

Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area

Field Trip Guide - Swan Falls Road

A 62-mile loop tour beginning at Kuna Visitor Center provides opportunities to view wildlife and scenic vistas, and to visit cultural sites in the NCA. Allow at least 3 to 4 hours to complete the route. Depending on the length of stops, one can easily spend an entire day exploring the loop drive.

Mile 0.0

Kuna Visitor Center

Located at the intersection of Avalon Street and Swan Falls Road, the Kuna Visitor Center is staffed several days a week by the Kuna Chamber of Commerce. When the Visitor Center is closed, there is an open kiosk with several information signs about the Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area (NCA) and Kuna area.

Mile 3.0

Barker Road

Barker Road marks the northern boundary of the NCA. Northern harriers and prairie falcons frequent this area, while red-tailed and Swainson's hawks sometimes perch on the telephone and power poles. Piute ground squirrels and black-tailed jackrabbits take cover in the sagebrush. Look for American kestrels on wires between power poles.

Kuna Butte, on the west side of the road, burned in 1996. The furrows you may see are from rangeland drill seedings of bunchgrasses. Prior to the fire, this butte and the surrounding area were covered with sagebrush and bunchgrasses.

Mile 8.0

Initial Point

In a sense, Idaho begins at Initial Point. The prominent lava butte, located one mile to the east, provided the starting point for Idaho's official land survey, begun in 1867. Beginning at this geographic reference point, the entire state was surveyed, and each township was referenced to this "Initial Point" of the survey. A short walk up the rocky, steep access trail brings visitors to an observation deck and survey marker at the summit of the butte.

Look for raptors perching and hunting on the volcanic rock outcroppings to the south. The Owyhee Mountains are visible to the southwest.

Mile 10.2

PacifiCorp 500kV Powerline

Some birds of prey enjoy roosting or nesting on the steel towers that support this powerline. Special nesting platforms have been placed on some of the towers to encourage raptors to nest below the electrical lines. Large powerlines do not usually electrocute birds. The greatest number of electrocutions occur on much smaller powerlines where the wires are closer together, where a wingspan may touch two lines. This powerline marks the southern "no shooting" boundary east of Swan Falls Road.

Mile 11.5**Idaho Power Company Double-pole Powerline**

The cross-arms of this powerline provide hunting perches. In winter look for rough-legged hawks perched on the cross-arms. Winterfat, a low silvery shrub, provides excellent food and cover for Piute ground squirrels (which become food for raptors), and helps hide the abundant badger holes. Most people don't realize the NCA contains one of the densest badger populations in the world (up to 11 badgers per square mile).

Mile 12.0**Intersection with Victory Lane**

Fence posts and powerline cross-beams provide prairie falcons and red-tailed hawks great vantage points for hunting.

Sinker Butte, an extinct volcano, lies directly south across the canyon. Travelers on the South Alternate of the Oregon Trail passed around the south side of this butte.

Mile 15.5**Dedication Point**

Dedication Point overlook provides an outstanding view of the Snake River Canyon. During the spring, this is a good place to spot birds of prey in flight. Winterfat and scattered patches of sagebrush provide habitat for Piute ground squirrels. For raptors with hungry nestlings in the canyon cliffs, a food supply this close to the canyon rim makes for a quick turnaround.

Interpretive signs along the one-quarter mile trail describe the plants, wildlife, and geology of the NCA and aid with bird identification.

Mile 18.0**Three-Pole Pullout/Swan Falls Grade**

Before descending into the canyon, stopping at the Three-Pole pullout or the top of Swan Falls grade offers a great view of Swan Falls Dam and the Snake River Canyon. Look for prairie falcons, red-tailed hawks and turkey vultures. As you descend the grade, observe the different geologic layers that form the canyon wall.

Mile 20.0**Swan Falls Historic Exhibit**

Swan Falls Dam was built in 1901 (the first hydroelectric dam on the Snake River). Originally, the dam supplied power to gold and silver mines in the Owyhee Mountains. Eventually, it provided electricity for settlement and agriculture on the Snake River Plateau. The dam, operated by Idaho Power Company, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978.

In 1995, a new powerhouse was completed and the old historic powerhouses renovated into a visitor/interpretive center. The center provides a history of the Swan Falls Dam and hydroelectricity, plus information about the natural and cultural resources of the NCA. Tours may be available by appointment only, one week in advance by calling Idaho Power at (208) 736-3458. Other facilities at Swan Falls Dam include restrooms, drinking water, a public telephone, and picnic area.

To continue the loop tour, retrace Swan Falls Road eight miles to Victory Lane. Turn west on Victory Lane to reach Celebration Park.

