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For Refuge Information
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Cover photograph of a Snowy Egret by John and Karen Hollingsworth

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Imperial

*National
Wildlife Refuge*



*The 25,768-acre
Imperial National
Wildlife Refuge is
one of more than
500 refuges throughout
the United States.
These national
wildlife refuges are
administered by the
Department of the
Interior, Fish and
Wildlife Service.
The Fish and Wildlife
Service mission is
to work with others
“to conserve fish
and wildlife and
their habitat.”*

Welcome

Imperial National Wildlife Refuge protects wildlife habitat along 30 miles of the lower Colorado River in Arizona and California, including the last unchannelized section before the river enters Mexico.

The river and its associated backwater lakes and wetlands are a green oasis, contrasting with the surrounding desert mountains.

Refuge Highlights

Wetland wildlife is most abundant in winter, when 'snowbirds' such as cinnamon teal and northern pintail use the refuge. During the summer months, look for permanent residents such as great egrets and muskrat.

In the desert, wildlife such as black-tailed jackrabbits and western whiptail lizards are plentiful. Watch at dawn and dusk for desert bighorn sheep and mule deer heading to the river for a drink.

Wilderness

More than 15,000 acres of Imperial National Wildlife Refuge is federally designated wilderness. Wilderness is protected to ensure that nature, not people, is the primary influence on this quiet, scenic place.

Scorpionweed Photograph by Sheldon Damberg





Imperial NWR

Photograph by John and Karen Hollingsworth

Forest in the Desert?

At one time, the banks of the Colorado River were lined with cottonwood and willow forests, sustained by the river's natural periodic flooding. Animals depended on this green forest oasis for breeding, resting, feeding, and shade.

Woodcutting during the steamboat era, clearing for agriculture, wild fire, exotic plants like salt cedar, and use of dams for flood prevention have devastated cottonwood and willow stands along the lower Colorado River. Some animals that depend on these forests, such as the southwestern willow flycatcher, have become endangered.

Refuge staff are working with other agencies and organizations to plant cottonwood and willow trees. From the observation tower, look for patches of restored forest.

Marsh Management

Ducks, geese, shorebirds, and other waterbirds flock to the lower Colorado River each year to spend the winter. Refuge staff and volunteers restore wetlands, protect backwater lakes, manage marsh units, and farm croplands to provide food and resting areas for these winter residents.



Cinnamon Teal

Photograph by Karen and John Hollingsworth

**Things to do at
the Refuge**

The Visitor Center is open from 7:30 am to 4:00 pm, Monday through Friday. From November 15 to March 31, also open Saturdays and Sundays from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm. Enjoy the exhibits, native plant garden, and watch a wildlife video.

*Red Cloud
Mine Road*

Follow this scenic drive through the Sonoran desert landscape to access the lookout points and the Painted Desert Trail. If you intend to drive further than the Painted Desert Trailhead, a 4-wheel drive vehicle is recommended. Check with the Visitor Center for road conditions.

Lookout Points

Mesquite, Ironwood, and Smoke Tree Points offer beautiful views of the Colorado River valley. Often, both desert and wetland wildlife may be seen. All of the lookout points can be reached by vehicle.

*Painted
Desert Trail*

Walk this 1.3-mile self-guided trail for an opportunity to see desert plants and wildlife. The trail takes you through a rainbow of colors left by 30,000 year-old volcanic activity and features a panoramic view of the Colorado River valley.

Meers Point

Looking for a quiet place to canoe or fish? Meers Point has shaded tables, toilets, and a boat launch.

Colorado River

The refuge surrounds one of the few remaining “wild” places on the Colorado River. This stretch is valued by boaters for its remote scenery.

For Your Safety

The desert can be dangerously hot and dry. Be sure to carry and drink plenty of water, use sunscreen, and wear light-colored clothing, including a hat.

Watch out for stinging insects, venomous reptiles, and thorny plants. Avoid putting your hands and feet under rocks or into crevices and plants, and watch where you step or sit.

Gambel's Quail

Photograph by
Thomas A. Gatz





Wildlife Watching Tips

Dawn and dusk are the best times to see wildlife.

This is a warm climate, so little is moving on hot summer afternoons or on windy days.

Observe from the sidelines. Leave “abandoned” young animals alone. A parent is probably close by waiting for you to leave. Don’t offer snacks; your lunch could disrupt wild digestive systems.

Cars make good observation blinds. Drive slowly, stopping to scan places wildlife might hide. Use binoculars or a long lens for a closer look.

Try sitting quietly in one good location. Let wildlife get used to your presence. Many animals that have hidden will reappear once they think you are gone. Walk quietly in designated areas, being aware of sounds and smells. Often you will hear more than you will see.

Teach children quiet observation. Other wildlife watchers will appreciate your consideration.

Look for animal signs. Tracks, scat, feathers, and nests left behind often tell interesting stories.

*Hiking,
Photography,
and Wildlife
Observation*

The following are permitted on the refuge, except within the waterfowl management units and staff residence area.

Wilderness

Travel in wilderness areas is by foot or horseback only.



*Hunting
and Fishing*

Hunting and fishing are permitted, according to state regulations, in some areas. Please contact the Visitor Center for more information.



Pets

Unconfined domestic animals are not allowed. Pets are permitted only if under your control at all times.



Boating

Boating is permitted in some areas. Special regulations apply. Please contact the Visitor Center for more information.



*Off-Road
Vehicles*

Vehicles are permitted on designated roads only. All off-road vehicle travel is prohibited. All motorized vehicles, including all-terrain vehicles and motorcycles, and all operators must be licensed and insured for highway driving. Speed limit is 25 mph unless posted otherwise.



Zebra-tailed Lizard

Photograph by Karen and John Hollingsworth



*Rock, Mineral,
and Antiquity
Protection*

It is illegal to remove, deface, or damage rocks, minerals, semi-precious stones, Indian artifacts, paleontological objects, or objects of antiquity.

*Plant and
Animal
Protection*



Collecting, possessing, molesting, disturbing, injuring, destroying, removing, or transporting any plant or animal or part thereof (alive or dead) is prohibited, except for legally taken game.

Camping



Camping is not permitted on the refuge.

Fires



Fires are not permitted on the refuge.

Firearms



Carrying, possessing, or discharging firearms or explosives (including fireworks) on the refuge is prohibited. Persons may use legal firearms for approved hunting provided that when being transported in vehicles they are unloaded and cased or dismantled.

*Weapons Other
than Firearms*



Possession or use of crossbows, bow and arrows, air guns, or other weapons is prohibited except when they are used for approved hunting.

Imperial NWR Facts

Where is it?

Take Highway 95 north from Yuma or south from Quartzite. Turn (west) onto Martinez Lake Road for 10.4 miles, then turn right (north) onto the dirt road at the Imperial NWR sign. After 2.1 miles, another sign will lead you through the next right hand turn. Follow the next sign to the Visitor Center.

*When was it
established?*

February 14, 1941

How big is it?

25,768 acres.

Why is it here?

To be a refuge and breeding area for migratory birds and other wildlife.