

## 10 SCENIC RESOURCES

### A. Introduction

Butte County's possesses numerous scenic resources, many of which are found in the natural areas within the unincorporated county. These resources not only enhance the quality of life for Butte County residents, but are a significant attraction that brings tourists to the region. This chapter reviews and summarizes Butte County's key scenic resources, which are mapped in Figure 10-1.

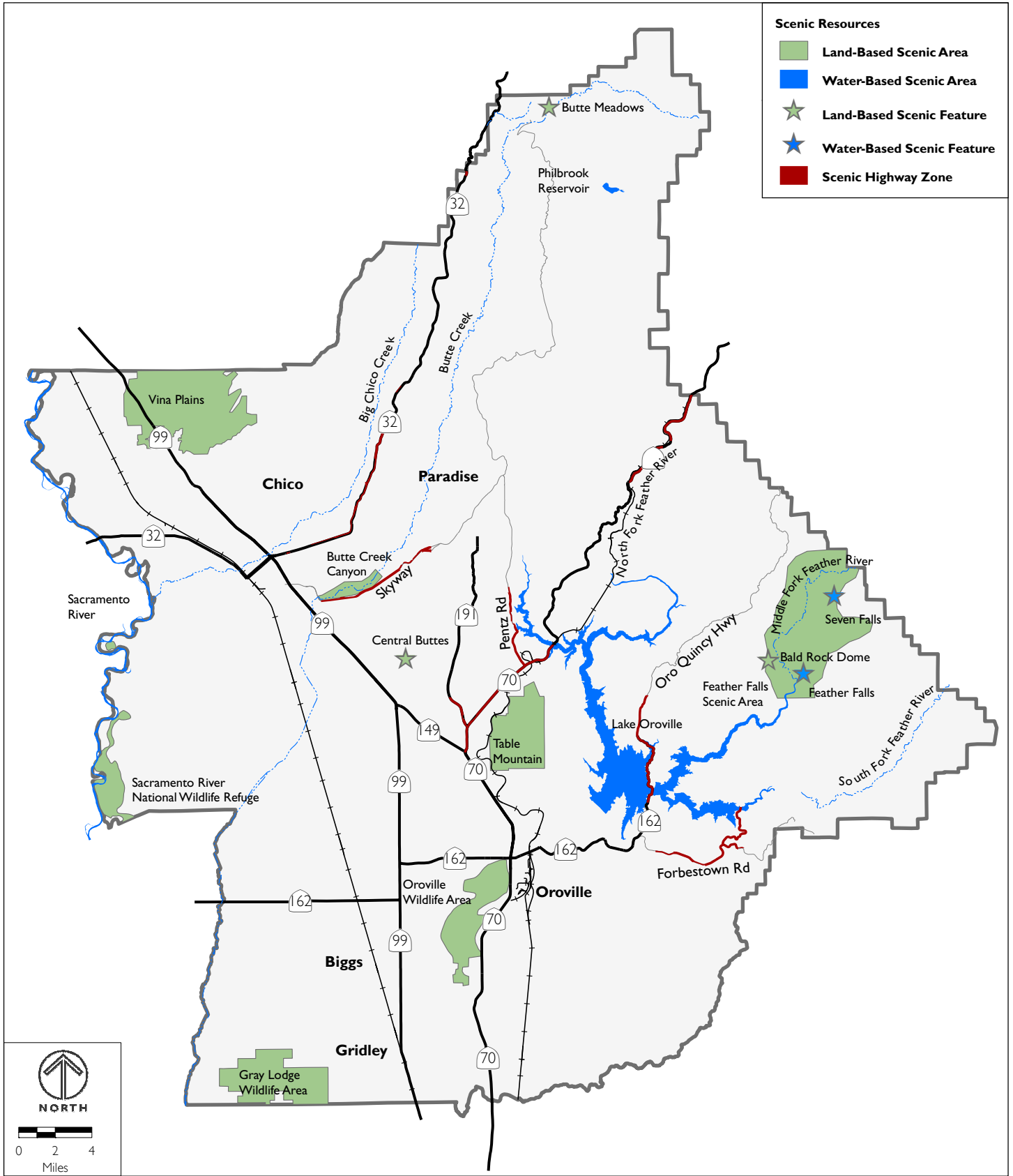
### B. Regulatory Setting

#### 1. State Law Requirements

State law previously mandated the inclusion of a scenic highways element in a General Plan, but it has since become optional. However, there is an existing Scenic Highways Element in the Butte County General Plan, and designation of scenic highways can have a significant impact on physical development. Further, the California Environmental Quality Act requires analysis of the impacts of a General Plan on scenic highways. Thus, the discussion of the county's scenic highways and corridors is afforded considerable discussion in this chapter. State law also requires the General Plan to address scenic open space resources, and those aspects are also addressed here.

#### 2. State Scenic Highways

The 1977 Butte County General Plan Scenic Highway Element provides a general definition of a *Scenic Highway* as "a main public road through an area of picturesque natural landscapes." In addition to this more general definition, the State of California has a number of officially designated State Scenic Highways. Such roadways traverse land of outstanding natural beauty, and importantly, are afforded protection through local regulation of land use and development intensity, and control of elements such as outdoor advertising (billboards) to preserve their scenic qualities. "Eligible" State scenic highways are those that possess exceptional scenic qualities, but for



Sources: Butte County Geographic Information Systems; US Forest Service.

FIGURE 10-1  
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which no scenic corridor protection program is in place, nor for which an application for official scenic highway status has been made or approved by Caltrans.<sup>1</sup> State Scenic Highways in Butte County are discussed in Section C, below.

### *C. Existing Conditions*

#### **1. Scenic Highways and Corridors**

This section describes various scenic highways and corridors, which are considered to be so either by virtue of their official designation by the State, through their identification as a County Scenic Highway in the 1977 Scenic Highway Element, or through application of Scenic Highway (S-H) Zoning Designation.

As noted above, *Scenic Highways* are defined as those main public roadways that pass through an area of picturesque natural landscapes. A *Scenic Corridor* is also defined in the Scenic Highway Element, and in this chapter as “the view from the road.” Though not explicitly stated, it is assumed that “the road” means an identified scenic highway. As further noted in the Scenic Highway Element: “the view may be a distant panorama as well as the immediate roadside area. Corridor width varies depending on terrain, vegetation and development. A corridor encompasses the outstanding natural features and picturesque landscapes that qualify the highway as ‘scenic.’” The corridor also includes nearby land where human use or development may adversely affect the views of motorists traveling a scenic highway.

Some of the scenic highways and corridors in Butte County traverse State-owned lands, where development poses little threat to the viewshed. Others pass through areas that are privately held, such as portions of the following: Forbestown Road east of Lake Oroville above 2,000-foot elevation; Highway 162 on the south side of Lake Oroville and north of the North Fork of the

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<sup>1</sup> Caltrans - California Scenic Highway Program. <http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/LandArch/scenic/scpr.htm>. Accessed February 22, 2007.

Feather River; Highway 70 north of Oroville and west/north of Table Mountain; Highway 99 west of the Central Buttes; and Highway 149 south of the Central Buttes and west of Table Mountain.

a. State Scenic Highways

Although there are no officially designated State Scenic Highways in Butte County, Highway 70 north of the intersection with Highway 149 is included on the State's Master Plan and is considered an eligible State Scenic Highway. New routes can be added to the State's Master Plan only through the action of the State Legislature.

b. County Scenic Highways and Corridors

The 1977 Scenic Highway Element recognizes Highway 70 through Feather River Canyon, and a portion of Highway 32 north of Forest Ranch as county scenic highways.

c. Scenic Highway (S-H) Zoning

At the time of its writing, the 1977 Scenic Highway Element noted that several different zoning districts applied to Butte County's Scenic Corridors, and that, in the late 1960's, several of the most scenic routes were rezoned to S-H (Scenic Highway), with the designation applicable to an area extending 350 feet from the centerline of selected highway sectors. Roads subject to S-H zoning are illustrated in Figure 10-1. As shown in the figure, these include portions of Highway 32 north of Chico; Highway 70 north of the Highway 149 intersection; the Skyway through Butte Creek Canyon; Highway 191 part of Pentz Road; the portion of Highway 162 where it crosses Lake Oroville; Forbestown Road and Lumpkin Road.

The S-H zone allows agricultural uses, and up to one residential dwelling per parcel, but also allows "highway services primarily for the convenience of the traveling public" with a use permit. By the late 1970s, the commercial provisions in the S-H zone had allowed the development of scattered businesses along scenic highways. This dispersal of commercial uses (and

their advertising displays) can conflict with the objectives of the scenic highway program.

## 2. Natural Scenic Resources

Butte County encompasses an outstanding variety of natural vistas and landscapes. Although the existing General Plan's Scenic Highway Element addresses scenic highways and corridors, there is no single element that addresses all scenic resources in Butte County. The following section describes the significant scenic resources found in the county, as appeared in the existing Butte County General Plan. These various resources are mapped in Figure 10-1, and include the following:

- ◆ **Table Mountain Spring Floral Area.** The lava flow that now tops Table Mountain, located north of Oroville and east of Highway 70, is tens of millions of years old. Each year spring brings an explosion of color to Table Mountain in the form of native wildflowers, which attract many tourists and locals alike. In the 1990's, to help protect the area's vernal pools and habitat for rare plant and animal species, the State Department of Fish and Game acquired over 3,300 acres of North Table Mountain as an ecological reserve.
- ◆ **Central Butte.** Rising from the valley floor, these geologic features are remnants of the surrounding landform that eroded around them over the millennia. Many of these buttes are visible from three state highways (Highways 99, 149 and 70). Some of the buttes have prehistoric caves and bedrock mortar sites located near their tops.
- ◆ **Sacramento River and its Riparian Corridor.** Some of the county's richest habitat for plant and animal species is found along the Sacramento River and its associated riparian corridor. State and federal agencies have acquired significant portions of the riparian corridor to help protect this resource: the State Department of Fish and Game owns and manages the Sacramento River Wildlife Area, covering 3,737 acres of riparian woodland, meadows and gravel bars; California State Parks owns and manages the Bidwell-Sacramento River State Park, offering fishing, boating and other recreational opportunities; and the U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service owns and manages the Sacramento River National Wildlife Refuge, composed of numerous properties along the river and undergoing large-scale riparian habitat restoration.

- ◆ **Butte Meadows and Colby Meadows Area.** Located in the Sierra Nevada mountains off Highway 32 on the way to Chester and Susanville, Butte Meadows includes a series of wet meadows, some adjacent to Butte Creek. The Colby Meadows area provides recreation opportunities for regional outdoor enthusiasts, including hiking, skiing and snowmobiling.
- ◆ **Butte Creek Canyon (Vista Along the Skyway).** The Skyway, a major transportation route connecting Paradise to Chico, provides views to a dramatic and panoramic display of the topographic and geologic features of Butte Creek Canyon. A portion of this canyon is protected as an ecological reserve by the State Department of Fish and Game.
- ◆ **Vina Plains.** While much of the Vina Plains are located in Tehama County, a portion occupies an area in northern Butte County. The Plains consist of interspersed vernal pools, supporting a vast array of flora, including the Butte County Meadowfoam, which is listed as endangered on both the State and federal endangered species lists. Approximately 1,500 acres of the Plains, mostly in Tehama County, are owned and managed by The Nature Conservancy as the Vina Plains Preserve.
- ◆ **Lake Oroville.** Lake Oroville provides many scenic vistas from several highways that traverse its shores, while providing an assortment of recreational activities for residents and visitors. Although the California Department of Parks & Recreation owns its shores, many of the vista points and accesses to viewsheds of the lake are privately held.
- ◆ **Gray Lodge Wildlife Area.** The State Department of Fish and Game owns and manages this 8,400-acre wildlife area located southwest of the City of Gridley. The wildlife area was created primarily to protect winter feeding and resting habitat for migratory waterfowl, but it also provides numerous recreational opportunities, such as wildlife viewing, hunting, fishing and nature study.

- ◆ **Oroville Wildlife Area.** The State Department of Fish and Game owns and manages this 5,500-acre wildlife area located immediately west of the City of Oroville. It was created to protect wildlife habitat and mitigate the construction of the Oroville Reservoir. Formed on the dredge tailings along the Feather River, it provides habitat for migrating waterfowl, shorebirds and resident wildlife as well as recreational opportunities, such as boating, fishing, hunting, mountain biking and wildlife viewing.
- ◆ **Philbrook Lake.** Pacific Gas and Electric Company owns the Philbrook Reservoir, a beautiful, tranquil mountain lake nestled between several scenic mountain outcroppings. The lake provides a variety of recreational opportunities, including boating, fishing, biking, hiking and camping.
- ◆ **Feather Falls Scenic Area Features.** The Feather Falls Scenic Area, part of the Plumas National Forest, is located northeast of Lake Oroville, near the community of Feather Falls. This area's features include magnificent granite domes and waterfalls including:
  - Feather Falls, is one of the highest waterfalls in the United States, and one of the most outstanding attractions in Butte County. Accessible only by trail, the Fall River plunges 640 feet at the falls to meet the Middle Fork of the Feather River.
  - Seven Falls. Seven Falls is also located in the Feather Falls Scenic Area and Plumas National Forest, contains a series of waterfalls located near the confluence of the South Branch and Middle Fork of the Feather River. The Falls provide a unique scenic feature in a remote area of the county accessible only by a difficult hiking trail.
  - Bald Rock Dome. Bald Rock Dome is a large barren granite dome that overlooks the Sacramento Valley, dominating the landscape for miles. Bald Rock was once a spiritual place for Native Americans, and there is evidence of Native use through grinding holes on the granite surface.

### 3. Scenic Water Resources

Butte County has an abundance of water resources that contribute to the county's visual character. These include both linear waterways and surface

water bodies. While some of these resources are included among those described in Section C.2, above, this section provides additional information on those and other important scenic water resources in the county.

a. Rivers, Streams and Creeks

Butte County is part of the Sacramento River watershed, and is bounded by the Sacramento River on its west side. Numerous streams and rivers drain runoff from the Sierra Nevada and Cascade Mountains southwesterly across the county into the Sacramento River. Of these waterways, the most significant are Butte Creek, Big Chico Creek and the North, Middle and South Forks of the Feather River. These rivers pass through rugged terrain, which often obstructs visual access to the water. Nevertheless, they are significant visual features within the county. One waterway, Butte Creek between its confluence with the West Branch of Butte Creek and the Centerville Bridge, is classified as “scenic” by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

b. Surface Water Bodies

Also significant as visual features are the county’s lakes and reservoirs. Few natural lakes exist in the county, although numerous reservoirs have been built to provide domestic and irrigation water, hydroelectric power, recreation, flood control and watershed management. The most visually significant of the county’s water bodies are Lake Oroville, which covers over 15,800 surface acres and has 167 miles of shoreline, along with Thermalito Forebay and Afterbay. Other important reservoirs in the county include Concow Reservoir, Paradise Lake, Magalia Reservoir, Philbrook Lake, Lake Madrone, Ponderosa Reservoir and Lake Wyandotte. Figure 12-1, in Chapter 12, maps the locations of these water bodies.