

El Fondo Nature Reserve is a wetland enclave, 2.387 hectares in size, has great ecological interest, but its great economic value should not be underestimated either. With the water from these reservoirs, coming from the river Segura, about 40.000 hectares in the zone between San Juan and Orihuela are irrigated.

The two reservoirs of greatest size and capacity are the Levante and Poniente reservoirs, which respectively take up 450 and 650 hectares. The capacity of the Levante reservoir is five million cubic metres and that of the Poniente reservoir is eleven million cubic metres.

Man forms an essential part of this ecosystem, consisting of a number of damp enclaves created in order to manage the water for irrigation, hunting and fishing.



## Fauna

The bird life is the parks greatest biological asset. Nevertheless there are also some very interesting fish species, such as the eel, the mullet and above all the fartet (*Aphanius iberus*), a cyprinodontid endemic to the Spanish Mediterranean. The red-tailed (or spiny-footed) lizard (*Acanthodactylus erythurus*) is the most plentiful sort of reptile found, while the freshwater shrimp (*Paleomonetes zariquiei*), an endemic crustacean, is also numerous.

The abundance and diversity of birds in the park has meant that this has been classified as a wetland of international importance and is more specifically included in the RAMSAR agreement for protection of wetlands, and in the European Union Birds directive (Zone of Special Protection for Birds).

Some of the most important of the many species present in the park are the marbled teal (*Marmaronetta angustirostris*) and the white-headed duck (*Oxyura leucocephala*). The first of these has its main breeding colony in the whole peninsula in El Fondo, not being found anywhere else on the continent. The white-headed duck also has one of the main population centres worldwide in this reserve.

Other important varieties of birds at nesting time are the colonies of herons, amongst which there are very rare species such as the purple heron (*Ardea purpurea*), the black-crowned night-heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) and especially the squacco heron (*Ardeola ralloides*).

Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*)



Red-crested pochard (*Netta rufina*)

Some of the nesting Anatidae of greatest importance are the red-crested pochard (*Netta rufina*) and the common pochard (*Aythya ferina*). The common shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*) a difficult species to find, also nests there.

In shallower waters it is possible to see colonies of Limicolae birds, such as the avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*), the stork (*Himantopus himantopus*) and the collared pranticole (*Glareola pratincola*), which has in this reserve, along with the Prat de Cabanes, the only two breeding areas in the Valencian Community.



Collared pranticole (*Glareola pratincola*)

In the winter season there are the greatest concentrations of birds, particular importance being attributed to species such as the northern shoveler (*Anas clypeata*), the coot (*Fulica atra*) there being as many as 30.000 specimens.

Other species which can be seen in the park are the marsh harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*), the osprey and the bearded tit (*Panurus biarmicus*), penduline tit (*Remiz pendulinus*) or moustached warbler (*Acrocephalus melanopogon*), all of them threatened by the disappearance and degradation of the swamp ecosystems.



## Vegetation

The land forming El Fondo is fairly uniform. Nevertheless, there are different environments in the park depending on how much the different zones are flooded and on the quality of their water.

The reservoirs have relatively fresh water and a high degree of eutrophy. These characteristics are what mean that the submerged vegetation is rather scanty. The dominant formation is the reeds, which surrounds and colonises shallow water, alternating with clumps of rushes in some zones.

The peripheral pools consist of smooth water with a high degree of salinity and in general of better quality. In them the salt marsh formations, which include amongst other genuses *Limonium*, *Halocnemun*, *Suaeda* or *Salicornia*, constitute typical vegetation in the zone, of great interest through the endemic nature of the peninsula's southwestern region.

Lastly, in some of the drained land on the edges, it is still possible to see different crops. Palm trees and the line of eucalyptus bordering the main canal and crossing the park form a characteristic image of the zone.

Reeds





Dam regulation trough sluices



Fishig boat on the Levante reservoir

## History

El Fondo Nature Reserve, the farmland around it and nearby towns of San Felipe de Neri, Dolores, Catral and San Isidro de Albatera, are all on land which used to form part of the huge Elche lagoon which existed until the 18th century. The denomination of swamp land and salt marshes given to the sections in the zone act as a reminder of its past.

What was once the Elche lagoon disappeared as a result of the natural silting up of the land, but also due to the many drainage operations carried out there. One of these were the so called bonuses undertaken by Cardinal Belluga in the 18th century.

The need to have fresh water with which to wash the salts from the land and irrigate the new crops, created after the gradual process of drying out the lagoon, gave rise to the construction of reservoirs, for which the bed of El Fondo lagoon was used.

The hillocks created with the earth dug out for making the reservoirs propitiated the creation of an interesting swamp biotope which can still be found.

The owners of some pieces of land located around the reservoirs have been used for cynegetic and fish farming purposes, as a result of the low farming value of the land. A number of interesting wetland enclaves associated with the reservoirs have thus been formed.





"El Tollo" observatory

## ROUTE 1 (red): Ornithological Route

Going along the main canal of the reserve, the ornithological route starts at the second elevation of Levante Irrigation Community.

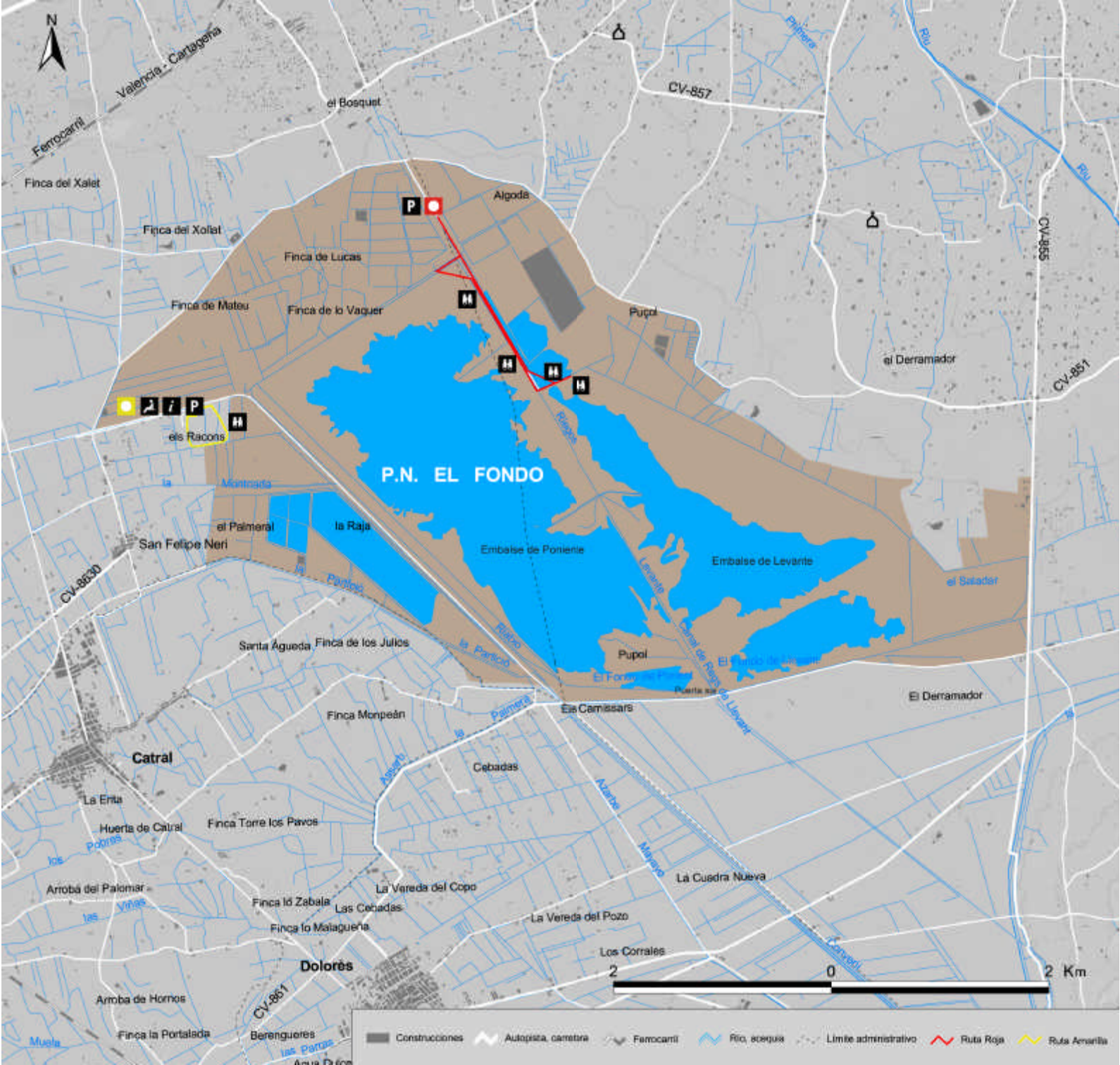
Along this route you can make different stops that give visitors an unrivalled chance to make contact with the flora and fauna of the environment, which along with the variety of landscapes, make el Fondo Nature Reserve a must for any bird lover.

The path starts through a salt marsh zone where, amongst other genuses, you can observe close up *Limonium*, *Halocnemum*, *Suaeda* or *Salicornia*, which constitute the typical vegetation in this zone, being of great interest for their endemic nature in

the south-east of the peninsula. Along the path and by the edges of the reservoirs, the dominant formation is the reed, which surrounds and invades the shallower waters, alternating in some zones with formations of rushes.

Going along by this route and around the western reservoir you will reach the first two observatories - "el Tollo" and straight after, "el Calamón", from which you can easily make the acquaintance of the greatest biological wealth of the park, its bird life.

There are many species which can be observed from these two observatories, both when swimming, feeding or in flight, such as for example the purple heron (*Ardea purpurea*), the black-crowned night heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) or the squacco heron (*Ardeola ralloides*).







B. Albrecht



Conservation and ambient

Marbled teal (*Marmaronetta angustirostris*)

It is hard to point out any particular one of the many species of ducks which can also be seen from this point. We could nevertheless mention two as the real stars of the park: the marbled teal (*Marmaronetta angustirostris*), which uses El Fondo as its main breeding place in the whole peninsula, and the white-headed duck (*Oxyura leucocephala*) present all year round and for which this reserve is one of the main population centres all over the world. Other nesting Anatidae present the whole year in the two reservoirs are the pochard (*Aythya ferina*) or the red-crested pochard (*Netta ruffina*).

A little farther on you will come to the Marbled Teal vantage point, from which you can see almost the whole area of the two reservoirs (Poniente and Levante), as well as the perimeter pools of salty waters.

Reservoir and line of eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus* sp.)





White headed duck (*Oxyura leucocephala*)

This vantage point is a strategic spot from which to observe the large concentrations of birds in the wintering season, sometimes over 30.000 specimens, with such species as the northern shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) or the coot (*Fulica atra*) being worthy of mention.

The end of this trip is at "el Peu Verd" observatory, which is accessed by a wooden gangway and from which it is easy to see some species that have been successfully re-introduced in this wetland, such as the purple swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) or the crested coot (*Fulica cristata*), apart from the increasingly numerous black-necked grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*).



Access to "el Peu Verd" observatory

Other species of interest which surprise the visitor throughout the trip with their flight are the marsh harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*), the osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*), apart from the bearded tit (*Panurus biarmicus*) or the moustached warbler (*Acrocephalus melanopogon*), all of these endangered through the disappearance or degradation of the swamp ecosystems.

This route is about 5 km long (there and back) and takes roughly two and a half hours



## ROUTE 2 (yellow) Information Centre

Opened on 11th July 2001, El Fondo Nature Reserve has a circular itinerary which starts from this centre and goes around a nearby pool.

At the start of the route you can see both the salt marshes with their characteristic plants and the farmland in the surrounding areas. A gangway over the salt marshes allows you to observe species which colonise shallow water settings, the Limicolae birds. Some of the main ones are the avocet (*Recurvirostra avoseta*), with its characteristic upwardly curved beak, or the black-winged stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*). Both species are present all year round, it being possible to see them watchful over their chicks at nesting time, as well as the snowy plover

Black-winged stilts pairing (*Himantopus himantopus*)







El Fondo Information Centre



General View of the Information Centre

(*Charadrius alexandrinus*). These species, along with others such as the sandpiper, stint or redshank families, and even lapwings (*Vanellus vanellus*) form part of the reserve's biological diversity. The collared pratincole (*Glareola pratincola*) is another of the species which can easily be observed in this setting, and this reserve and the Prat de Cabanes are the only two breeding points in the Valencian Community.

We could also stress the presence of such an emblematic and eye-catching species as the flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*). This is its natural habitat, where it has found an ideal environment for peace and quiet all year round, giving rise to unforgettable images of great flocks in flight arriving or setting off towards other nearby damp zones.

One of the species that are more difficult to find is the shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*), which tends to concentrate in the small islands built in the centre of the lagoons and which act as resting places for many species.

To end up the route you come to a zone where you can rest from your short trip and just enjoy taking in the sounds of this outstanding natural refuge.



### **Visits of interest**

Elche's Palm grove, from which you can visit the Municipal Park every day and the Huerto del Cura gardens, open from 9 to 20 hours.

Puçol Ethnographic Museum and Schoolchildren's Farming Museum, in Partida de Puçol, 8 (tel. 966 630 478)

La Alcudia Monography Museum, at Carretera de Dolores, Km 2.2 (tel. 965 459 667)

Other centres of interest found nearby are: Elche Contemporary Art Museum, Mariano Benlliure Museum in Crevillente, La Mata and Torrevieja Lagoons Nature Reserve, Santa Pola Salt Works Nature Reserve, dunes and mouth of the River Segura, Altamira Palace, L'Alcudia Iberian settlement site.

### **Accommodation**

El Fondo is only a few kilometres from the coast and some of the most important tourist resorts on the Costa Blanca, such as Santa Pola, La Marina or Guardamar, and inland ones such as Elche, Crevillente, Orihuela, Dolores, Catral... There is a good range of hotel options available in all these towns.

### **Cuisine**

Arroz con costra rice is the most highly appreciated Elche cooking speciality. Hake and different varieties of salads are also typical in the zone, as well as dates, the local dessert par excellence.

Elche's Palm grove





El Fondo from the Picacho. Crevillent mountain range

### **Accesses**

El Fondo Nature Reserve can be accessed from the road that links Elche with the locality of Matola. At the height of kilometre 8 there is a turnoff to San Felipe Neri which leads to the entrance to the park.

You can also get there by the Alicante-Murcia dual carriageway, by taking exit 76 (Crevillente-railway station). Going on towards the station, after about 5 kilometres take the turnoff to San Felipe Neri which leads to the entrance.