

Pied-billed Grebe

Podilymbus podiceps

Length: 13 inches **Wingspan:** 16 inches

This small, plump, brown bird with a dark banded bill shaped like that of a chicken is an inconspicuous but intriguing inhabitant of the marsh. The secretive pied-billed may slowly submerge, like a tiny feathered submarine, leaving only its head exposed, when it notices you. Like other grebes, this species nests on floating masses of vegetation and frequently carries its young on its back. The raucous chimp-like call of the pied-billed is a memorable component of the marshland spring chorus.



David Besenick

Marsh Wren

Cistothorus palustris

Length: 5 inches **Wingspan:** 6 inches

Likely you'll hear the chattering call of this somewhat elusive bird before you see it. A small brown bird, clinging near the top of a cattail stem while producing a fussy, buzzing song may be your first glimpse. The male wren builds up to four nests each spring, eagerly awaiting an approving female to select her favorite. When a mate chooses the male, the two then line the nest with plant down and proceed to raise one or two broods each breeding season. Males and females look alike. Adult birds have bold white eyebrows and white streaking on the back and a thin, slightly re-curved bill.



Jerry Ting

Further Reading

Water Birds of California, Howard L. Cogswell, ISBN 0-520-02699-3

Birds of Northern California, David Fix and Andy Bezener, ISBN 1-55105-227-X

The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America, David Allen Sibley, ISBN 0-679-45 12 1-8

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Big Break Regional Shoreline, Oakley
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Coyote Hills Regional Park, Fremont
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Crown Memorial State Beach, Alameda
Doug Siden Visitor Center at Crab Cove
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Recycle Bug
goes here
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goes here
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Common Marsh Birds in the East Bay Regional Park District



Marsh Birding

According to California naturalist and birder Arnold Small, “No other birding experience can equal that of a spring dawn in a marsh.” Of all California bird habitats, marshes have one of the highest percentages of species specifically adapted to their habitat.

Divers, dabblers, gleaners, probers, long-legged waders, and songbirds can all be found in our marshes.



Rich, Vibrant Habitats

Marshes are rich, vibrant habitats that have an undeserved bad reputation. Some people think of marshes as dangerous, mosquito-infested wastelands fit for nothing except draining. In fact, freshwater marshes are some of the most productive habitats in the world. Brackish and salt marshes also provide crucial habitat between rivers and the sea, creating both a home for birds and a protective barrier for human communities.

An Essential Destination for Birds

For thousands of years, San Francisco Bay was rimmed by an immense system of fresh and saltwater marshes, stretching from San Jose all the way to the Golden Gate. These marshes were an essential destination along the Pacific Flyway, a flight path for millions of migratory birds.

Bay Area marshlands are saturated with abundant food resources in the form of insects, worms, fish, and crustaceans – all supported by dense vegetation. These food-rich habitats provide critical “wayside rest stops” along the Pacific Flyway.

Great Egret

Ardea alba

Length: 39 inches

Wingspan: 51 inches

In 1886, while taking two walks down the streets of New York, naturalist Frank Chapman recorded sighting feathers from 40 different species of birds adorning women’s hats. During the heyday of the plumage trade for the Victorian fashion industry, many bird species suffered steep declines in population. Egrets were prime targets for the trade because of their delicate pure-white nuptial or breeding plumes. Today, thanks to conservation efforts, the sight of a great egret high-stepping gracefully about the marsh or deftly hunting fish is a common birding experience. While common in marshlands, this tall bird will also hunt in open fields, particularly in agricultural areas. It nests and roosts colonially high in tree tops. Notice the black legs and bright yellow bill.



Preserving a Rare Habitat

The East Bay Regional Park District has been successful in preserving these rare habitats within the Bay Area. One such freshwater marsh, Coyote Hills Regional Park, is a top-rated birding destination in western North America. Other fine examples of freshwater marshland habitat may be found at Radke Martinez Regional Shoreline, Hayward Regional Shoreline, Waterbird Regional Preserve, and Big Break Regional Shoreline.

It may be time to look more closely at your local marsh. You’ll discover that it’s not a wasteland but an ecological masterpiece, worthy of protection and admiration. Grab your binoculars, stroll amongst the tule reeds, and get to know the avian residents that call our marshes home. As you study and enjoy these fascinating birds, please help us continue to protect this rare habitat. Always stay on marked trails and don’t disturb or collect plants or wildlife.



Snowy Egret

Egretta thula

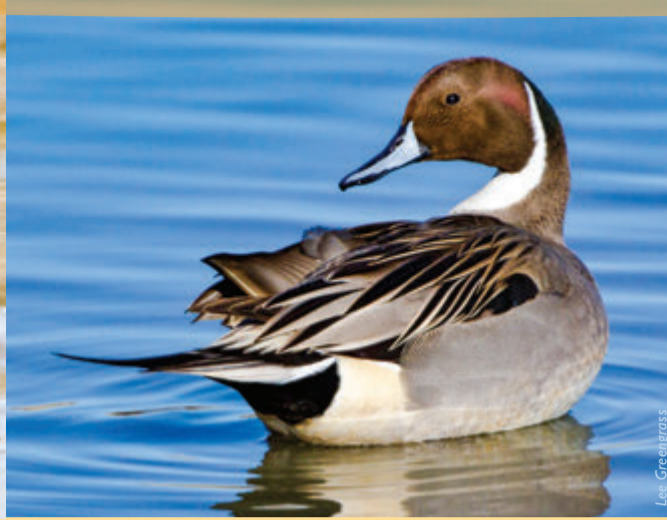
Length: 24 inches

Wingspan: 41 inches

Feather hunters in the 19th and early 20th centuries killed these birds by the thousands at nesting sites, harvesting their nuptial plumes which were sold for up to 80 dollars per ounce (more than gold at the time). In later decades the snowy egret population made a successful comeback, and today it is common to see dozens of egrets together in marshes. Unlike the great egret that stands motionlessly waiting for prey to approach, the snowy egret actively pursues its prey by scuffling along in the shallows, agitating the mud with its feet. Notice its black legs and bright yellow feet.



Common Marsh Birds in the East Bay Regional Park District



Cinnamon Teal

Anas cyanoptera
Length: 16 inches **Wingspan:** 22 inches

The brilliant rusty-red plumage and bright ruby eyes of the male cinnamon teal is an unmistakable sight. This species is known to nest locally, and unlike many other ducks, male and female remain together as a couple throughout much of the nesting season. The mottled brown female lays 7-12 eggs in a grassy cup-shaped nest. Like other “dabbling ducks,” the cinnamon teal feeds on aquatic plants, seeds, snails, and insects. This distinctive duck can explode out of the water into flight when alarmed. In flight, look for a light blue patch in the upperwing feathers.

Northern Pintail

Anas acuta
Length: 21-25 inches **Wingspan:** 34 inches

Your first sight of the pintail may well be a rear-end view. This duck is a dabbling, feeding by tipping bottom-up and paddling to stay in position, scooping sedge seeds from the mud. Even while dabbling, the male is easily identified by the black patch under its tail and by its long tapering tail feathers. When viewed upright, the cocoa-brown head, pure white bib and gray body complete the picture of the elegant male. Female pintails are a soft mottled brown with a slightly elongated tail.

Northern Shoveler

Spatula clypeata
Length: 19 inches **Wingspan:** 30 inches

Abundant on our marshes from September to May, flocks of northern shovelers are easily recognizable by the large white areas on the breast and under the tail of the males. Shovelers are known by hunters as the “spoonbill” because its bill is wider at the tip than in the middle and fringed along the edge. Flocks of shovelers with colorful males and mottled brown females are often seen swimming along with heads beneath the water surface, using their spatulate bills to strain food from the muddy shallows. Look for a glimpse of their bright orange legs and feet as they dabble.

Ruddy Duck

Oxyura jamaicensis
Length: 15 inches **Wingspan:** 18½ inches

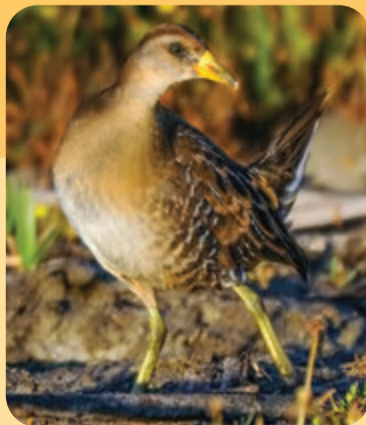
“Ruddies” are diving ducks, capable of covering long distances in underwater pursuit of fast moving prey. Recognized most of the year as a small, plump brown duck with a distinct up-tilt to its tail, the male ruddy in breeding plumage becomes one of the most striking and easily identified ducks on the marsh pond. His gray cheek patch turns pure white, his body color brightens to a rich chestnut red, and his bill turns sky blue. The brightly plumaged male flirts with potential mates by fanning his upturned tail in a display and swimming circles around a group of subtly colored females until he attracts their interest.



Virginia Rail

Rallus limicola
Length: 9½ inches **Wingspan:** 14 inches

Rails, by far, are the most secretive birds of the marshland environment. When you finally glimpse one, feel privileged and enjoy the rush of excitement that accompanies the experience. Built for slinking through narrow passages in dense vegetation, rails are deep-bodied but narrow birds with amazing flexibility. Seldom seen, Virginia and Sora rails become more visible as seasonal marsh ponds shrink in size in late summer. Rails will move away from the protection of dense cattails to forage at water's edge to take advantage of the food available in remaining pools. Look for the short yellow bill and black face and throat of the sora and the longer bill and rusty breast of the Virginia. Both species possess long thin toes for gripping vegetation, short chicken-like tails, and bright red eyes.



Sora Rail

Porzana carolina
Length: 8 ¾ inches **Wingspan:** 14 inches

Ridgway's Rail

Rallus obsoletus
Length: 14½ inches **Wingspan:** 19 inches

The recently named Ridgway's rail (formerly the clapper rail) spends most of its life hidden in dense vegetation. Living exclusively in salt and brackish marshes on the Pacific Coast of North America, the Ridgway's rail is a federally endangered species. Habitat loss and development, pollutants, and urban predators such as feral cats and introduced red foxes all threaten this species. A true salt marsh specialist, these elusive birds have glands that enable them to drink salt water. Listen for their “clapping” calls at dusk, and look for them when high tides push them upland from their hidden homes.



American White Pelican

Pelecanus erythrorhynchos
Length: 50-65 inches **Wingspan:** 96-114 inches

Among the most massive of North American water birds, a flock of American white pelicans flying overhead or team-fishing in the marsh is a spectacular sight. These heavy-bodied birds with a wingspread of up to 9 feet are abundant on local marsh ponds from late August until early spring. Feeding in teams, white pelicans swim in formation, herding fish into dense groups where they can be scooped up in enormous orange bills. Captured fish are retained within the leathery bill pouch as water drains out, then swallowed with a tilt of the head. This synchronized fishing behavior creates a fascinating avian water ballet which should not be missed.

Red-winged Blackbird

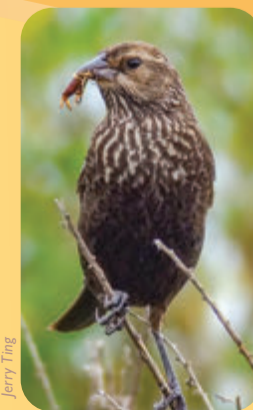
Agelaius phoeniceus
Length: 8 ¾ inches **Wingspan:** 13 inches

Scarlet shoulder patches bordered with a band of yellow against black wings and body provide diagnostic markings of the male red-winged blackbird. These striking features combined with a loud raspy song and an aggressive manner allow the polygynous male to defend a large nesting territory, chasing even raptors away and attracting several mates each breeding season. Females are mottled brown with dark streaking on the breast and faint

Great Blue Heron

Ardea herodias
Length: 46 inches **Wingspan:** 72 inches

By far the tallest bird seen in our bay area marshes, the great blue heron has a six-foot wingspan. With its harsh squawking call and lumbering flight, this species conveys strong hints at the reptilian ancestry of birds. Remarkably, the great blue, like the great and snowy egrets, is colonial, nesting in groups on large twig platform nests high in trees sometimes several miles from the marsh.



rust-brown shoulder patches. Both seed-eating and insectivorous, red-winged blackbirds feed their young a strictly insect protein diet. Red-wing flocks are a common sight in most cattail and tule marshes.