



BAYLANDS

Birds of the Salt Marsh

There are seven types of birds found at the Palo Alto Baylands: songbirds, birds of prey, waterfowl, marsh birds, terns, gulls, and shorebirds.

During the warm months some of the song birds living at the Baylands are Song and Savannah Sparrows, Long-billed Marsh Wrens, Common Yellowthroats, Red-winged Blackbirds and the Western Meadowlarks. They are easily identified by song and form. These birds nest in the grasses and reeds, and are vulnerable to predation. Nesting time is when bird watchers and Baylands Park users need to be especially careful not to disturb them.

The small birds of prey soaring or hovering in the skies of the Baylands include the American Kestrel, Loggerhead Shrike, Burrowing Owl, and Short-eared Owl. Much larger birds of prey are the White-tailed Kite and the Northern Harrier (also called the Marsh Hawk). All are hunting for small birds, mice, voles, or flying insects and each has a distinctive way of hunting. The large Turkey Vulture is a scavenger and waits for freshly killed or decayed animals.

Common waterfowl you may see along the shore are the Pintail, Mallard and Canvasback ducks. Mallards and Pintails are called dabbling ducks because they dip their heads into the water to eat underwater plants, insects, and fish. Canvasbacks are called diving ducks because they dive to the bottom to search for food. Other waterfowl include the American Coot and the Pied-billed Grebe.

The Clapper Rail is a special marsh bird at the Palo Alto Baylands, because it is both an endangered species and the symbol of the Palo Alto Baylands. It is 14 inches long with a long, slightly down-turned beak. Its markings are drab: black and both grayish and reddish brown. The Clapper Rail feeds on small fish, insects, crayfish and plants as it wanders through shallow waters, reeds, and on mud flats. Its

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call sounds like a person clapping.

The graceful Forster's Tern is common in the summer at the Baylands. The winter and summer plumage of this bird are quite different. In winter it is mostly white and light gray, with a black head. In summer it is white, tan and brown. Forster's Terns hunt flying insects and plunge-dive for fish.

The Palo Alto Refuse Area, Airport, and Baylands are the favorite habitat for the Ring-billed Gull. It is easily identified by the black ring near the tip of its bill. The Ring-billed Gull is mostly white with black on the tips of the wings. These birds are scavengers but will also eat eggs from nesting sea birds, worms from plowed fields and swarms of flying insects.

Tidal pools and the tall grassy marshes of the Baylands are a perfect feeding ground for the large shore birds. The largest, standing four feet tall, is the Great Blue Heron. As it slowly and elegantly wades through the shallow waters it searches for fish, insects, and small rodents to dine on. The Great Egret, another very large marsh bird, is white with long black legs and a yellow bill. The smaller Snowy Egret is sometimes seen in large flocks, feeding on small fish, shrimp, crabs, and insects.

The Western Sandpiper is the most numerous of the shore birds. A very gregarious bird, it can occur in flocks of hundreds. It is a tiny 6 1/2 inch long bird with a white breast, brown and black speckled back, black legs, and a long thin bill. It searches for worms, mollusks and crustaceans as it scurries along on the soft Bayland mud at low tide.

These are just a few of the birds that may be seen at the Palo Alto Baylands. To add to the enjoyment had by bird watchers, the Baylands are used by great numbers of migrating birds in the Spring and Autumn.

Written and Illustrated by Virginia Kolence





