

Guest writer Susan Kelly regularly helps lead public bird walks for the Marin Audubon Society, including their monthly first Thursday walks at Las Gallinas which are particularly welcoming to beginners. The regular Las Gallinas walks take a break during the slower summer months; check marinaudubon.org for currently scheduled field trips.

The Las Gallinas Sewage Ponds is the birding community's name for the complex of sewage treatment ponds, tidal mudflats, salt marsh, and agricultural fields around the Las Gallinas Valley Sanitary District plant in San Rafael. The wastewater facility includes four treatment ponds and two miles of flat levee trails around and between the ponds. Beyond the last pond a 1-mile trail continues along a levee with native salt marsh on the east side and agricultural fields on the west. Once you've birded this area and enjoyed the wide variety of waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, and songbirds it attracts, you'll understand why Las Gallinas is one of the most popular birding spots in Marin.

As soon as you get out of your car in the gravel parking lot, look for Red-winged and Brewer's Blackbirds on the wires above you, Quail and California Towhees foraging on the ground, and perhaps a Red-tailed Hawk perched in a nearby tree or on a pole. In summer, look under the concrete bridge for nesting Cliff Swallows and other swallows over the ponds. Walk across the bridge and you quickly reach the first pond. Here several small islands attract nesting and roosting waterfowl and you can expect to see a wide variety of ducks, geese, and wading birds such as egrets, herons, and shorebirds. While Mallards, Gadwall, and Canada Geese are resident and can be seen all year, in fall and winter the ponds attract large numbers of migratory waterfowl, including American Wigeon, Bufflehead, Canvasback, Cinnamon Teal, Green-winged Teal, Common Merganser, Greater Scaup, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Ruddy Duck, Cackling Goose, American Coots, and four species of grebes: Western, Clarks, Eared, and Horned.



Common Gallinules join Mallards and Pied-billed Grebes as spring waterfowl. Photo by Doug Greenberg.

The first pond fluctuates in level due to water management requirements. If the water level is low enough to expose bare ground along the shoreline you'll see many shorebirds. Depending on the season, you could spot Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Least Sandpipers, Dunlin, Long-billed Dowitchers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Willet, Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwit, Wilson's Snipe and Killdeer.

Naturally this abundance of prey attracts many raptors. Resident raptors that work the fields to the east and west of the ponds include Red-tailed Hawks, Red-shouldered Hawks, White-tailed Kites, and Northern Harriers; you can see them all year long. Many other raptors arrive in the fall, including the occasional Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, American Kestrel, Cooper's Hawk, Sharp-shinned Hawk, and, at dusk or in the evening, the occasional Short-eared Owl or Barn Owl.



The gray ghost: the male **Northern Harrier** is one of our most striking raptors. Photo by Don Bartling.

The vegetation near the water's edge and in the shrubs along the levees is home to many songbirds, including Marsh Wrens, Bewick's Wrens, Song Sparrows, Savannah Sparrows, Black Phoebes, Common Yellowthroats, House Finches, and American and Lesser Goldfinches. In spring, the musical songs of song sparrows and marsh wrens are particularly noticeable. In the fall and winter you'll find large numbers of White-crowned and Golden-crowned Sparrows, Yellow-rumped Warblers, and solitary birds like Say's Phoebes and American Pipits.

Look carefully into the vegetation along the edges of the ponds for an American Bittern, a Sora, or a Green Heron. Striking Black-crowned Night Herons often roost on the island in the middle of the first pond. Sharp-eyed birders may be rewarded with an uncommon sighting, such as Blue-winged Teal, Eurasian Wigeon, Hooded Merganser, Snow Goose, or a sparrow such as Fox, Lincoln's, or Swamp Sparrow. One winter a rare Northern Shrike stayed a few months, attracting birders from all over the Bay Area.



Great-tailed Grackles are a recent addition here. Photo by Doug Greenberg.

As a special treat, you might see river otters swimming in the ponds. Look for the tracks they've made as they cross from one pond to the next. Continue past the ponds on the levee trail along the salt marsh and you'll be rewarded with fine views of San Pablo Bay and looming Mount Diablo. Watch for an Osprey flying by with a fish in its talons, or scan the distant towers for one. In the fall and winter flocks of Western Meadowlarks grace the fields, easily identifiable with their stocky bodies, bright yellow breasts, and white outer tail feathers, and American Kestrels hover over the grasslands looking for small prey items. If you're there late in the day you might hear a chorus of Ridgeway's Rails (formerly Clapper Rails) sounding their loud kek-kek-kek calls across the marsh.



Black-crowned Night Herons are usually found roosting on the island in the first pond. Photo by Frank Schulenberg.

Practical Details

How to Get There: To reach the Las Gallinas ponds, exit Hwy 101 at Smith Ranch Rd/Lucas Valley and drive east toward San Pablo Bay. At the entrance to McInnis Park, cross the railroad tracks and turn left. Follow this road .7 miles until it ends in a gravel parking lot.

Rules & Access: The Las Gallinas ponds are managed by the Las Gallinas Valley Sanitary District and are open during daylight hours free of charge. This walk is highly accessible and offers easy, relaxed walking with flat, level trails, portable toilets, benches, and a few picnic tables at the entrance. The trail forms part of the San Francisco Bay Trail and will eventually connect to the Bay Trail segment at Hamilton to the north.