



Map adapted from official map at marincountyparks.org

Rush Creek Open Space Preserve on the northern border of Novato offers several hundred acres of public wetlands and woodlands, but is set alongside several thousand more acres of protected land which together comprise the largest natural tidal brackish marsh in California. Rush Creek can be approached via several different entrances marked above: 1) from the west end, adjacent to Highway 101 on the Binford frontage road, 2) from a central point off Bugeia Lane, or 3) from the east end in the Bahia neighborhood.

Binford Road & the Main Trailhead: A Wide Watery Expanse, with Some Distance and Noise

The most popular trailhead is this first one, with its most plentiful parking and even easy transit access by bus or SMART. In fact, for those who want a quick birding fix, you hardly need to even walk: just glide down Binford, pull over at a likely looking spot or two and take a look at what you can see. Traffic on Binford is generally light, but there is some freeway noise and some birds will be beyond comfortable binocular distance and will be best enjoyed with a spotting scope. But some will be closer!

As with any of our wetlands, activity will vary greatly at different times of the year. The spring and summer months (April–July) will be the slowest for waterbirds, with waterfowl mostly limited to Canada geese, mallards, and a few gadwalls; and shorebirds dominated by stilts and avocets, with a smattering of killdeers and greater yellowlegs. Herons and egrets can also be found year-round. Still, even the waterbird diversity nadir of late May and early June can be a fun time to visit and look for goslings, ducklings, or the precariously long-legged fuzzballs that accompany the wading black-necked stilts and avocets (pictured: stilt chick by Patty McGann). Spring and summer also offer some interest in the non-waterbird department, perhaps most notably the abundance of swallows found here, including all five of our common local swallows (barn, cliff (photo below by Don DeBold), northern rough-winged, tree, and violet-green). Be sure to check the small freshwater marsh at the trailhead, filled with cattails and bordered by willows: you might hear a sora or spot an immobile green heron or some other such skulking wonder.





Shorebird activity picks up from mid-July and increases into fall and winter. The variety can be impressive: from the tiny least and western sandpipers (“peeps”), up to the slightly larger dunlins, the mid-sized yellowlegs, dowitchers, and willets, and then the big boys of marbled godwit, whimbrel, and long-billed curlew. August through mid-September may also host some of the most loveable and less predictable visitors to the marsh in passing Wilson’s or red-necked phalaropes, endearing little pint-pots that stir up food from the marsh floor by paddling vigorously in tight little circles. The fall months then see ever increasing numbers of ducks, ultimately collecting thousands of pintail, canvasbacks, shovelers, American wigeons, green-winged teals, ruddy ducks, and

buffleheads to spread their cheerful colors throughout the preserve, where many will remain through the following March. Winter months also tend to be busier with raptors, with additional red-tailed hawks, kestrels, and harriers joining the year-round crew (red-shouldered hawks and white-tailed kites both breed in the preserve), as well as merlins, peregrine falcons, or bald eagles occasionally stopping by.

Cemetery Marsh: Closer Birds and Quieter Birding

Farther along in the middle of the preserve is a nice little inlet between two ridges and completely circled by trails, allowing a relatively close approach to birds that can nonetheless feel comfortable amid the little islands of Cemetery Marsh (named for the neighboring Valley Memorial Park). A variety of waterbirds use this marsh and are often easier to see than the sometimes distant birds around the Binford trailhead.

Bahia: In from the Water, Into the Woods

On the eastern end of the preserve, there is another trailhead at the end of Bahia Dr. Unlike the trails described above, which skirt directly along the wetland edge, the trail from Bahia is up a short distance from the water and passes instead through forest of oaks, bays, buckeyes, madrones, and good-sized manzanitas: everything you need for a nice mixed woodland replete year-round with several woodpecker species (pictured: acorn woodpecker by Risa George), buzzing Bewick’s wrens, honking white-breasted nuthatches, squeaking titmice and chickadees, and tremulously whispering brown creepers. You’ll still get periodic approaches to the water, where you can look out in winter and see the large flocks of canvasbacks, pintails, and other ducks.



Practical Details

How to Get There: Rush Creek has three primary access points. One pleasant way to spend half a day is to leave a vehicle at either Binford or Bahia and then do a point-to-point walk of about 4 fairly level miles. The most easily reached, main trailhead is immediately off Highway 101 at the Atherton exit. Heading east on Atherton, make an immediate left to get onto the Binford frontage road, from which you can either look for birds along the shoulder, or head out on the trail. For directions to other trailheads, consult the labelled map above or visit our website at wbu.com/marin.

Rules & Access: Rush Creek is a Marin County Open Space Preserve and so is open to free public access 24 hours a day, but lacks amenities such as garbage cans, restrooms, or tables. Bikes are permitted throughout the preserve, leashed dogs are permitted on trails, and unleashed dogs under voice control are permitted on fire roads. As with all Open Space Preserves, excellent downloadable maps are available at marincountyparks.org or you can consult our favorite printed map, *Trails of Northeast Marin* by Pease Press.