

Bird Habitats of Northeast Marin

All sites listed are in Novato and San Rafael. Find maps, directions, and more bird details on our *Nature in Novato* blog or at official preserve websites. I also highly recommend the excellent *Trails of Northeast Marin* map by Pease Press. “OSP” indicates county Open Space Preserves, always free and always open.

1. In the Neighborhood

Key species: House finch, goldfinches, scrub-jay, oak titmouse, California towhee, robin, mockingbird.

Target species: Neighborhoods with palm trees are the best places to look for nesting hooded orioles. Planted Chinese pistache, pyracantha, and other winter-fruiting ornamentals are among the best places to spot cedar waxwings. In periodic winters, pine siskins are seen in large numbers at seed feeders.

Sites: In addition to your own neighborhood, wherever it may be, various elements of human origin are strongly attractive to certain birds. Note utility towers for hawks, nesting boxes for bluebirds and swallows, owl boxes for barn owls, and backyard feeding stations near different types of wild habitats.

2. Oak Woodland

Key species: Titmouse, chickadee, white-breasted nuthatch, scrub-jay, and various woodpeckers. Common summer singers include juncos, purple finches, orange-crowned warbler, and warbling vireo.

Target species: Denser woods near creeks host Steller’s jays and (in summer) pacific-slope flycatchers and Wilson’s warblers. Well-developed and expansive woods have pileated woodpecker, brown creeper, western screech-owl, and (in winter) golden-crowned kinglet and fox sparrow. In April–May, look for migrants like western tanager, black-headed grosbeak, and black-throated gray warbler.

Sites: Olompali State Historic Park, Mount Burdell OSP (Dwarf Oak trail), Big Rock Ridge (lower eastern portion), Indian Valley OSP, Indian Tree OSP, China Camp State Park. Relatively modest woods border adjacent wetlands at Rush Creek OSP (Bahia trailhead) and Deer Island OSP.

3. Conifer Forest

More conifer forest (redwood or Douglas-fir) is found in west and south Marin, but we do have some on the north-facing slopes of Big Rock Ridge. Much of this is privately held outside of our single forest preserve at **Indian Tree OSP**. Characteristic species include brown creeper, Pacific wren, hermit thrush, breeding pine siskin, golden-crowned kinglet (winter). Go near the redwood-lined creek on the Deer Camp trail to listen for singing Pacific wrens and hermit thrush in spring.

4. Oak Savanna and Grassland

Oak savanna has widely spaced trees compared to the continuous tree cover of oak woodland above.

Key species: Western bluebird, white-tailed kite, red-tailed hawk. Meadowlark and kestrel (winter), western kingbird, lark sparrow, grasshopper sparrow, violet-green swallow (summer).

Target species: Lazuli buntings are best seen near clumps of trees on the Loma Alta Fire Road or on Mount Burdell near the Middle Burdell and Deer Camp Fire Roads. Horned larks and uncommon breeding meadowlarks can be seen in grasslands at Loma Alta or at upper elevations of Big Rock Ridge.

Sites: Mount Burdell OSP (esp. Middle Burdell + Deer Camp Fire Roads), Big Rock Ridge (higher western portion), Loma Alta Fire Road (off Lucas Valley Rd), Bahia Lagoon (for winter species + ducks).

5. Chaparral

This dry, shrubby community of south-facing slopes is covered by chamise, manzanita, and coyote bush.

Key species: Wrentit, spotted towhee, Bewick's wren, scrub-jay, Anna's hummingbird.

Target species: Wrentits are easily located by their carrying "bouncing ball" calls. Rufous-crowned sparrows are difficultly located when not singing. Blue-gray gnatcatchers here and in adjacent woodland.

Sites: Big Rock Ridge has our most extensive and well-developed chaparral; smaller bits at Mount Burdell OSP, Indian Valley OSP, Indian Tree OSP, and China Camp.

6. Ponds

Key species: Year-round waterfowl species are mostly limited to mallard, Canada goose, mute swan, and duck-like common gallinule and pied-billed grebe. Oct–April, a large variety of ducks will be found in all sites. Wading herons and egrets and certain songbirds and raptors are also present year-round.

Target species: Visit April–June for baby waterfowl, perhaps our cutest birds. In winter, saltwater-preferring birds like red-breasted merganser, common goldeneye, and Barrow's goldeneye are at Bahia and Day Island. Freshwater specialists like sora, Virginia rail, gallinule, and common merganser are best seen at Las Gallinas, Stafford Lake, and Pacheco Pond. Common and eye-catching ducks include: green-winged teal, cinnamon teal, ruddy duck, bufflehead, and northern pintail. Beyond ducks, these sites are also good for gulls (more diversity in winter, e.g. mew gulls at Las Gallinas), Forster's and Caspian terns (mostly summer), and raptors (northern harrier; peregrine, merlin, and kestrel in winter).

Sites: Las Gallinas Ponds, Stafford Lake Park, Pacheco Pond, Bahia Lagoon, Day Island Wildlife Area, Lower Novato Creek/"Vintage Oaks Ponds" (limited public access).

7. Salt Marsh

Key species: Northern harrier, song sparrow, common yellowthroat, marsh wren, great egret.

Target species: Ridgway's rail and black rail are easier heard than seen; Lincoln's sparrow in winter.

Sites: Rush Creek OSP, Bahia Lagoon, Hamilton Wetlands, Las Gallinas Ponds, China Camp.

8. Mudflat and Tidal Wetlands

Key species: Black-necked stilt, American avocet, and killdeer are our year-round shorebirds. In winter, greater yellowlegs, willet, small "peep" sandpipers and many more shorebirds join them, as do a wide variety of duck species. All sites below are bordered by salt marsh, featuring birds listed above.

Target species: Additional mudflat specialists include long-billed curlew, whimbrel, dowitchers, marbled godwit, semipalmated plover, and snowy plover. Phalaropes may visit deeper water areas in July-August. Some ducks that gather here in large flocks include canvasback, northern pintail, and scaup. Some gulls, Forster's terns, and Caspian terns fish in submerged areas in summer, additional gull species in winter.

Sites: Rush Creek OSP, Hamilton Wetlands, Day Island (distant but extensive views of bayshore mud).

9. Rocky Bayshore/Deeper Baywater

Key species: Some ducks like scaup and common goldeneye favor the deeper saltwater of San Pablo Bay, as do several diving grebes (Clark's, western, horned) and the typically coastal western gull. Adjacent patches of wetlands host various other ducks, shorebirds, and wading birds (egrets, etc.)

Target species: Black oystercatcher and black turnstone are found only on rocky shorelines, which are also the best area for spotted sandpiper. Brown pelican and elegant terns possible in fall.

Sites: Loch Lomond Marina and the Bay Trail between San Rafael Canal and Richmond Bridge for rocky shoreline. Day Island Wildlife Area in Black Point is Novato's closest approach to the bayshore, except for "behind the scenes" trips to Hamilton Wetlands in fall (Marin Audubon, WBU, or for volunteers).