

Introduction to Birding in Northeast Marin

What birds do we have here?

In our checklist of the birds of Northeast Marin, we pin the number of regular and readily-findable birds at precisely 176 species. With a little more effort chasing down less common birds, it is very possible to find 200 species over a year or so within the Novato/San Rafael area. For a general overview, our list of the 176 common birds includes the array listed below—how well do you know each group?

Waterfowl: 21 species of ducks, geese, and swans, plus 5 grebes and 2 duck-like rails

Shorebirds: 19 species from the avocet, plover, and sandpiper families

Gulls & Terns: 7 common species

Hawks, Eagles, Falcons: 13 species

Miscellaneous: 3 owls, 6 herons and egrets, 4 doves, 3 hummingbirds, 7 woodpeckers, 6 flycatchers, 2 vireos, 2 jays, 1 lark, 5 swallows and 2 swifts, 4 wrens, the only wren in the world, 1 bluebird, 5 finches, 6 warblers, 11 sparrows and 2 towhees, 1 bunting, 2 orioles, and 3 assorted European imports.

When are they here?

Every season has its highlights. A typical calendar of interest for local birders might look something like:

July-Aug ~ Early Fall Migration: Southbound shorebirds appear, including migrant-only phalaropes and peak numbers for some scarce winter species like lesser yellowlegs and whimbrel.

Sep-Oct ~ Fall Migration: Southbound ducks and grebes arrive, as well as various winter hawks and gulls, several sparrows, the two winter warblers, waxwings, varied thrushes, and sapsuckers.

Nov-Feb ~ Winter: A few southbound hawks, ducks, and tardy migrants appear in November; a few northbound hummingbirds and swallows arrive in February, but overall little migration occurs—enjoy the winter residents, including high duck and shorebird numbers and winter resident songbirds.

March-May ~ Spring Migration: Ducks, shorebirds, and winter songbirds head north. Summer arrivals are fewer and are dominated by insect-eating groups like swallows, vireos, warblers, flycatchers, and orioles. **Early nesting season:** Birdsong peaks in March and April, early-nesting resident species may fledge young as early as March, and by May most breeding birds have at least started nest construction.

May-June ~ Summer: The last migrants appear in early May, and then movement mostly stops for a while. The birder's occupation with song fades somewhat in favor of watching baby birds among early-nesting resident species, while later migrant birds that arrive in late April might not fledge their first young until July (second broods of various species may still yield young in August).

Where can you find them?

Bird distribution is based on habitat, with requisite food sources and landscape structures determined by topography, water availability, and plant community. Consult our separate *Bird Habitats of Northeast Marin* for a tour of our major habitats, covering typical birds, special “target” species, and suggested birding sites. See our *Nature in Novato* blog for detailed site profiles, eBird.org for bird lists and recent sightings, and the Pease Press map *Trails of Northeast Marin* for enticement to explore new ground.

On the reverse here, see a suggested starting list of sites to visit—arranged roughly north to south—as well as a subjective “highlights” list for some unique birds that aren't particularly hard to find, but are easily overlooked by the general public. How many can you check off? Use these arbitrary 30 birds as an approximate measure of how many exciting discoveries still await in your own neighborhood.

Have You Been There? 12 Recommended Birding Sites in Northeast Marin

- 1. Mount Burdell: Summer hotspot for buntings, Bullock's orioles, chipping sparrows, kingbirds.
- 2. Stafford Lake: The reservoir fills up with winter ducks and attracts osprey and bald eagles; oaks host summer kingbirds and orioles; look creekside for yellowthroats and Wilson's warblers.
- 3. Indian Tree: Our only conifer forest gives homes to pileated woodpeckers, winter varied thrush and golden-crowned kinglet, and spring-singing Pacific wren and hermit thrush.
- 4. Rush Creek: Wetlands and oaks for woodland birds, winter ducks, and shorebirds. Visit Binford frontage road in June for baby stilts and avocets.
- 5. Bahia Lagoon: Petaluma River saltwater and relative proximity to bay make this a hotspot for winter goldeneyes and red-breasted merganser; fields with winter raptors and meadowlarks.
- 6. Day Island: This hidden preserve in Black Point offers enclosed ponds similar to Bahia Lagoon, a wooded hill, and Novato's only bayfront, where shorebirds gather and grebes feed offshore.
- 7. Indian Valley: Foothills on the north side of wooded Big Rock Ridge give room for pileated woodpeckers, spring black-throated gray and Wilson's warblers, and winter varied thrush.
- 8. Hamilton Bay Trail: The largest active wetlands restoration west of the Everglades is our best local site for tidal mudflat-loving shorebirds and a host of winter ducks.
- 9. Loma Alta Fire Road: Singing summer meadowlarks, horned larks, lark and grasshopper sparrows, and the sought-after lazuli buntings in clumps of trees.
- 10. Las Gallinas Ponds: Year-round activity includes breeding grebes and gallinules, winter ducks and raptors, thousands of summer swallows, and a prospering great-tailed grackle colony.
- 11. Loch Lomond Marina: Our best rocky shoreline, with close winter views of black oystercatchers, black turnstones, and the deeper-water grebes: Clark's, western, and horned.
- 12. McNear's Brickyard, Point San Pedro Road: A fall special up the road from the Marina—visit at sunset in late September to see thousands of migrating Vaux's swifts entering the chimneys.
- ❖ Additional sites: Upper Novato Creek (O'Hair and Miwok Parks), Scottsdale Pond and Lower Novato Creek ("Vintage Oaks Ponds"), Deer Island OSP, Big Rock Ridge, Pacheco Pond, Miller Creek & Terra Linda, China Camp, Bay Trail between San Rafael Canal and Richmond Bridge.

Have You Seen? 30 Birds Worth Seeking Out

Need some help tracking down some of these birds? Check eBird.org for recent sightings, search our *Nature in Novato* website by species name for recommended locations, or just ask us!

Spring and Summer

- 1. American avocet baby
- 2. Forster's tern
- 3. Horned lark
- 4. Violet-green swallow
- 5. Black-throated gray warbler
- 6. Wilson's warbler
- 7. Hermit thrush singing
- 8. Lark sparrow
- 9. Lazuli bunting
- 10. Hooded oriole

Fall and Winter

- 11. Common goldeneye
- 12. Hooded merganser
- 13. Vaux's swift
- 14. Semipalmated plover
- 15. Black turnstone
- 16. Spotted sandpiper
- 17. Peregrine falcon
- 18. Varied thrush
- 19. Cedar waxwing
- 20. Townsend's warbler

Year Round

- 21. Black oystercatcher
- 22. White pelican
- 23. Black-crowned night-heron
- 24. White-tailed kite
- 25. Barn owl
- 26. Great horned owl
- 27. Belted kingfisher
- 28. Pileated woodpecker
- 29. Western bluebird
- 30. Western meadowlark