

Shorebirds of Northeast Marin

Shorebirds include local birds from four different families, described below, all of whom are generally adapted to foraging on the borders of watery environments. The list of 23 local shorebirds given here omits a few birds of the sandy/rocky ocean coast in preference to the birds more typically found around mudflat and wetland habitats in our inland and bayshore section of the county. A few general tips:

1. **Migration:** Most of our local shorebirds breed in the far north and then appear here in winter. Actually, many of them pass by on migration with peak numbers in fall as they travel to wintering grounds farther south. (Most birds discussed here do winter locally in at least some quantity.) We also have some birds that migrate to the US interior for nesting (willet, curlews, godwits) and a few birds that breed here in limited numbers (stilts, avocets, oystercatchers, snowy plovers, killdeer), although all of these also increase in numbers in winter.
2. **Timing:** When we say a shorebird “winters” here, we mean that it spends the breeding season elsewhere, then travels here. For shorebirds with short Arctic nesting seasons, southbound migrants often appear in July, while the last northward migrants may linger until May.
3. **Plumage:** Many shorebirds appear in July or August still in breeding plumage and can then be seen again in breeding plumage on their way north in April or May. The degree of difference between winter plumage and breeding plumage varies by species.
4. **Field Guides:** If you want something simple, I recommend the folding *Laws Pocket Guide to Birds of the Sacramento Valley* by John Muir Laws or David Allen Sibley’s *Birds of the California Coast*. If you want more a more complete set of illustrations, get a good comprehensive field guide, like David Allen Sibley’s *Birds of Western North America* and use it in conjunction with this list.
5. **Places:** Visit mudflat and tidal wetlands at Rush Creek and the Hamilton Wetlands; slightly deeper water with vegetated shorelines at Stafford Lake and the Bahia Lagoon (Novato), Las Gallinas Ponds (San Rafael), and Shollenberger Park (Petaluma); and rocky shorelines along the San Rafael Bay Trail, especially at Loch Lomond Marina. In the rest of the county, other shorebird hotspots include Corte Madera Marsh, Richardson Bay, Rodeo Lagoon, Bolinas Lagoon, and the various beaches along the ocean coast for a somewhat different selection of species.

Our Four Shorebird Families: Stilts and Avocets, Oystercatchers, Plovers, and Sandpipers

Stilts and Avocets (*Recurvirostridae*): Striking black and white birds with long, graceful legs and bills.

1. **American Avocet:** Unmistakable with unique upturned bill and reddish head in breeding season. Nests in low numbers at Rush Creek and Shollenberger. Common summer; abundant winter.
2. **Black-necked Stilt:** Also unmistakable: bright red legs, elegant black and white plumage, and long straight bill. Social, vocal birds that share habitat, nesting sites, and seasonality of avocets.

Oystercatchers (*Haematopodidae*): Large, dark shorebirds with long, powerful red bills used to smash or pry open mollusks and crustaceans, represented here by one species, the **(3) Black Oystercatcher**, best found locally on rocky shorelines such as Loch Lomond Marina and nearby sections of the Bay Trail.

The Plovers (*Charadriidae*)

Small-headed, relatively plump and thick-necked birds with only medium length legs, stubby little bills, foraging habits of running and pecking at prey, and (unlike the sandpipers) no hind toes.

4. **Black-bellied Plover:** Plain and bulky in winter, but you can see their distinctive black bellies when they arrive in July and August, and again before they leave in April.

5. **Killdeer:** Our most common locally-nesting shorebird, although as with all others here, we do get more in winter. Unique in often nesting in many open habitats far from water. Easily recognized by two clear bands on breast. Smaller than black-bellies, bigger than the next two.
6. **Semipalmated Plover:** Fairly common in winter, both on mudflats and coastal beaches. Often forages above water among vegetation. Like a smaller, cuter killdeer with a single breast band.
7. **Snowy Plover:** Endangered breeder along the coast; winters in small numbers at Hamilton Wetlands. Tiny, with no breast band except for remnant side patches in breeding plumage.

The Sandpipers (*Scolopacidae*): Some species in this large and varied family are called sandpipers in their common names, but many are not. Their common ancestry can be traced in their short, elevated hind toe and bills that are typically more slender than the stubby bills of the plovers. Listed roughly by size.

8. **Least Sandpiper:** Often referred to with the Western Sandpiper as one of the “peeps”—a group of small sandpipers often difficult to identify at a distance. Large flocks are common in winter. If you get close, the simplified ID rule is that leasts have yellow legs, while westerns have dark legs.
9. **Western Sandpiper:** Slightly larger and grayer in winter plumage than the browner leasts, this other peep shares the habits of hyperactive group feeding and impressive undulating flocks in flight.
10. **Dunlin:** Like a slightly larger version of Western Sandpipers, with somewhat longer and more drooping bills. Late migrants who don't arrive until mid-September (smaller peeps show up in July).
11. **Spotted Sandpiper:** Can use both rocky shorelines (Loch Lomond & S.R. Bay Trail) and gravelly pond edges (Stafford Lake). Lose spots in winter, but their teetering and tail-bobbing is distinctive.
12. **Black Turnstone:** A specialist of rocky shorelines, like the oystercatcher; best found here at Loch Lomond Marina. Their name is apt: they do indeed turn over stones as they search for food.
13. **Wilson's Phalarope:** Phalaropes only pass through on migration (June-September), but are unique in a few ways. Early in migration, *females* may show remnants of colorful breeding plumage.
14. **Red-necked Phalarope:** A little later, migrating through from mid-July into October. Look for both phalaropes stopping to feed in ponds and wetlands, sometimes with unique circle swimming.
15. **Wilson's Snipe:** Mostly from September through April, though never abundant. Solitary skulkers among vegetation near ponds and wetlands, or in flooded fields near Las Gallinas or Shollenberger.
16. & 17. **Dowitchers:** Two very similar species (long-billed and short-billed) have nearly identical appearance. Dowitchers are common in wetlands in winter, where flocks probe with their bills submerged in the mud in a repeated “sewing machine” machine.
18. **Greater Yellowlegs:** A medium-sized wader with distinctive bright yellow legs. Common in wetlands from July arrival until May departure.
19. **Lesser Yellowlegs:** Much less common relative, seen perhaps most in migration July-September, with very few remaining in winter. Obviously smaller when side-by-side; bill is shorter and daintier.
20. **Willet:** Similar shape to yellowlegs, but bigger, bulkier, and gray all over. Often gives loud alarm call and shows striking black and white wings in flight.
21. **Marbled Godwit:** The first of three distinctly larger birds, sharing a color palette of brownish upperparts and reddish underwings with curlews, but with a straight to slightly upturned bill.
22. **Whimbrel:** A smaller and less common cousin to the curlew, more gray and less red-brown, and with a shorter, but still sizeable, downcurved bill.
23. **Long-billed Curlew:** Fairly common on mudflats and occasionally wet fields. Our biggest shorebird and the one with the longest, downcurviest bill. May feed alone or in loose groups.