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MARSH WREN (juvenile)

Cistothorus palustris

L 5" WS 6"

A diminutive brown bird, clinging near the top of a cattail stem with its tail held stiffly vertical while producing a fussy, buzzing song may be your first lucky glimpse of the marsh wren. More than likely, however, you'll hear the chattering call of this somewhat elusive bird before you see it. The industrious male wren builds up to four nests each spring eagerly awaiting an approving female to select her favorite. When the finicky shopper has made her choice the couple lines the nest with plant down and proceeds to raise one or two broods each breeding season. Males and females look alike. Adult birds have bold white eyebrows and white streaking on the back and a thin, slightly re-curved bill.

SORA & VIRGINIA RAIL (Virginia rail shown on cover, bottom)

Porzana carolina *Rallus limicola*

L 8.75" WS 14" L 9.5" WS 14"

Rails, by far, are the most secretive birds of the marshland environment. When you finally glimpse one, feel privileged and enjoy the rush of excitement that

accompanies the experience. Built for slinking through narrow passages in dense vegetation, rails are deep-bodied but narrow birds with amazing flexibility. Seldom seen, Virginia and sora rails become more visible as seasonal marsh ponds shrink in size in late summer. Rails will move away from the protection of dense cattails to forage at water's edge to take advantage of the food available in remaining pools. Look for the short yellow bill and black face and throat of the sora and the longer bill and rusty breast of the Virginia. Both species possess long thin toes for gripping vegetation, short chicken-like tails, and bright red eyes.

As you study and enjoy the fascinating birds of the freshwater marsh ecosystem please help us continue to protect this rare habitat. Always remain on marked trails and don't disturb or collect plants or wildlife.

Text: Jan Southworth

Cover photos: top, **snowy egret** by Don Jedlovec & bottom, **Virginia rail** by Jim Dunn.

FURTHER READING:

The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western North America, David Allen Sibley, IBSN 0-679-45121-8

Birds of Northern California, David Fix and Andy Bezener, ISBN 1-55105-227-X

Water Birds of California, Howard L. Cogswell, ISBN 0-520-02699-3

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6/07

**Common
Marshbirds
of the
East Bay Regional Parks**



Freshwater marshes are rich, vibrant habitats that have received an undeserved bad reputation. Often thought of as swamps and “bottomlands,” many people think of marshes as dangerous wastelands, mosquito-infested cauldrons of murky water where humans invariably have misadventures. During the last two centuries this view and the ease with which shallow wetlands can be filled in for commercial and agricultural development have led to their widespread destruction within the contiguous United States.

Because water is essential to the survival of every living organism, aquatic habitats are home to a vast diversity of living things, and freshwater marshes are no exception. Far from a wasteland, a healthy marsh is a biological soup full of the very “liquid of life.” Swamps and freshwater marshes, however, are **different** wetland habitats with two basic features in common—they are both filled with shallow standing, not running, water and they foster an abundance of plant life. Freshwater marsh vegetation is composed of grassy sedges and reeds like cattails, tules, and bulrushes whereas swamp ecosystems are actually wetland forests, vegetated with trees and shrubs—typical of the Southeast United States.

When the first Europeans arrived in the 1700s, San Francisco Bay was rimmed by a vast system of fresh and saltwater marshes which stretched from the south end along both sides of the Bay all the way to the Golden Gate. These marshes existed along the route of an ancient “sky-highway” known as the Pacific Flyway, a distinct flight path for millions of migratory birds. Bay Area marshlands are literally

saturated with abundant food resources in the form of insects and vegetation, worms and other invertebrates, fish, and crustaceans all supported by dense vegetation. Although reduced by more than 75% today, these food-rich marshland habitats continue to provide the critical “wayside rest-stops” along this aerial highway.

The East Bay Regional Park District has been successful in its work to preserve spectacular examples of this increasingly rare habitat within the Bay Area. One of these is among the top-rated birding areas in western North America—Coyote Hills Regional Park. Other fine examples of freshwater marshland habitat may be found at Martinez Regional Shoreline, Hayward Regional Shoreline, Waterbird Marsh Preserve, and Big Break Regional Shoreline.

Of all California bird habitats, freshwater marshes have one of the highest percentages of species exclusive to the intricate marsh environment. Divers, dabblers, gleaners, probers, long-legged waders, and songbirds, the avian inhabitants of the marsh display myriad adaptations for feeding and nesting within this ecosystem. Red-winged blackbirds, marsh wrens, and yellowthroats find easy concealment for their nests and protection from predators among the tangled marsh reeds. Rails and bitterns, the most elusive birds of the marsh, glean seeds and stalk aquatic invertebrates, silently squeezing between plant stems and melting away at the slightest hint of danger. Egrets and herons stand motionlessly and ever watchful in marsh shallows, ready to snatch unwary fish, frogs, and crayfish as well as rodents like mice and muskrats. Resident dabbling ducks like the pintail, mallard, and shoveler

tilt bottoms-up to extract seeds, insects, and other organisms from the mud. Diving birds like grebes and ruddy ducks disappear, “swim-flying” long distances through dim water to deftly capture fast-moving fish.

According to California naturalist and birder Arnold Small, “No other birding experience can equal that of a spring dawn in a freshwater marsh.” It may be time to look more closely at your local marsh. You’ll discover that it’s not a wasteland but a natural treasure full of intricacy and the power to delight, an ecological masterpiece well worthy of protection and study. So grab your binoculars and take a bird walk in the marsh soon. Described and pictured below are a few of the many intriguing marshland celebrities to entice you.



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PIED-BILLED GREBE

Podilymbus podiceps
L 13” WS 16”

This small, plump, brown bird with a dark-banded bill shaped like that of a chicken is an inconspicuous but intriguing inhabitant of the marsh. The secretive pied-billed may slowly submerge, like a tiny feathered submarine, leaving only its head exposed,

when it notices you. Like other grebes, this species nests on floating masses of vegetation and frequently carries its young on its back. The raucous chimp-like call of the pied-billed is a memorable component of the marshland spring chorus.



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GREAT BLUE HERON

Ardea herodias
L 46” WS 72”

By far the tallest bird seen in our bay area marshes, the great blue heron has a six-foot wing-span. With its harsh squawking call and lumbering flight, this species conveys strong hints at the reptilian ancestry of birds. Flying low over the marsh, this heron resembles the pterodactyl of your childhood dinosaur collection. Remarkably, the great blue, like the great and snowy egrets, is colonial, nesting in groups on large twig platform-nests high in trees sometimes several miles from the marsh.

L = Body length from bill tip to tail tip
WS = Wing span



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SNOWY EGRET

Egretta thula
L 24" WS 41"

The National Audubon Society, formed in 1888, ushered in the bird conservation movement, adopted this species as its symbol and helped save it from extinction. Feather hunters in the 19th and early 20th centuries killed birds by the thousands at nesting sites. Elegant egret nuptial plumes were sold for up to 80 dollars per ounce (three to four times the price of gold at the time). Thankfully, in later decades, the snowy egret population made a successful comeback. Today it is not uncommon to see dozens of egrets in local marshes. In spring, a fully bedecked snowy, adorned with gossamer nuptial plumes on head, neck, and back, is a glamorous sight to behold. Unlike the great egret that stands motionlessly for long periods waiting patiently for unwary prey to approach, the snowy pursues its prey by scuffling along in the shallows, agitating the mud with its feet. Notice its black legs and "golden slippers" or bright yellow feet.



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GREAT EGRET

Ardea alba
L 39" WS 51"

In 1886, while taking two walks down the streets of New York, naturalist Frank Chapman recorded sighting 40 different species of dead birds and bird parts adorning women's hats. During the heyday of the plumage trade for the Victorian fashion industry, many bird species suffered steep declines in population. Egrets were prime targets for the millinery trade because of their delicate pure-white nuptial or breeding plumes. Today, thanks to conservation efforts, the sight of an elegant great egret high-stepping gracefully about the marsh or deftly impaling a fish is a common birding experience. While common in marshlands, this tall bird will also hunt in open fields, particularly in agricultural areas. It also nests and roosts colonially high in tree tops. Notice the black legs and bright yellow bill.



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RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

Agelaius phoeniceus
L 8.75" WS 13"

Scarlet shoulder patches bordered with a band of yellow against satin-black wings and body provide the eye-catching and unmistakable diagnostic markings of the male red-wing. These striking physical features combined with a loud raspy song and an aggressively pugnacious manner allow the polygynous male to defend a large nesting territory, chasing even raptors away and attracting several mates each breeding season. Females are mottled brown with dark streaking on the breast and faint rust-brown shoulder patches. Both seed-eating and insectivorous, red-winged blackbirds feed their young a strictly insect protein diet. Redwing flocks are a common sight in most cattail and tule marshes and usually nest exclusively in freshwater marshes.



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CINNAMON TEAL

Anas cyanoptera
L 16" WS 22"

The brilliant rusty-red plumage and bright ruby eyes of the male cinnamon teal is an unmistakable and striking sight. This species is known to nest locally and, unlike many other ducks, male and female remain together as a couple throughout much of the nesting season. The mottled brown female lays 7-12 eggs in a grassy cup-shaped nest. Like other "dabbling ducks" the cinnamon teal feeds on aquatic plants, seeds, snails, and insects. Also like other "dabblers" this distinctive duck can explode out of the water into flight when alarmed. In flight, look for a light blue patch in the upperwing feathers.



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NORTHERN SHOVELER

Anas clypeata
L 19" WS 30"

Abundant on the marsh from September to May, flocks of northern shovelers are easily recognizable by the large white areas on the breast and under the tail of the males. Shovelers are known by hunters as the "spoonbill" because its bill is wider at the tip than in the middle and fringed along the edge. Armadas of shovelers with the colorful males and mottled brown females are often seen swimming along with heads beneath the water surface using their spatulate bills to strain food from the muddy shallows. Occasionally, as they dabble, you may catch a glimpse of their bright orange legs and feet.



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NORTHERN PINTAIL

Anas acuta
L 21-25" WS 34"

Your first sight of the pintail may well be a rear-end view. This duck is a dabbler extraordinaire, feeding by tipping bottom-up and paddling furiously to stay in position, scooping sedge seeds from the mud. Even in this position the male is easily identified by the black patch under its tail and by its long tapering tail feathers. When viewed upright, the cocoa-brown head, pure white bib and gray body complete the picture of the dapper male. Female pintails are a soft mottled brown with a slightly elongated tail.



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RUDDY DUCK

Oxyura jamaicensis
L 15" WS 18.5"

Recognized most of the year as a small, plump brown duck with a distinct stiff up-tilt to its tail, the male ruddy in breeding plumage becomes one of the most striking and easily identified ducks on the marsh pond. His gray cheek patch turns pure white while his body color brightens to a rich chestnut red and his bill turns a gaudy sky blue. The flamboyantly plumaged male flirts with potential mates by fanning his upturned tail in a jaunty sexual display and swimming circles around a bevy of subtly colored females until he attracts their interest. Ruddies are diving ducks capable of covering long distances in underwater pursuit of fast moving prey.



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AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN

Pelecanus erythrorhynchos
L 62" WS 108"

Among the most massive of North American water birds, a flock of American white pelicans flying overhead or team-fishing in the marsh is a truly spectacular sight. Dramatically unmistakable, these heavy-bodied birds with a wingspread of 9 feet are abundant on local marsh ponds from late August until early spring. Feeding in teams, white pelicans swim in formation, herding fish into dense groups where they can be easily scooped up in enormous orange bills. Captured fish are retained within the leathery bill pouch as water drains out, then swallowed with a back tilt of the head. This synchronized team-fishing behavior creates a fascinating and graceful avian water-ballet which should not be missed.

L = Body length from bill tip to tail tip
WS = Wing span