

**AMERICAN AVOCET** (cover photo, top)  
*Recurvirostra americana*  
L 18" WS 31"

The American avocet is easily distinguished from the stilt by the absence of any black on the head or neck. The male avocet in breeding plumage is among the most beautiful of all shorebirds. Long pale blue legs, a tawny apricot-colored head with an elegantly upturned bill, and crisp black and white body complete the dapper and distinctive figure of the breeding male. Feeding behavior among avocets is also distinctive. Darting forward and sweeping its bill in a sideways motion through the water, the avocet captures tiny shrimp and other crustaceans. The avocet periodically raises its head, swallowing its catch.

**LONG/SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER**  
*Limnodromus scolopaceus* L 11.5" WS 19"  
*Limnodromus griseus* L 11" WS 19"



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Long-billed and short-billed dowitchers are so similar in appearance (especially in winter plumage) that even experienced birders often refer to both species simply

as "dowitchers." These medium-sized, plump gray-brown sandpipers stick closely together in tight flocks while feeding and are easily identified by their distinctive feeding style. As a "regiment" of dowitchers marches across the shoreline they forage for mollusks, crustaceans, and marine worms by probing deeply into the mud in a methodic sewing-machine-stitch rhythm. Distinguishing between the two dowitcher species is quite the challenge because the bill-length difference is barely noticeable. The pale barring, which is wider than the alternate pattern of dark bars, is sometimes noticeable on the tail of the long-billed dowitcher in flight.

As you study and enjoy the exquisite variety of shorebirds that visit our East Bay shores each year, it is hoped that your personal sense of connection to the natural world will increase and, with it, your dedication to conservation and a desire to protect the wonderful wildlife with which we share the planet. Happy Birding!

Text: Jan Southworth  
Design: Doyle Wegner  
Cover photos: top, **American avocet**  
& bottom, **killdeer** by Jim Dunn.

**FURTHER READING:**

[The Sibley Guide to Birds of Western North America](#), David Allen Sibley, ISBN 9780679451211

[Birds of Northern California](#), David Fix and Andy Bezener, ISBN 9781551052274

[Water Birds of California](#), Howard L. Cogswell, ISBN 0520029941

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



California's nearly 1500 miles of coastline contains some of the very best bird habitats in North America. The bays, beaches, estuaries, mudflats, lagoons, and salt marshes that compose this coastal environment are home to a large and diverse bird population. In its efforts to preserve open space for Bay Area residents, the East Bay Regional Park District has established a collection of precious shoreline parks, which protect vital pieces of the mosaic of California's coastal habitats. In doing so, the Park District has provided the visitor with some spectacular birding opportunities.

Observing songbirds can be a frustrating experience as the small quarry hops tantalizingly about, moving in and out of high, dense tree foliage. Shorebirds, however, feed in the open and are generally much larger than songbirds, allowing more comfortable viewing and, often, easier identification. Shorebirds' specialized feeding behavior, known as "resource partitioning" between several species can be readily observed, sometimes within the same field of view. Avocets, stilts, sandpipers, curlews, godwits, and other shorebirds display obvious physical characteristics and behaviors keyed to their territorial feeding strategies. While the American avocet swings its' up-turned, scythe-like bill in a side-to-side motion agitating the water and snatching up small shrimp, a nearby long-billed curlew probes the mudflat with its seven inch recurved bill, deftly extracting a worm. A few yards away a turnstone methodically turns over small rocks, exposing and snatching hidden prey. Tiny, short-legged, western sandpipers run about grabbing small crustaceans and flies from the mud surface while long-legged

stilts wade in water several inches deep latching on to unsuspecting shrimp and other crustaceans.

The nesting habits of shorebirds are equally as fascinating as their feeding behaviors. Many shorebird nests are not nests at all but merely "scrapes" or shallow, unlined depressions where two or three camouflaged eggs are laid. Some shorebird parents, like the killdeer, engage in elaborate "distraction displays" to protect their nests from discovery by potential predators. Shorebird babies are "precocial" or fully feathered and able to run, hide, and/or swim within minutes of hatching.

While binoculars are an indispensable tool for the birder, shorebird watching can also be enhanced with the use of a spotting scope mounted on a tripod. The scope allows for greater magnification to bring you that "up close and personal" intimacy where the subtle but exquisite beauty of a shorebird may be fully appreciated.

San Francisco Bay is one of the many stopovers along the Pacific Flyway, a giant aerial avenue used by migrating shorebirds to move from the Arctic to Central and South America as seasons change. For example, nearly two-thirds of North American shorebirds species travel from spring-summer nesting grounds in the Arctic, covering up to 15,000 miles during their annual migration to southern feeding grounds in the fall and winter. This remarkable feat requires flying at speeds around 50 miles per hour at altitudes as high as 10,000 feet. Some sanderlings, for example, undertake a truly mind-blowing navigational journey, which completely circles the Americas each year. After wintering in Chile

and Peru, sanderlings travel north through the western United States. Each spring they return to their arctic breeding grounds. As fall approaches they fly east along the top of North America, then south along the Atlantic Coast and north back to their South American wintering grounds. Migration requires massive amounts of energy, which requires enormous amounts of food. Migrating shorebirds travel in large flocks and stop at feeding or "staging areas" in huge concentrations where superabundant food resources are available. Protection of mudflats and salt marshes like those of the East Bay Regional Park District in San Francisco Bay is critical to shorebird survival.



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### **KILLDEER**

*Charadrius vociferus*  
L 10.5" WS 24"

This shorebird is commonly found throughout North America, and is quite widespread in California. Beginners will find the killdeer easy to identify by both sight and sound. The killdeer's scientific name refers to its loud and distinctive call which sounds much like its common name "killdeer." The only North American

plover with two black breast bands, the killdeer is famous for its flamboyant distraction display as it performs "the broken-wing act" in order to divert a potential predator's attention away from its eggs or vulnerable young. When danger is detected, tiny hatchling killdeer freeze while a parent flops about dramatically feigning an injury. Drawing the predator far from the nest area the adult suddenly recovers and flies off.



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### **BLACK-NECKED STILT**

*Himantopus mexicanus*  
L 14" WS 29"

The striking black and white plumage and vivid red legs of this elegant bird make it an unmistakably beautiful sight against the gray-brown of shoreline mudflats. Wading in tidal waters up to six or more inches deep, the stilt steps delicately about with an attitude of watchful determination. Using its needle-like bill it pecks and probes with great precision, capturing a variety of small crustaceans. In proportion to its body size, the black-necked stilt has the longest legs of any North American shorebird.



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### CLAPPER RAIL

*Rallus longirostris*  
L 14.5" WS 19"

The clapper rail is a plump, long-billed, chicken-sized bird with a short tail, which is perpetually twitching as it moves. An inhabitant of the saltmarsh, the clapper is stealthy and secretive as it slips, often undetectable, through dense thickets of cordgrass and pickleweed. Excellent parents, clappers have been documented providing aerial transport for their young to remove them from danger. The alert birder may spot a clapper as it feeds in the open along a muddy marsh channel at low tide. The diagnostic field marks of the adult clapper include the cinnamon-colored head, neck, and breast, cinnamon wing patches (seen only in flight) and the brown, barred lower belly. During the last century, efforts to fill shallow baylands and claim natural habitat for human occupation severely reduced clapper rail populations. The introduction of the non-native red fox took an additional toll. This special bird is on the national and state endangered species lists. If you are fortunate enough to spot one, feel privileged, and please observe—do not disturb! This is a fully protected species.



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### GREATER /LESSER YELLOWLEGS

*Tringa melanoleuca* L 14" WS 28"  
*Tringa flavipes* L 10.5" WS 24"

Both greater and lesser yellowlegs are often found among mixed groups of shorebirds. These slender brown-gray birds with yellow legs often perform sentry duty by bobbing their heads and producing noisy two- to five-note alarm calls, warning other birds of potential danger. Often seen standing on one leg this bird might easily be referred to as the yellow leg. Concealing one long leg completely under its feathers, the yellowlegs sometimes hops about on its other leg thus creating the false impression that it's injured. Unlike the killdeer, which feigns injury to distract predators, the yellowlegs is simply conserving warmth. The lesser yellowlegs is about 4 inches smaller in length and wingspread than the greater and the two species are so similar they can only be distinguished with great attention to subtle differences in bill length and call notes.



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### WILLET

*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*  
L 15" WS 26"

A large, stocky, gray-brown wader, the willet is rather nondescript in its juvenile, adult, and breeding plumages. When the willet takes flight, however, its eye-catching black and white wing-pattern makes it easy to identify, even by the beginner. The willet was named for its call, which sounds like "will-will willet" repeatedly, quickly in a loud, harsh voice. Willets breed around marshy meadows and lakes at high elevations and winter down on our coastal mudflats, rocky shores, and ocean beaches. An excellent probe feeder, the willet dines on insects, crustaceans, and vegetative matter.



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### LONG-BILLED CURLEW

*Numenius americanus*  
L 23" WS 35"

The largest shorebird in North America, the long-billed curlew is equipped with a bill almost half as long as its body. This bird's seven-inch lethal-looking bill is recurved and multipurpose, designed for extracting large insects from prairie grasslands and crabs, mollusks, worms, and crayfish from mudflats and marshes. Probing deeply into shoreline mud this curlew is able to reach prey unavailable to other shorebirds. Like other probing shorebirds, the curlew's bill tip can differentiate between the feel of a pebble and the neck of a clam. As its breeding habitat on prairie grasslands, marshes, and lakes becomes reduced, the long-billed curlew's numbers shrink. Spotting this dramatic bird feeding along our bay shore is an exciting sight and thrill.



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### MARBLED GODWIT

*Limosa fedoa*  
L 18" WS 30"

Diets of shorebirds may change from week to week or month to month depending upon availability of certain prey. The adaptable marbled godwit is able to take advantage of a large number of search strategies in its quest for food. Plump and tawny with a long, pinkish, slightly up-turned bill, the godwit is at home extracting grasshoppers from prairie grass or wading thigh-deep to plunge its bill deep into shoreline mud to capture mollusks, worms, and crustaceans. Foraging both day and night, marbled godwits are often seen in large, loose flocks feeding with their heads completely submerged.



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### SANDERLING

*Calidris alba*  
L 8" WS 17"

Sometimes seen pecking delicately at insects or invertebrates on mudflats like other sandpiper species, sanderlings are most known for their feeding behavior on sandy beaches as tiny wave runners. Never overtaken by a wave, sanderlings dart after receding surf to catch prey in the rolling sand. Racing forward just ahead of the leading edge of the next wave, this small pale sandpiper seems to take great pride in playing tag with the surf. A true cosmopolitan species, the sanderling breeds far north in the Arctic, Canada, and Russia and winters in North and South America as well as Asia, Africa, and Australia.



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### DUNLIN

*Calidris alpina*  
L 8.5" WS 17"

Dunlin form large, dense, and rather exclusive flocks as they feed along bay shorelines. This behavior pattern of foraging in tight "cliques," as well as their larger size, darker color, and slightly drooping bill-tip distinguish dunlin from Western and least sandpipers. Look for them along our shorelines from September to May, a compact regiment, moving steadily forward together, probing their way across a mudflat. Dunlin form huge flocks during migration and are known to fly at speeds over 100mph.



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### WESTERN/LEAST SANDPIPERS

*Calidris mauri* L 6.5" WS 14"  
*Calidris minutilla* L 6" WS 13"

Western and least sandpipers, as well as other small sandpiper species, are collectively known to birders as "peeps" because of their tendency to vocalize in a series of "peeping" sounds as they forage. Another reason for this label is because it seems easier to lump these small, similarly shaped, subtly colored birds under a generic title rather than attempt to distinguish them. If you opt for the fun of learning to distinguish the peeps, here's how to tell the winter plumage Western sandpiper from the least sandpiper: the Western is slightly larger with a slightly longer bill, a mottled gray upper body and **dark legs**. The least sandpiper is smaller with a shorter bill and a mottled brown upper body and **pale yellow legs**. All you need to do now is catch a glimpse of these species when their legs are not muddy!

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