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# Pocket Guide to Beach Birds of California

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*A project of PRBO Conservation Science*



# Pocket Guide to Beach Birds of California

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PRBO Conservation Science

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## Acknowledgments

The California Coastal Commission's Whale Tail License Plate Grants Program provided the lead grant to develop this guide. The California Coastal Commission works to protect, conserve, restore, and enhance environmental and human-based resources of the California coast and ocean for environmentally sustainable and prudent use by current and future generations.

PRBO biologists Gary Page, Catherine Hickey, Ryan DiGaudio, Rich Stallcup, Dave Shuford, Kriss Neuman, and Dave Dixon provided valuable comments on the content in this guide. Layout design and production by Claire Peaslee (PRBO).

Thanks to the following photographers for donating images: Michael "Mike" L. Baird ([flickr.bairdphotos.com](http://flickr.bairdphotos.com)); Len Blumin; Lyann Comrack; Ryan DiGaudio; Jenny Erbes; Tom Grey ([www.geocities.com/tgrey/41](http://www.geocities.com/tgrey/41)); Ron LeValley ([www.levalleyphoto.com](http://www.levalleyphoto.com)); Stuart Mackay; Martin Meyers; David C. Ohlson; Steve Smith. **Cover photos:** *front* (Snowy Plover), Jenny Erbes; *back* (Brown Pelican), Tom Grey; *title page* (Long-billed Curlew), Mike Baird.

*The following partners provided funding for this guide:*

California Coastal Commission Whale Tail License Plate Grants Program – [www.coastal.ca.gov/index.html](http://www.coastal.ca.gov/index.html)

USFWS Arcata Office – [www.fws.gov/arcata/](http://www.fws.gov/arcata/)

USDA Forest Service – [www.fs.fed.us](http://www.fs.fed.us)

San Francisco Bay Joint Venture – [www.sfbayjv.org](http://www.sfbayjv.org)

Supported by the



California Coastal Commission's  
Whale Tail License Plate Grants Program



Printed on 100% recycled paper, 50% post-consumer waste, processed chlorine-free paper.

## **Beaches are Habitat**

Beaches of the western United States are important to people and wildlife. They can be sandy or rocky and are found along coastlines, lagoons, estuaries, and sand spits. A popular recreation destination for people, beaches also provide important habitat for wildlife species. Many of California's imperiled and endemic plant and animal species depend on coastal estuaries and beaches. Millions of waterbirds use coastal ecosystems for breeding, migrating and wintering habitat.

On the Pacific coast of the United States, oceanfront development, exotic plant species, heavy recreational use, and expanding predator populations threaten coastal birds, especially the endangered Western Snowy Plover and California Least Tern. The beach-dune ecosystem is degraded to the point that it no longer sustains a viable breeding population of Snowy Plovers or Least Terns without ongoing human intervention. This guide aims to provide information on how people can share our coasts with birds and other wildlife.

# How to Use this Guide

This guide was written for people interested in learning about the most common bird species on beaches of the western United States. It also provides tips for wildlife-friendly beach recreation. We focus on 50 species and separate them according to where they are most commonly found in the beach ecosystem.

## Species Profiles

Each species profile includes a photo of the particular species. An attempt was made to include photos of birds in plumage typical of how they usually look while on the California coast (some birds can appear different depending on the time of year and also depending on their age and sex).

Each species includes a profile listing the following sections:

- 1) **Identification:** An overview of important physical features or behavioral clues that help identify a particular species, including its length

in inches. When males and females or different age classes look different, this is noted.

2) **Timing:** When the species occurs on the California coast. **Note:** “Winter” is defined as birds that arrive in the fall and stay until spring, but do not breed here during the summer months. Similarly, “summer” is defined as birds that arrive in the spring and stay until fall.

3) **Diet:** The main food items.

4) **Note:** An interesting fact about the bird.

5) **Conservation:** Describes specific ways to conserve birds and their habitats.

This is not a comprehensive guide to birds of the California coast, but an introduction to the species and how to conserve them. References are listed at the end of this guide.

## Threatened and Endangered California Beach Birds



Jenny Erbes

*A Snowy Plover is camouflaged to hide in plain view on the sand. (Below) It feigns injury to lure a predator away from its nest.*



Ryan DiGaudio

Thousands of Snowy Plovers and Least Terns once inhabited California beaches; today their populations are heavily impacted by human development and beach recreation. Construction of the Pacific Coast Highway in 1919 increased human enjoyment of beaches but not without a cost. Habitat loss, increased predation, and human disturbance, have made

beach nesting difficult for both species. The Western Snowy Plover has been federally listed as threatened since 1993, and is a California Species of Special Concern. The California Least



David Gardner

*A California Least Tern incubates eggs in its open nest on gravelly sand.*

Tern has been on state and federal endangered species lists since 1971 and 1970, respectively. Since their listing, populations of both species have increased due to conservation efforts, but they are not yet stable and self-sustaining.

## **Adapted for Beaches**

Terns and plovers nest on sandy beaches in a small scrape that is often lined with a few sticks, shells or pieces of seaweed.



Ian Tait



Ryan DiGaudio

*A brooding Snowy Plover  
and very young chicks.*

These birds are adapted to beach nesting; eggs and chicks are well camouflaged in their natural habitat, and adults use special behaviors to ward off predators. When a predator is detected, chicks hide by crouching in the open or hiding under beach drift and remaining very still. Adult Western Snowy Plovers will either lure predators from their nest sites or simply run off their nests. Adult Least Terns will often mob (harass) predators.

Despite these remarkable adaptations, these populations have not been able to adapt to the increased pressures brought by human development and recreation on beaches. People have been the cause of this problem, but we can also be the solution!

## Threats and Solutions

### *Threat: Habitat Loss*

**Causes:** Beachfront property development and spread of invasive plant species.

**Solutions:**

- Support legislation and conservation efforts to protect and preserve beach habitat.
- Support or volunteer to safely remove non-native invasive plant species such as European beach grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) and iceplant (*Carpobrotus* spp.)

### *Threat: Increased Predation*

**Causes:** Increased predators associated with humans: native crows, ravens and raccoons, and non-native cats and red foxes.

**Solutions:**

- Dismantle driftwood sculptures, which can serve as avian predator perches.

- Leave driftwood and seaweed on beaches for chicks to take cover under.
- Keep domestic cats indoors.
- Keep trash contained and covered so as not to attract predators.
- Never feed wildlife.

### *Threat: Disturbance to Nesting Birds*

**Causes:** Human recreation activities on beaches where plovers and terns breed. Activities include beach recreation, off-leash dogs, horse riding, and motorized and non-motorized vehicles.

**Note:** When on dry sand these activities can crush nests. Also, birds may be attracted to depressions—made in the sand by tires, feet and hooves—to nest or roost, which puts them at higher risk of getting crushed. Domestic dogs on and off leash in dry sand can chase birds, causing stress and a waste of their needed energy; chasing can also kill adults and chicks. Kites look like avian predators and can cause birds to flush off their nests, wasting precious energy and leaving nests vulnerable to real predators and weather.

**Solutions:**

- Respect protected habitat areas by reading signs and following rules to share the beach.
- Respect fences and exclosures around nest sites.
- Walk and ride horses on wet sand when in protected breeding areas, so you don't accidentally crush camouflaged nests.
- Keep dogs on leash and only in designated dog-friendly areas.
- Do not fly kites in protected breeding areas—they look like predators!
- Operate motorized and non-motorized vehicles only in designated areas.
- Help birds save their energy for survival by not chasing them at any time of year.
- Report disturbances to local authorities—these birds are protected by law! Disturbance causes separation of chicks and parents, leading to chick abandonment and death.

For information on the Western Snowy Plover and resources for recovery: [www.westernsnowyplover.org/](http://www.westernsnowyplover.org/)

## Nearshore Waters



David C. Ohlson

California's nearshore waters are habitat for many birds, fish, mammals, and invertebrates. These shallow waters are influenced by wind, current, and changes in the depth of the ocean floor. Underwater

plants like kelp help provide food and shelter for the small fishes, invertebrates and algae that feed other marine animals. The birds you see floating and diving near the beach are feeding on invertebrates and fish found in the nearshore waters.

### **Conservation Tips: Nearshore Waters**

- When boating, paddling, and fishing, stay 1000 feet away from birds nesting on bridges, cliff ledges, and islands. If you see birds reacting nervously (e.g., head-bobbing, calling, or fluttering), you are too close: move away.
- Paddle, sail, or motor around floating or feeding flocks of birds on the water, rather than through them.
- Support legislation requiring double-hulls for fuel tanks on cargo ships.
- Do not feed wildlife, and pack out all trash.



Len Blumin

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## Common Loon

(*Gavia immer*)

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**Identification:** 26–36" – *Winter:* Dark grey upperparts fading to white chin, throat and underparts. Heavy blue-grey bill, dark eye. *Breeding plumage:* Head, neck back and wings dark black. Distinct white, lined collar. Back checkered with white squares.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Fish.

**Conservation:** Support programs that promote clean watersheds and strategies for oil spill prevention.



Tom Grey

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## Western Grebe

*(Aechmophorus occidentalis)*

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**Identification:** 25" – Upperparts dark, underparts white. Black on crown extends below red eye. Long neck. Bill greenish-yellow.

**Timing:** Year-round. More abundant from September to May.

**Diet:** Fish.

**Note:** Elaborate courtship ceremonies include paired birds diving together for organic materials.

Steve Smith



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## Brown Pelican

(*Pelecanus occidentalis*)

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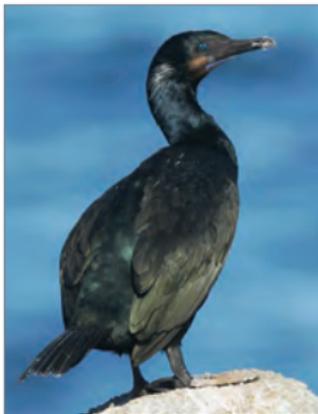
**Identification:** 51" – Only dark-plumaged pelican.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Fish.

**Note:** Plunges into water up to 65 feet deep for prey seen from flight.

**Conservation:** Federally endangered species. Support programs that reduce pesticide levels and that seek to remove fishing line, hooks and lures from the marine environment.



Tom Grey



Ron Le Valley

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## Brandt's Cormorant

*(Phalacrocorax penicillatus)*

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**Identification:** 31" – All black body. Blue gular (throat) patch edged with tan feathers. Blue eye.

**Timing:** Year-round, but mostly visible in spring and summer.

**Diet:** Mostly fish, some cephalopods (squid) and other invertebrates.

**Note:** Can dive from 30-400 feet deep to find food.

**Conservation:** Keep a safe distance from breeding colonies (1000 feet). Breeding birds are sensitive to disturbance.



Tom Grey

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## Surf Scoter

(*Melanitta perspicillata*)

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**Identification:** 20" – *Male* (shown): Black overall with white patches on back of head and forehead. Multicolored bill. *Female*: Brown, with less distinct white patches on head and face. Dark bill.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Mollusks.

**Conservation:** Support oil spill prevention programs, and remove fishing line, hooks and lures from the environment.

Ron LeValley



Tom Grey

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## Common Murre

(*Uria aalge*)

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**Identification:** 14–17" – *Breeding* (left photo): Black head, neck, back, feet and beak; white underside. Plump body. *Winter* (right): More white on neck and face.

**Timing:** Summer, but can be seen year-round.

**Diet:** Fish, krill, crustaceans, and squid.

**Note:** Can dive up to 590 feet to find food.

**Conservation:** Keep 1000 ft away from nesting colonies on coastal islands and cliffs.

## Sandy and Rocky Shore



Mike Baird

You may think the beach is just a large swath of lifeless sand, but look closer! The beach, whether rocky or sandy, is a place where all kinds of animals live, feed and reproduce. Marine ‘wrack’, or seaweed on the shore, attracts insects, sand crabs, and other invertebrates, providing birds with plenty of food. If you’ve never seen wrack on your favorite beach, it might be because it has been ‘groomed’ (wrack removed to make the beach appear clean). Groomed beaches have fewer birds, plants and invertebrates.

This section includes several sub-habitats: **sandy beach, rocky shore**, and sandy spits **near river mouths**. Birds move between these sub-habitats but may favor one, as indicated at the top of each page.

### **Conservation Tips: Sandy and Rocky Shore**

- Leave seaweed on beaches: it provides food for birds and other animals.
- Never leave trash on the beach, including cigarette butts!
- Refrain from chasing birds, because it wastes their energy and impairs their survival.
- Keep a respectable distance from nesting birds on the beach.
- Keep dogs leashed on the beach and only in designated dog areas.
- If allowed, ride horses below the tide line.
- Never feed birds on the beach, especially ravens which are nest predators of birds.
- Dismantle driftwood sculptures after creating and enjoying: they create unnatural perches for shorebird predators.



Tom Grey



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## American White Pelican

(*Pelicanus erythrorhynchos*)

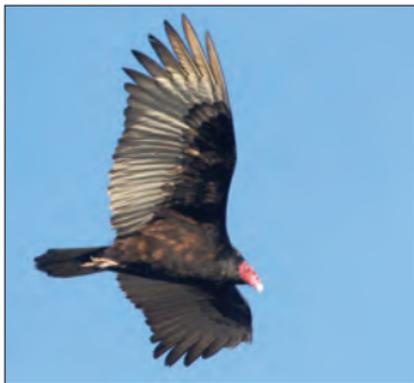
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**Identification:** 62" – White overall except black hind wings (visible in flight). Large yellow-orange bill with extensible pouch.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Fish.

**Note:** Forages by dipping bill into the water and scooping out prey, sometimes in symmetrical “chorus lines.”



Tom Grey

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## Turkey Vulture

(*Cathartes aura*)

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**Identification:** 26" – Blackish-brown overall, featherless red head. In flight, underwings two-toned (light hindwing).

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Carrion.

**Conservation:** Important decomposers! When you see them on the beach let them do their job by not chasing or scaring them.

Martin Meyers



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## Canada Goose

(*Branta canadensis*)

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**Identification:** 25–48" – Black neck and head, white cheek patch. Brownish back and belly.

**Timing:** Year-round. More common in winter.

**Diet:** Plant material, berries, seeds.

**Note:** Very widespread throughout North America. Also breeds in Greenland, Europe, Asia, and New Zealand.



Tom Grey

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## Merlin

(*Falco columbarius*)

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**Identification:** 10–12" – Small falcon lacking a distinct “mustache” marking. Yellow legs; barred tail. *Male:* Dark grey to pale blue-grey on back, rufous underneath (left photo). *Female:* Brown back.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Small to medium-sized birds.

**Note:** Lays its eggs in abandoned crow or hawk nests. Populations declined due to DDT use in the 1960s and '70s but have recovered.



Tom Gray

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## Peregrine Falcon

(*Falco peregrinus*)

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**Identification:** 16" – Pointed wings. Dark upperparts and cheek spot. Streaked underparts. Obvious “mustache.”

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Birds.

**Note:** A fast and powerful hunter, it can fly faster than 200 mph when dropping towards prey.

**Conservation:** Recently removed from the Endangered Species list due to recovery efforts.



Tom Gray



Len Blumin

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## Black-bellied Plover

(*Pluvialis squatarola*)

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**Identification:** 11.5" – *Summer:* Black upperparts, black central chest spot, white tail. *Winter:* Appears gray with white belly (left photo). Right photo: molting into breeding plumage.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Invertebrates (especially worms), bivalves, crustaceans.

**Note:** Only plover in North America with hind-toe on its foot (difficult to see).



Jenny Erbes

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## Snowy Plover

(*Charadrius alexandrinus*)

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**Identification:** 6.25" – Light brown upperparts. Incomplete breast band. Gray legs.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Invertebrates.

**Note:** On parents' signal of the approach of people and potential predators, young drop themselves to the ground to hide. Nests on open sand and also in vegetated dunes.

**Conservation:** See *Special Conservation Section*, page 4.



Tom Grey

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## Semipalmated Plover

(*Charadrius semipalmatus*)

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**Identification:** 7.25" – Brown upperparts. Dark, complete breast band. Yellow legs.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Invertebrates (fly larvae, worms, small bivalves).

**Note:** “Semipalmated” comes from partial webbing between the three front toes



Tom Gray

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## Killdeer

(*Charadrius vociferus*)

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**Identification:** 10.5" – Two bands on breast.  
Unique, rufous rump.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Terrestrial invertebrates (earthworms, grasshoppers, beetles, snails).

**Note:** Commonly observed pretending to have a broken wing to lead humans and potential predators away from their nests.



Tom Grey

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## Black Oystercatcher

(*Haematopus bachmani*)

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**Identification:** 16–18" – Black with bright red bill, pink legs

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Intertidal invertebrates like clams, crabs, limpets, chitons, and barnacles.

**Note:** Contrary to English name, rarely eats oysters!

**Conservation:** Since this species forages and nests along rocky marine shores, it can be severely affected by oil spills. Support double-hulled ships that help prevent spills.

Mike Baird



Stuart Mackay

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## Willet

(*Tringa semipalmata*)

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**Identification:** 15" – Gray. Black and white wing pattern seen in flight. Gray legs.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Insects, small crustaceans, mollusks, worms.

**Note:** Only sandpiper in North America that breeds as far south as the tropics (southern limit, Venezuela).



Tom Grey

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## Wandering Tattler

(*Tringa incana*)

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**Identification:** 10–12" – Light grey overall. Whitish stripe above eye. Short yellow legs.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Marine invertebrates, aquatic insects, small fish.

**Note:** The only regularly occurring North American shorebird with entirely pale grey upper parts year round.



Tom Grey

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## Spotted Sandpiper

(*Actitis maculara*)

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**Identification:** 7–8" – Grey-brown with spotted white chest. Displays distinctive teetering motion.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Invertebrates, sometimes small fish.

**Note:** Females stake out and defend breeding territories, and males incubate eggs and care for young.



Tom Grey

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## Whimbrel

(*Numenius phaeopus*)

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**Identification:** 17" – Mottled brown overall, with dark eye stripe. Decurved bill.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Marine invertebrates. Sometimes berries, insects and flowers on breeding ground.

**Note:** Breeds across the arctic and temperate regions of North America and Europe, Asia and Africa.



Tom Grey

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## Long-billed Curlew

(*Numenius americanus*)

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**Identification:** 23" – Extremely long, down-curved bill. Buffy brown overall.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Insects, crustaceans, other invertebrates.

**Note:** Largest North American shorebird.

**Conservation:** California Bird Species of Special Concern. Declining due to loss of breeding habitat (grasslands) and winter habitat (wetlands and intertidal zone). Support wetland conservation and restoration.

rocky shore, sandy beach

Sandy and Rocky Shore



Tom Grey



Tom Grey

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## Marbled Godwit

*(Limosa fedoa)*

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**Identification:** 18" – Upturned bill with pink base and dark tip. Buff-brown all over.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Worms, small bivalves, crabs.

**Note:** Breeds in the center of the North American continent and winters on the coasts.



Len Blumin

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## Ruddy Turnstone

(*Arenaria interpes*)

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**Identification:** 8–10" – Mottled brown and black back. White chin, throat and underparts. Bright orange legs.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Diverse array of marine invertebrates, small fish, insects, human food, and fishery discards.

**Note:** When nesting inside gull or tern colonies, some individuals specialize as egg predators.



Tom Grey

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## Black Turnstone

(*Arenaria melanocephala*)

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**Identification:** 8–10" – Black back with white underparts. Short pinkish brown legs.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Variety of marine invertebrates.

**Note:** True to their name, often turn stones over to find food in the intertidal.

Tom Grey



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## Surfbird

(*Aphriza virgata*)

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**Identification:** 10" – Grey back. Underparts white with streaks of brown.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Intertidal invertebrates.

**Note:** The surfbird has one of the longest and narrowest winter ranges of any North American breeding bird. From Kodiak Island, Alaska, to the Strait of Magellan, Chile, its range extends only a few meters inland from the tide line.



Tom Grey

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## Sanderling

(*Calidris alba*)

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**Identification:** 7–8" – Bill and legs black and short. Otherwise appears whitish overall with black shoulder patches.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Small marine invertebrates.

**Note:** Common in the winter on all three North American coasts—Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf. Seen “chasing the waves” along the sand.

Tom Grey



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## Western Sandpiper

(*Calidris mauri*)

---

**Identification:** 6.5" – Bill slightly drooping. Black legs.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Marine invertebrates (arthropods, worms, mollusks).

**Conservation:** Support protection of important migration stopover spots like the San Francisco Bay wetlands and beaches.



Tom Grey

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## Least Sandpiper

(*Calidris minutilla*)

---

**Identification:** 6" – Bill slightly drooping. Yellow legs.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Marine invertebrates (arthropods, worms, mollusks).

**Note:** Smallest shorebird in the world!

**Conservation:** Support protection of important migration stopover spots like the San Francisco Bay wetlands and beaches.



Tom Grey

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## Dunlin

(*Calidris alpina*)

---

**Identification:** 8.5" – Fairly long, drooping bill. Blackish legs.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Marine invertebrates. Occasional plant material.

**Note:** Raptor predation likely accounts for most mortality on the winter grounds.



Tom Grey

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## Heermann's Gull

*(Larus heermanni)*

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**Identification:** 19" – Grey overall with darker grey back. Red bill with dark tip. Dark legs.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Fish, marine invertebrates, insects, eggs, carrion, garbage.

**Note:** 90–95% of the world's population breeds on Isla Raza, in the Gulf of California, Mexico.

**Conservation:** Support actions to reduce human disturbance and invasive species at island breeding colonies.

Tom Grey



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## Ring-billed Gull

(*Larus delawarensis*)

---

**Identification:** 17–20" – Yellow legs. Yellow bill with black ring around tip. Yellow eyes.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Fish, insects, rodents, grain.

**Note:** Female-female pairs have been recorded laying superclutches of 5–7 eggs in a nest.



Stuart Mackay

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## California Gull

(*Larus californicus*)

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**Identification:** 21" – Yellow legs. Yellow bill with black and red spot on lower mandible.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Mammals, fish, birds, invertebrates, garbage.

**Note:** Breed inland, from freshwater lakes and rivers to very salty waters such as Mono Lake, in addition to breeding in San Francisco Bay.



Tom Grey

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## Western Gull

(*Larus occidentalis*)

---

**Identification:** 25" – Pink legs. Yellow bill with red spot on lower mandible.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Invertebrates, fish, birds (eggs, chicks, adults), carrion, garbage.

**Note:** Population is estimated at 40,000 pairs, with approximately one-third of the total population breeding on Southeast Farallon Island in the Farallon National Wildlife Refuge.



Tom Grey



Ron Le Valley

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## Glaucous-winged Gull

(*Larus glaucescens*)

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**Identification:** 22–24" – Dark eyes. Heavy yellow bill with red spot on lower mandible. Pink legs. Grey wing tips. Head slightly streaked.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Fish, marine invertebrates, garbage, carrion.

**Note:** Sometimes hybridize with Western Gulls. Bald Eagles are a key predator.

Tom Grey



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## Caspian Tern

(*Sterna caspia*)

---

**Identification:** 21" – Thick red bill. Black legs.

**Timing:** Summer. A few individuals can be seen wintering from Santa Barbara south.

**Diet:** Fish.

**Note:** Largest tern in the world.

**Conservation:** Never leave fishing lines, lures, or hooks on beaches.



Mike Baird

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## Royal Tern

*(Sterna maxima)*

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**Identification:** 17–20" – Black of crest does not extend into eye area. Orange bill. Black feet. Dark eye.

**Timing:** Winter, with occasional breeding in far south of California.

**Diet:** Fish, crustaceans.

**Note:** Typically lay only one large egg.

Tom Grey



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## Elegant Tern

(*Sterna elegans*)

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**Identification:** 15–16" – *Breeding plumage:* Black cap covers eye, extends into shaggy crest. Light yellow to reddish orange bill. Legs black.

**Timing:** Summer. Breeds in localized spots in Southern California and can be seen along entire coast post-breeding.

**Diet:** Schooling fish.

**Note:** 90–97% of world's population nests on Isla Raza in the Gulf of California, Mexico.



Tom Grey

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## Forster's Tern

(*Sterna forsteri*)

---

**Identification:** 13" – Orange bill with black tip.  
Orange legs.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Fish.

**Note:** Breeds on salt ponds. Like many other terns, dives into water from flight rather than from swimming.



Tom Grey

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## Least Tern

(*Sterna antillarum*)

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**Identification:** 9" – Yellow bill. Black cap, white forehead.

**Timing:** Summer.

**Diet:** Fish, invertebrates.

**Note:** Also nests in vegetated dunes.

**Conservation:** Federally and state Endangered in California. Conserve beach breeding sites. See *Special Conservation Section*, page 4.



Lyann Comrack

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## Black Phoebe

(*Sayornis nigricans*)

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**Identification:** 7" – Black overall with white belly. Often dips tail while perched.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Insects.

**Note:** Typically catches insects in mid-air. Regurgitates small pellets of indigestible insect parts.



Tom Grey

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## American Crow

(*Corvus brachyrhynchos*)

---

**Identification:** 18" – All black with squared tail. Bill smaller than raven's.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Invertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, small birds and mammals, seeds, fruits, carrion.

**Conservation:** Do not supplement the diet of avian nest predators, such as crows, and keep food sources (e.g., compost piles) covered to prevent creating a feeding station.



Tom Grey

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## Common Raven

(*Corvus corax*)

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**Identification:** 24" – All black with wedge-shaped tail. Thick bill. Deep croaking calls.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Arthropods, amphibians, reptiles, birds (adults, chicks, and eggs), small mammals, carrion, grains, buds, and berries.

**Conservation:** Ravens prey on beach-nesting birds. Disassemble driftwood sculptures: they serve as raven hunting perches when left standing.



Tom Grey

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## American Pipit

(*Anthus rubescens*)

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**Identification:** 6–7" – Bill slender, short, straight and brown and pink. Legs long, dark. Light eyebrow. White edge to outer tail feathers. Distinctive bobbing motion.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Terrestrial and freshwater invertebrates and seeds.

**Conservation:** Alpine breeding habitat is disappearing with climate change. Take personal action to reduce climate change.



Tom Grey

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## Brewer's Blackbird

(*Euphagus cyanocephalus*)

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**Identification:** 9" – *Male:* Glossy black; purple and green iridescence. Pale eye. *Female:* Grey-brown overall. Usually with dark eye.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Invertebrates, seeds.

**Note:** Some individuals learn to wait at stoplights and pick insects from the grills of stopped vehicles.

Tom Grey



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## House Finch

(*Carpodacus mexicanus*)

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**Identification:** 6" – Upperparts grey-brown with faint streaks. Underparts whitish with brown streaks.

*Male* (shown above): Head, chest, and rump red.

*Female:* Plain brown face.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Seeds, berries.

**Note:** Red on males extremely variable throughout the year.

**Conservation:** Maintain native upland habitat adjacent to beaches and creeks.



## Vegetated Dunes



Mike Baird

California's dunes are shaped by wind into curving ridges. They are fragile and changing ecosystems, home to many animals, insects, and unique plants. They also protect buildings and low-lying inland areas from wind and strong winter storms. This fragile ecosystem is in danger. Off-road vehicles,

foot traffic, and horses can damage dune plants, loosening the sands and leaving the dunes vulnerable to wind erosion and blowouts. Non-native plants like ice plant and European beach grass crowd out the native plants and animals that need dunes to survive, and they stabilise dunes, restricting their natural movement.

### **Conservation Tips: Vegetated Dunes**

- Participate in projects to safely remove non-native dune plants.
- Keep dogs on leashes at beaches.
- Keep horses and off highway vehicles out of the dunes.
- Walk/hike only on designated trails.
- Never plant invasive plants.

Tom Grey



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## Northern Harrier

(*Circus cyaneus*)

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**Identification:** 18" – Long wings and tail. Distinctive white rump patch in flight. *Male* (above left): Upperparts grey. *Female* (right): Upperparts brown.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Small mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians.

**Note:** Most males mate with one or two (and up to five) females in the same season. The male provides food while females tend to eggs and young.



Tom Grey

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## Anna's Hummingbird

(*Calypte anna*)

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**Identification:** 4" – Upperparts green, underparts grayish. *Male* (left photo): Iridescent pink crown and throat. *Female* (right): Throat with lines of spots or a small patch of pink.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Nectar, insects.

**Note:** Males have an elaborate display including a swift “J” shaped dive.

**Conservation:** Plant native flowering plants like monkeyflower and penstemon.



Tom Grey

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## Say's Phoebe

(*Sayornis saya*)

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**Identification:** 7" – Upperparts, head and chest shades of grey-brown. Underparts cinnamon. Darker tail and wings. Dark bill, legs and eye.

**Timing:** Winter.

**Diet:** Flying or terrestrial insects.

**Note:** Often nests on human-made structures: builds open nest on ledge with overhang.



Tom Grey

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## Horned Lark

*(Eremophila alpestris)*

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**Identification:** 6–8" – Yellow tinge to face, with striking black “horns” (occipital feather tufts), lores, cheek, and breast patch. Dark beak, legs and eyes.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Seeds, sometimes insects. Feeds insects to young.

**Note:** Mostly found on beaches in spring and fall.



Steve Smith

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## Western Meadowlark

(*Sturnella neglecta*)

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**Identification:** 9.5" – Bright yellow underparts, black breast band. White outer tail feathers.

**Timing:** Year-round.

**Diet:** Seeds, insects.

**Note:** Female builds nest on ground, sometimes with an elaborate entrance tunnel and grassy roof.

**Conservation:** Support projects that promote grass-land restoration.

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## **Websites**

PRBO Conservation Science: [www.prbo.org](http://www.prbo.org)

Cornell Lab of Ornithology – All About Birds: <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/>

The Birds of North America Online – <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu.bnaproxy.birds.cornell.edu/bna>

Western Snowy Plover, tools and resources for recovery – <http://www.westernsnowyplover.org/>

# Notes from the Field

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**Funding for the Pocket  
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