

Willet

Tringa semipalmata

Length: 15" **Wing Span:** 26"

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



Willet with a crab

Photo: Lee Greengrass

Greater/Lesser Yellowlegs

Tringa melanoleuca

Length: 14" **Wing Span:** 28"

Tringa flavipes

Length: 10.5" **Wing Span:** 24"

Concealing one long leg completely under its feathers, the yellowlegs sometimes hops about on its other leg, thus creating the false impression that it is injured. Unlike the killdeer, which feigns injury to distract predators, the yellowlegs is simply conserving warmth.

The lesser yellowlegs is about four 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. Ever alert, yellowlegs often perform sentry duty, insistently warning other shorebirds of potential danger.



Greater and lesser yellowlegs

East Bay 
Regional Park District

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On the cover: Short-billed dowitchers
Photos courtesy Jerry Ting unless otherwise noted.

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Common Shorebirds in the East Bay Regional Park District



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Long-billed curlew



American avocet

Photo: Davor Desanic

Shorebirds in the San Francisco Bay

California's 1,500 miles of coastline contain some of the best bird habitats in North America. The beaches, mudflats, and salt marshes that comprise our coasts are home to many different birds that specialize in feeding on shores. These are collectively known as "shorebirds." The East Bay Regional Park District manages a collection of shoreline parks that both protect crucial sections of California's coastal habitats and provide visitors with outstanding opportunities for viewing shorebirds.

Long-distance Travelers

Shorebirds are champion long-distance travelers, covering vast distances on their migratory journeys. Almost two-thirds of North American shorebird species nest in the Arctic and travel each year to

Central and South America, many traversing more than 15,000 miles on their annual migration. They visit California during the fall and winter when their northern nesting grounds are frozen.



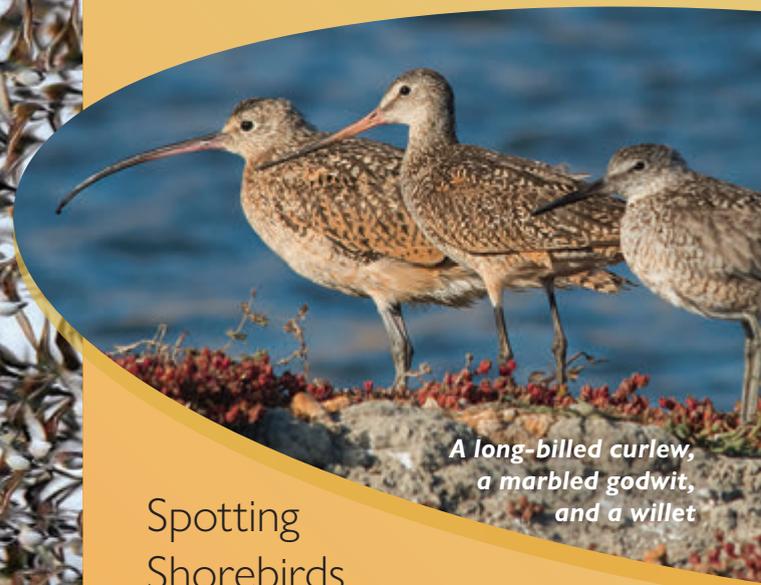
Rest Stops

Migratory flight requires large amounts of energy, which requires food. Migrating shorebirds tend to travel in vast flocks and stop at feeding areas where abundant food resources exist. Our East Bay shoreline parks provide such resources along

the migratory route known as the Pacific Flyway. Protection of these important stopover sites is essential to successful migration, and thus essential to shorebird survival.

Finding a Place to Feed

When feeding, shorebirds practice "resource partitioning." Birds with different types of bills feed in unique niches with little overlap, allowing multiple species to feed on the same stretch of mudflat or coastline. Watching a mixed flock of shorebirds will demonstrate this as tides recede, species begin to separate into their preferred feeding habitats. Those with shorter bills use dry and muddy areas, while longer-billed birds wade into water to search for food.



A long-billed curlew, a marbled godwit, and a willet

Spotting Shorebirds

Shorebirds can be a pleasure to view and identify. Unlike forest birds, shorebirds tend to feed and rest in open areas, allowing unobstructed views. While binoculars are an indispensable tool for any birder, shorebird watching can be enhanced with the use of a spotting scope and tripod.

Spend time getting to know the varied shorebirds that visit our East Bay shores each year. You may find that you develop a sense of connection to the natural world, and with it a dedication to conservation and a desire to protect the non-human world with which we share this planet. Happy birding!

Common Shorebirds in the East Bay Regional Park District



American Avocet

Recurvirostra americana
Length: 18" Wing Span: 31"

Long pale-blue legs, an apricot-colored head with an elegantly upturned bill, and crisp black and white body complete the distinctive figure of the breeding American avocet. Feeding behavior among avocets is also unique. Darting forward and sweeping its bill in a sideways motion through the water, the avocet stirs the mud, forcing invertebrates from their shelter. Holding its bill slightly open as it forages, the avocet periodically raises its head, swallowing its catch.



Black-bellied Plover

Pluvialis squatarola
Length: 11.5" Wing Span: 29"

The largest plover in North America, the black-bellied plover is a common winter visitor to Bay Area beaches. Often foraging alone rather than in dense groups, these birds use a unique combination of running and stopping to hunt for invertebrates. Their stout bill and lack of notable patterning in winter plumage help distinguish them from the slightly smaller Killdeer.



Black-necked Stilt

Himantopus mexicanus
Length: 14" Wing Span: 29"

The striking black and white plumage and red legs of this elegant bird make it an unmistakable sight against the drab tones of shoreline mudflats. Wading in tidal waters up to six inches deep, the stilt uses its needle-like bill to capture a variety of small crustaceans. In proportion to its body size, the black-necked stilt has the longest legs of any North American shorebird.



Long/Short-billed Dowitcher

Limnodromus scolopaceus
Length: 11.5" Wing Span: 19"

Limnodromus griseus
Length: 11" Wing Span: 19"

Medium-sized, plump, gray-brown sandpipers, these species 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 methodical sewing machine-stitch rhythm. 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." In flight, pale barring that is wider than the alternate pattern of dark bars is sometimes noticeable on the tail of the long-billed dowitcher.



Dunlin

Calidris alpina
Length: 8.5" Wing Span: 17"

Dunlin form large, dense, exclusive flocks as they feed along bay shorelines. This behavior pattern of foraging in same-species groups, 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, moving steadily forward together, probing their way across a mudflat. During migration dunlin form huge flocks and are known to fly at speeds of over 100 mph.



Long-billed Curlew

Numenius americanus
Length: 23" Wing Span: 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 bill is decurved and multi-purpose, evolved for both extracting insects from prairie grasslands and invertebrates from mudflats and marshes. Probing deeply into shoreline mud, this curlew is able to reach prey unavailable to other shorebirds. As sensitive as your fingertip, the curlew's bill tip can differentiate between a pebble and a clam.



Sanderling

Calidris alba
Length: 8" Wing Span: 17"

Sanderlings are best known for their feeding behavior on sandy beaches. Never overtaken by a wave, sanderlings dart after receding surf to catch prey in the rolling sand. Racing forward ahead of the edge of the next wave, this small pale sandpiper seems to take great pride in playing tag with the surf. A cosmopolitan species, sanderlings breed far north in the Arctic, Canada, and Russia and winter in North and South America as well as Asia, Africa, and Australia.



Western/Least Sandpipers

Calidris mauri
Calidris minutilla
Length: 6" Wing Span: 13"

Western and least sandpipers are collectively known to birders as "peeps" for two reasons: because of their tendency to vocalize in a series of "peeping" sounds as they forage, and because it is easier to lump these small, similarly shaped, drab colored birds into a group instead of separating them by species. They are not impossible to distinguish, however. The western sandpiper 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.



Killdeer

Charadrius vociferus
Length: 10.5" Wing Span: 24"

This shorebird is common throughout North America, and is widespread in California. The killdeer's scientific name refers to its loud and distinctive call, which sounds like its common name "killdeer." The only North American plover with two black breast bands, the killdeer is famous for its distraction display. When danger is detected, hatchling killdeer freeze while a parent flops about feigning an injury. Drawing the predator from the nest area, the adult "recovers" and flies off.



Marbled Godwit

Limosa fedoa
Length: 18" Wing Span: 30"

Plump and tawny with a long, pinkish, slightly upturned 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, leeches, and crustaceans. Foraging both day and night, marbled godwits are often seen in large loose flocks feeding with their heads completely submerged.