

## F O C U S



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Birds of Shollenberger Marsh

## A Walk in the Park

Rich Stallcup



Among the bird species found on a typical day at Shollenberger Park (L to R): American Bittern, American White Pelican, American Avocet.

An American Bittern stands still as stone only 20 feet away. Through our scopes we can see *ourselves* mirrored off the black pupil of its glaring yellow eye. It doesn't blink and doesn't move. Suddenly with a slashing jab of its dagger-like bill it snaps a wiggling mosquitofish from the water's surface between its legs.

A little farther down the trail we spot a Sora on a tiny beach edged by densely rooted sedge. Then a Virginia Rail scampers along the shore, darting in and out of alleys in the vegetation that seem too narrow for it. Rails have laterally compressed bodies that let them move through thick stands of rushes; that is where the term "skinny as a rail" comes from (it has nothing to do with trains).

Two moorhens paddle in the open through a family group of Pied-billed Grebes, past a muskrat, and alongside three sunning western pond turtles. A Green Heron flies up the ditch and drops into some secret spot.

We have been birding at Shollenberger Park for 45 minutes, only 200 yards from

the city parking lot (and a quarter-mile from PRBO's front door) and still have barely turned to look into the big ponds.

This is an amazing place to bird, for beginners and old-timers alike. Many shy and difficult-to-see species are close and still; the total list on any day of the year is large; and many rarities have been found. At this place, the unusual becomes usual.

Even the place itself is unusual: a human-made wetland system alongside the Petaluma River (which is actually a tidewater slough); just downstream, some of San Francisco Bay's largest intact tidal marshland; just inland, riparian thickets along Adobe Creek; nearby, grassy slopes and oak groves. This adds up to a great assemblage of wildlife habitats, much of it protected. The website of Petaluma Wetlands Alliance, devoted to conserving and interpreting Shollenberger, has many stories and photographs; see [www.petalumawetlandspark.org/](http://www.petalumawetlandspark.org/).

Walking southeast towards the PRBO building, we see the majestic (though feral) Mute Swans, many kinds of ducks

and sorts of shorebirds including statuesque Black-necked Stilts and American Avocets.

Various raptors hunt the weedy fields to the east, and on the tidal mudflats to the south Long-billed Curlews and Black-bellied Plovers forage for invertebrates. Several species of sparrows plus Marsh Wrens and yellowthroats work along the fence line, and a Say's Phoebe is on the wire watching for moths.

A high swirling flock of White Pelicans approaches from the south. Their prehistoric look makes me think they have just come in from the Pleistocene. Among the Turkey Vultures kettling over the western hills we spot a young Golden Eagle powering north.

This is not an unusual bird walk at Shollenberger; if you pay attention it is much like this every day.

Rich Stallcup is the Naturalist in PRBO's Education and Outreach Program.

Join us for a PRBO walk at Shollenberger! See Calendar on page 16.