

BIRDS OF
THE
BALLONA
WETLANDS

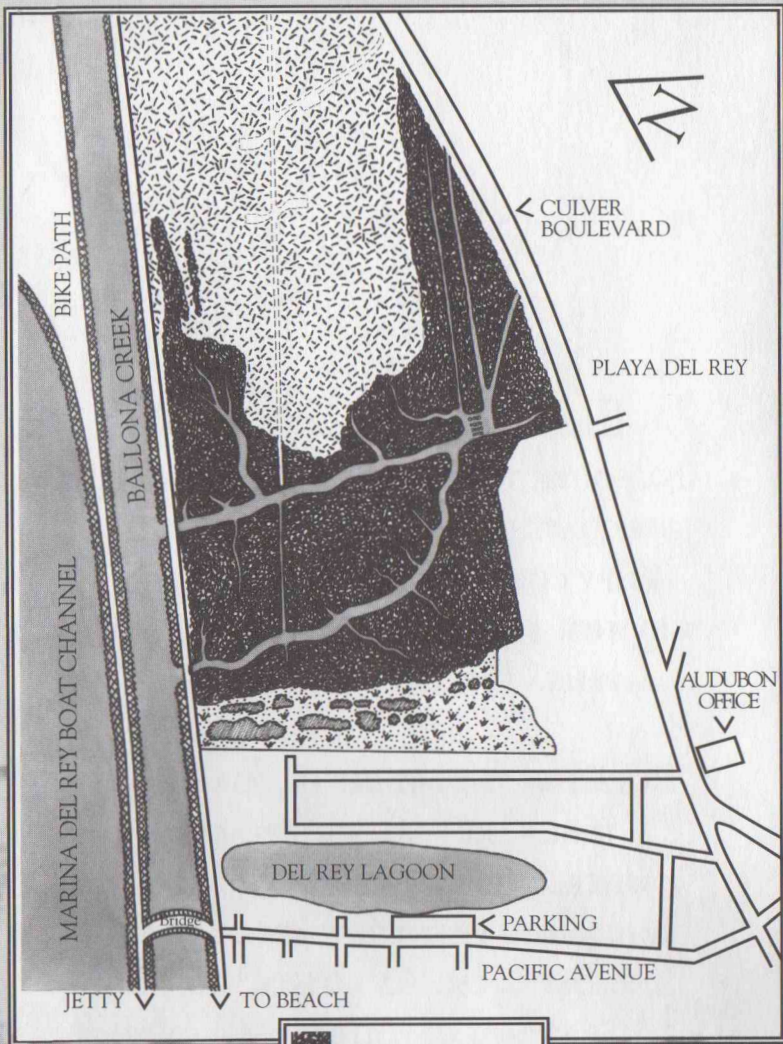







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Jonathan Alderfer

Written By
Daniel Kahane

EACH FALL, MILLIONS OF BIRDS
FLY SOUTH TO THE MARSHES THAT DOT
THE COAST OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.
THEY COME LOOKING FOR WARMER
WEATHER AND PLACES TO EAT, REST AND
PERHAPS, SPEND THE WINTER.

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF OUR CITY
THERE ARE STILL WILD PLACES
WHERE YOU CAN SEE THESE BIRDS.
WHEN YOU VISIT THESE AREAS, LOOK
AND LISTEN CLOSELY. IF YOU TAKE A
BIRD'S-EYE VIEW, YOU WILL DISCOVER
A NEIGHBORHOOD AS BUSY
AS YOUR OWN.



-  Pickleweed Salt Marsh
-  Salt Flat
-  Sand Dune and Grass
-  Trees
-  Rocky Shore and Jetty

BALLONA WETLANDS

PLAYA DEL REY, CALIFORNIA

The Ballona (by-OH-na) Wetlands are the remaining portion of what was once a vast estuary, a place where salt water from the Pacific Ocean meets fresh water from Ballona Creek. The Ballona Wetlands include the last major coastal salt marsh in Los Angeles County, as well as other habitats such as freshwater marsh and coastal sand dunes.

Each habitat provides food and shelter for a variety of birds. Tiny songbirds hide in the pickleweed marsh, long-legged wading birds stalk fish in the channels, and birds of prey hunt for rodents, reptiles and small birds in the dunes and grassy upland areas. Nearly 200 species of birds have been seen at Ballona. This guide presents 40 of the most common ones.



Birds spend much of their day looking for food.

In this guide, we have given names to some of the ways birds go about finding food in order to help you find and identify them. Ask yourself, "What is that bird doing?" and you'll be on your way to knowing which bird it is.

Stabbers and Grabbers wade in shallow water, stretching out their long necks to grab fish with their long, pointed bills.



Surface Divers float on top of the water, then dive to catch fish or pull up plants.



Dabbling Ducks turn bottoms-up in shallow water to feed on plants and small animals.



Plunge Divers spot a fish from the air, then dive head first into the water to catch it.



Long-billed Shorebirds use their bills to poke into nooks and crannies in the rocks, or probe deep in the mud where others can't reach.



Short-billed Shorebirds probe just below the surface of the ground looking for tiny mollusks and crustaceans.



Gulls will eat most anything that comes their way, from fish to french fries.



Birds of Prey are hunters. They have strong claws with which to nab their prey and sharp, hooked bills to help them eat it.



Scavengers eat dead animals and other leftovers.

Specialists feed only on very specific things, such as flower nectar or insects.



Generalists will eat a variety of foods.

Seed eaters have strong, short bills with which to crack open seeds.



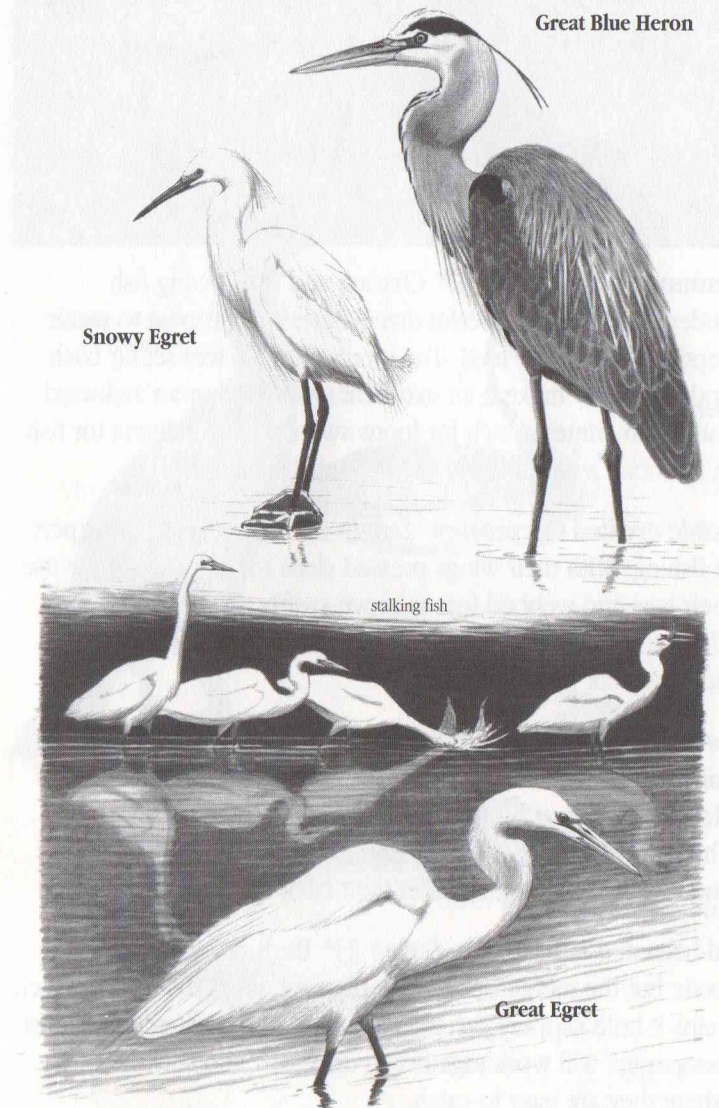
STABBERS AND GRABBERS

These large wading birds have long, pointed bills which they use to spear their prey or to snatch it up. Their long legs help them to stay dry while they stalk fish and other small animals along the channels of the marsh.

Great Blue Heron *Length 46"* Standing still as a statue, the Great Blue Heron waits for a fish to swim by, then quickly strikes out with its long, pointed bill. It tosses the fish in the air, catches it, and swallows it head first.

Snowy Egret *Length 24"* The Snowy Egret hunts for fish in shallow water. This member of the heron family may stand in one spot waiting for a fish, or it may walk along stirring up fish with its bright yellow feet. One hundred years ago, hunters brought these small, snow-white egrets close to extinction by killing them in order to use their feathers to decorate ladies' hats.

Great Egret *Length 39"* The Great Egret slowly stalks its prey in shallow water. With its long neck, it can strike quickly to snatch up fish. Early members of the Audubon Society helped to pass laws to stop the killing of these graceful birds for their plumes. Today, the Great Egret is the symbol of the National Audubon Society.



SURFACE DIVERS

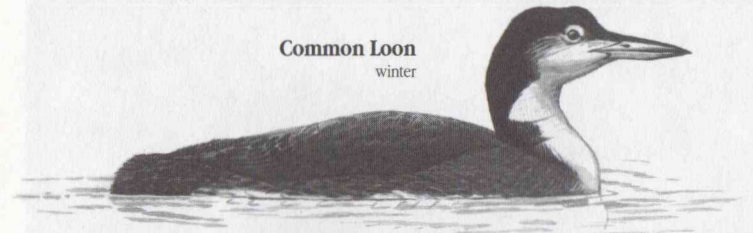
Now you see them, now you don't! You have to be quick to see these champion swimmers between their dives. Sometimes they come to the surface surprisingly far away from where they dove. Try to time how long they stay underwater.

Common Loon *Length 32"* Chasing and swallowing fish underwater, these powerful divers have been known to reach depths of up to 200 feet! The loon's webbed feet set far back under its body make it an excellent swimmer but an awkward walker. In winter, watch for loons swimming and diving for fish in Ballona Creek and offshore in Santa Monica Bay.

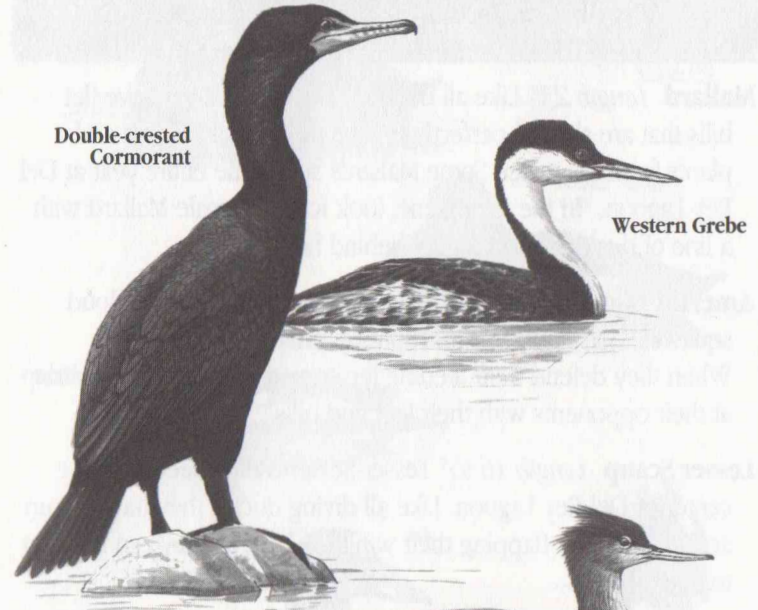
Double-crested Cormorant *Length 32"* Cormorants are expert at fishing. With their wings pressed close to their sides, they use their legs and webbed feet to move swiftly through the water. When they get back on land, they open their wings out to the side and wait for them to dry.

Western Grebe *Length 25"* Grebes have fleshy, lobed toes that can push a lot of water. This makes them fast swimmers. However, they are clumsy walkers and are rarely seen on land. They often sleep on the water, stretching out their long necks and tucking their heads under their back feathers.

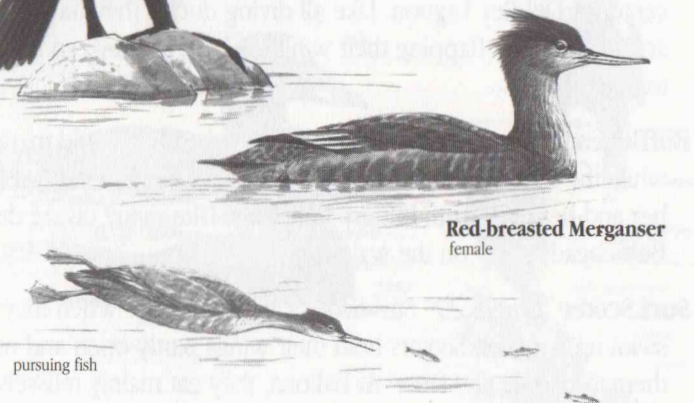
Red-breasted Merganser *Length 23"* Birds do not have true teeth, but the merganser has a long, thin, saw-toothed bill which helps it hold slippery fish that it catches underwater. Sometimes mergansers will work together to drive fish into shallow water where they are easy to catch.



Double-crested
Cormorant



Red-breasted Merganser
female



DIVING DUCKS, DABBLING DUCKS AND COOT

Diving ducks search for food while swimming underwater. Dabbling ducks, sometimes called "puddle ducks," feed by tipping tail-up and dabbling for insects, seeds and snails in shallow water. Coots have bills like ducks, but their feet are not webbed.

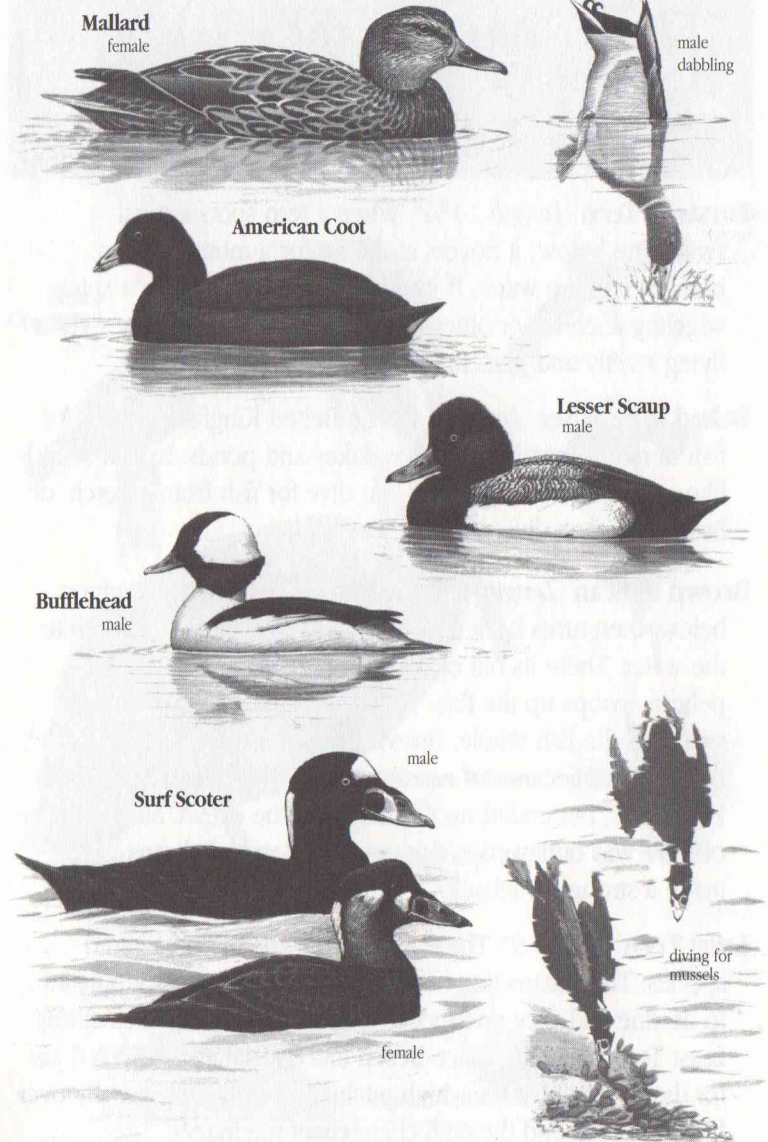
Mallard *Length 23"* Like all dabbling ducks, Mallards have flat bills that are shaped perfectly for straining small animals and plants from the water. Some Mallards spend the entire year at Del Rey Lagoon. In the springtime, look for the female Mallard with a line of ducklings swimming behind her.

American Coot *Length 15 1/2"* Coots communicate using loud squawks, body postures and splashy runs across the water. When they defend their feeding territory, they grab, stab and slap at their opponents with their feet and bills.

Lesser Scaup *Length 16 1/2"* Lesser Scaup usually feed near the center of Del Rey Lagoon. Like all diving ducks, they have to run across the water flapping their wings as hard as they can in order to take off.

Bufflehead *Length 13 1/2"* The male Bufflehead has bold markings while the female is much plainer. Her drab colors help protect her and her eggs from hungry predators. Like many diving ducks, Buffleheads sleep on the water.

Surf Scoter *Length 20"* Surf Scoters are sea ducks. When they swim underwater, Scoters hold their wings partly open and use them to paddle and steer. At Ballona, they eat mainly mussels which they pull off the rocks and swallow whole.



PLUNGE DIVERS

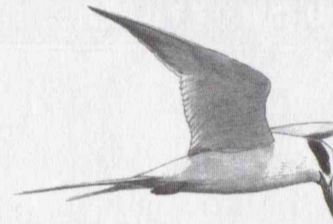
These high divers search for fish while they fly. When they spot a likely meal, down they go, *kersplash!*, head first into the water.

Forster's Tern Length 14 1/2" When a tern spots a meal swimming below, it hovers in the air for a moment, then plunges into the water. If it's lucky, it comes up with a shiny, wiggling anchovy or other small fish. Watch for Forster's Terns flying swiftly and gracefully over Ballona Creek.

Belted Kingfisher Length 13" The Belted Kingfisher hunts for fish in rivers, marshes, lagoons, lakes and ponds. Its call sounds like a loud rattle. Kingfishers can dive for fish from a perch, or hover and then dive.

Brown Pelican Length 48" The pelican spots fish swimming below, then turns back its wings and dives straight down into the water. There its bill opens, its pouch expands and the pelican scoops up the fish. Then the water drains out and it swallows the fish whole. Brown Pelicans nearly became extinct in California because of a poison called DDT that was used to kill insects, but ended up washing into the ocean. Since the use of DDT was outlawed in this country, Brown Pelicans have made a strong comeback.

Least Tern Length 9" These small terns are an endangered species. This means that humans have caused their populations to decline and they now need our help to survive. Each spring, Least Terns nest on Venice Beach in a special area reserved just for them. Listen for their high-pitched chattering as they fly over Ballona Creek and the tidal channels of the marsh.



Forster's Tern
winter

Belted Kingfisher
female

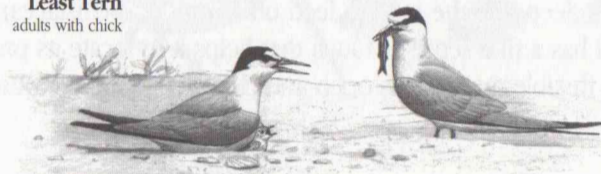


pelican
diving



Brown Pelican
winter

Least Tern
adults with chick



LONG-BILLED SHOREBIRDS

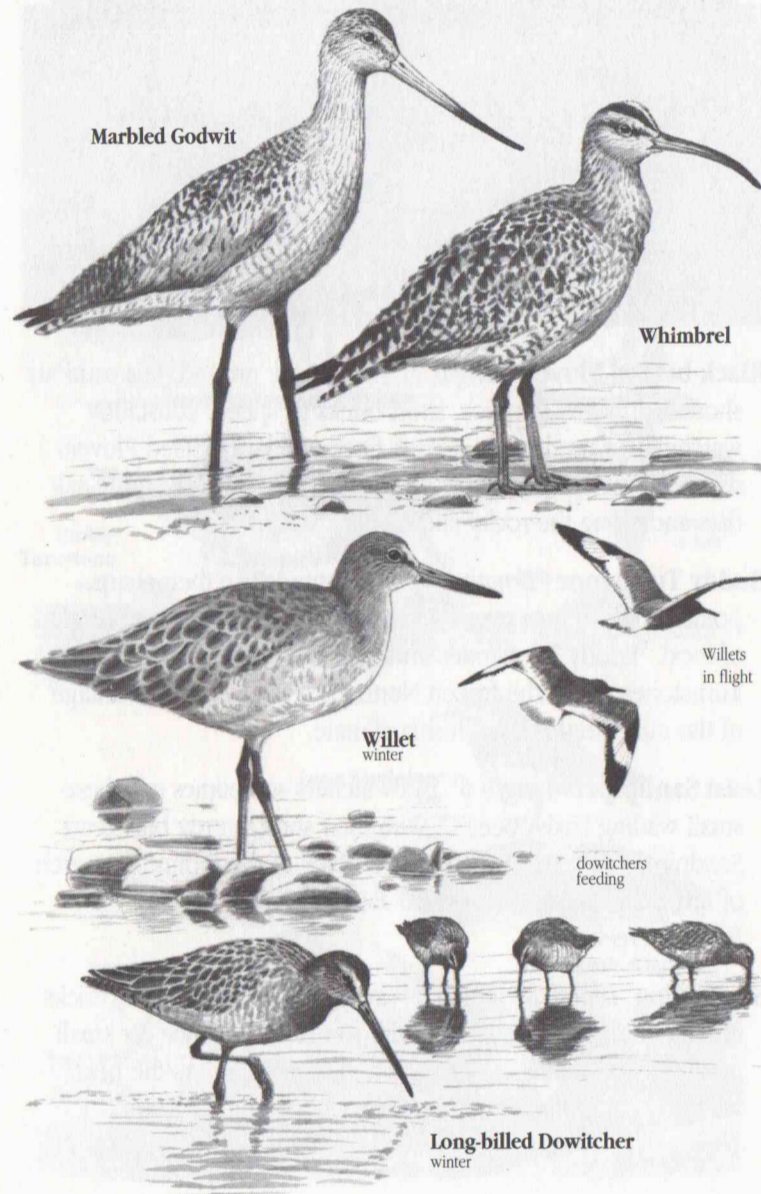
Notice the many different sizes and shapes of the shorebirds' bills. By using their bills to feed at different depths in the sand and mud, they avoid competition and share the food available in the marsh.

Marbled Godwit *Length 18"* The Marbled Godwit has a long, thin, two-toned bill that turns up slightly at the end. You can often see Marbled Godwits along the rocky shoreline of Ballona Creek.

Whimbrel *Length 17 1/2"* The Whimbrel uses its long, down-curved bill to reach into nooks and crannies in the rocks or to probe deep in the mud. It catches tiny animals that the short-billed shorebirds cannot reach.

Willet *Length 15"* Willets look very plain when they stand quietly along the rocky banks of Ballona Creek. But when they fly they display a bold, black-and-white pattern on their wings.

Long-billed Dowitcher *Length 11 1/2"* Working its long bill up and down like a sewing machine needle, this large shorebird probes deep into the mud to feed on worms and crustaceans. Its bill has a fine sense of touch that helps it to locate its prey, and a flexible tip that can open and close while underground.



SHORT-BILLED SHOREBIRDS

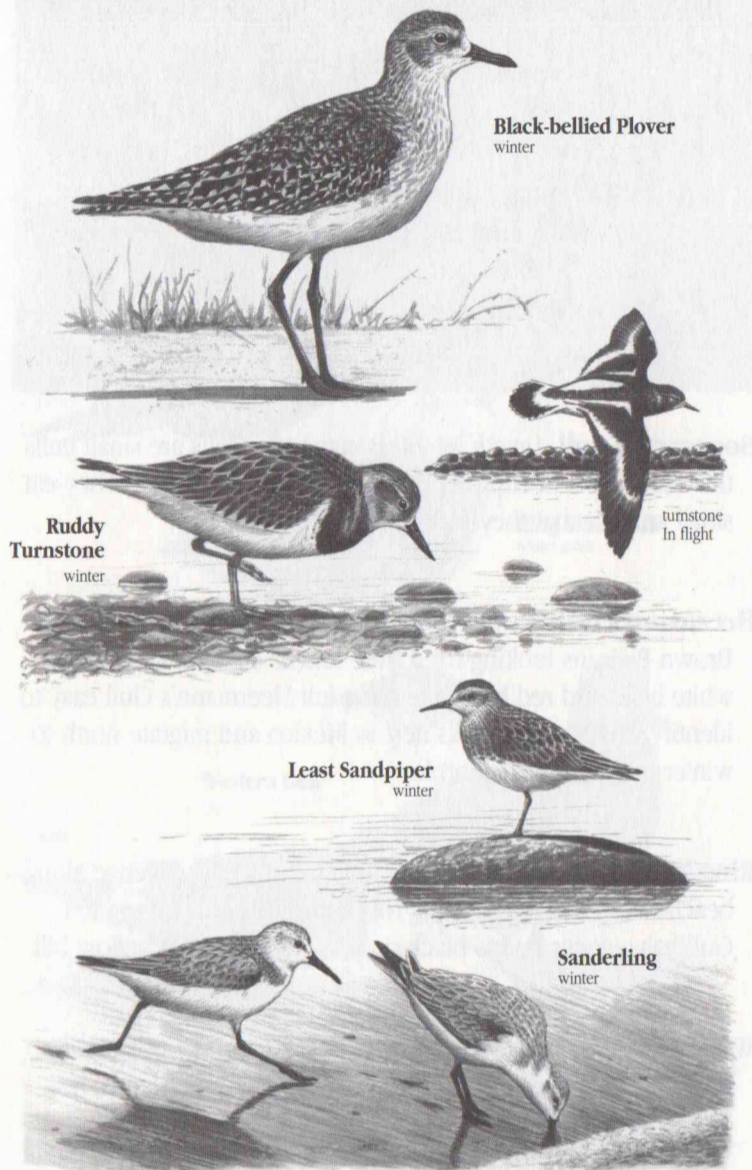
Most of our shorebirds migrate very long distances each year, sometimes traveling in large flocks. Many of them nest within or near the Arctic Circle in the summer months when days are long and insects plentiful. With their shorter bills, they catch small creatures near the surface of sand or mud.

Black-bellied Plover *Length 11 1/2"* On the ground, this cautious shorebird moves in quick, short bursts of speed, constantly watching for predators. A large flock of Black-bellied Plovers regularly spends the winter at Ballona. They "loaf" on the salt flats and along the rocky shoreline.

Ruddy Turnstone *Length 9 1/2"* Turnstones use their sharp, pointed bills to turn over rocks, shells, and seaweed in search of food. Ruddy Turnstones and their cousins, the Black Turnstones, leave the frozen North each fall to take advantage of the mild Southern California climate.

Least Sandpiper *Length 6"* Birdwatchers sometimes call these small wading birds "peeps." With their short, sturdy bills Least Sandpipers probe just below the surface of the ground in search of tiny animals. Watch for them along the rocks next to Ballona Creek.

Sanderling *Length 8"* When a wave rolls out from shore, flocks of Sanderlings sprint out onto the wet sand to probe for small mollusks, as well as crustaceans and their eggs. As the next wave comes in, they turn and scurry back onto dry sand.



GULLS

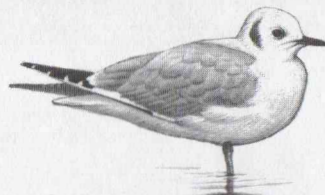
Gulls eat many kinds of food. They can often be seen following fishing boats for handouts or foraging for french-fries in front of fast-food restaurants. Many gulls nest and live inland, away from the ocean, so we do not call them "seagulls." Gulls change their plumage (feathers) as they grow up. The young birds may look very different from their parents.

Bonaparte's Gull *Length 13 1/2"* Bonaparte's Gulls are small gulls that feed while floating on or fluttering over the water. They eat small animals that they pick from the surface.

Heermann's Gull *Length 19"* This handsome gull often follows Brown Pelicans looking for a "free lunch." Its dark gray body, white head and red bill make the adult Heermann's Gull easy to identify. Heermann's Gulls nest in Mexico and migrate north to winter in Southern California.

Ring-billed Gull *Length 17 1/2"* Ring-billed Gulls scavenge along beaches and lagoons looking for food. The adult Ring-billed Gull has a conspicuous black ring near the tip of its yellow bill.

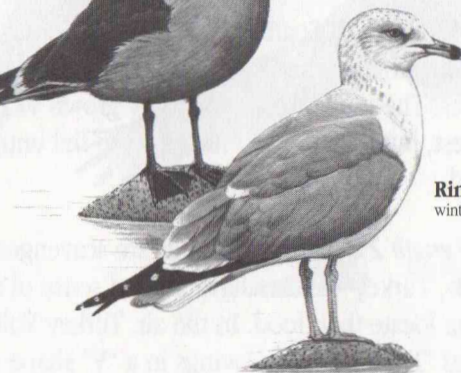
Western Gull *Length 25"* Western Gulls are among the largest gulls. They nest in noisy colonies on the Channel Islands, just off the coast near Los Angeles.



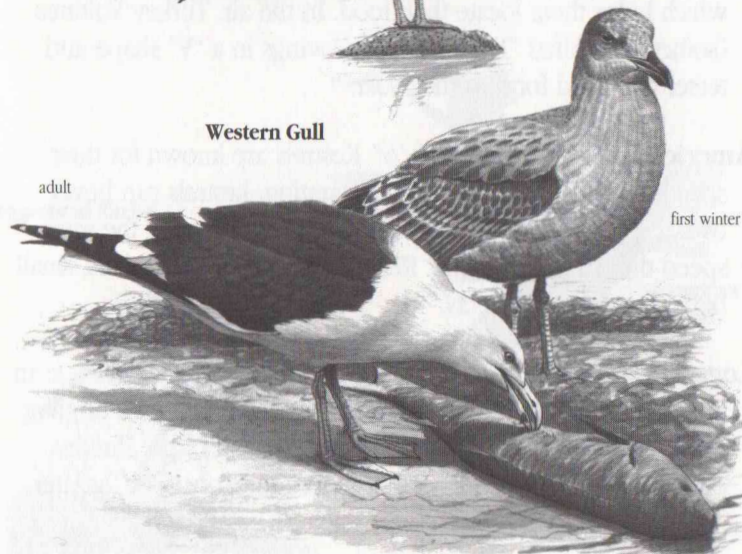
Bonaparte's Gull
winter adult



Heermann's Gull
summer adult



Ring-billed Gull
winter adult



Western Gull

adult

first winter

BIRDS OF PREY AND SCAVENGERS

Birds of Prey are the mighty hunters of the bird world. They are known for their powerful talons (claws) and sharp bills. The talons are used for catching and holding their prey and the bills for tearing apart the meat. Scavengers eat animals that have already died, as well as other leftovers.

Red-tailed Hawk *Length 22"* Soaring overhead or peering down from atop a high perch, Red-tailed Hawks search the ground for rodents or reptiles. The young hawks are fully grown when they leave the nest, but their tails do not become red until they are two years old.

Turkey Vulture *Length 27"* Turkey Vultures are scavengers. Unlike most birds, Turkey Vultures have a good sense of smell which helps them locate their food. In the air, Turkey Vultures (sometimes called "TVs") hold their wings in a "V" shape and teeter back and forth as they soar.

American Kestrel *Length 10 1/2"* Kestrels are known for their speed and agility in flight. While hunting, kestrels can hover over a spot on the ground by flying into the wind at the same speed the wind is blowing. Kestrels catch small mammals, small birds, reptiles and insects.

Loggerhead Shrike *Length 9"* These small, masked hunters scan their territory from lookout perches, then swoop down on their prey, usually insects, reptiles, rodents or small birds. Shrikes often pin their prey on thorns or fences to eat or save for later.

Red-tailed Hawk
adult

Turkey Vulture

kestrel
hovering

stooping

Loggerhead Shrike

American
Kestrel
male

grasshopper

SEED EATERS

Seeds are an abundant source of food. Most seedeaters crack seeds open with their heavy bills, while others swallow the seeds whole.

Mourning Dove *Length 12"* The cooing of this dove may sound sad, but it is actually a sound made when the dove is claiming a home territory or attracting a mate. You can see Mourning Doves in the willow trees on the sand dunes at Ballona, and also in most city neighborhoods.

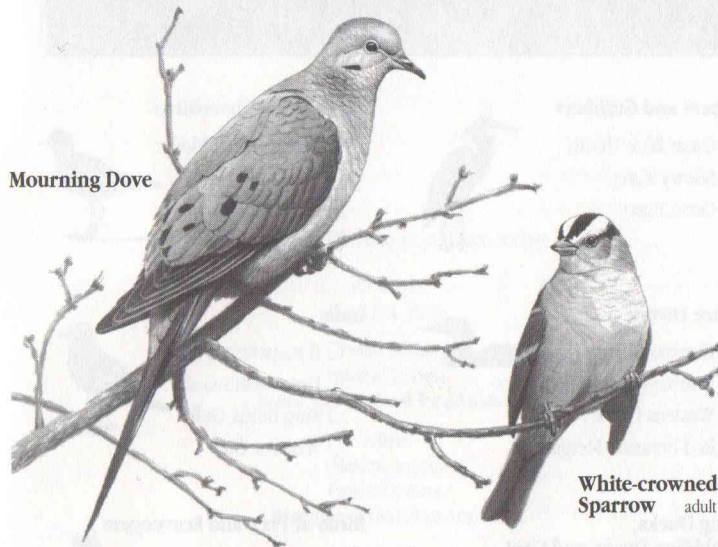
White-crowned Sparrow *Length 7"* Often you will hear a White-crowned Sparrow singing before you see it. Listen for its sweet song. Young birds have a brown crown (top of the head), not white. This sparrow can be seen at Ballona only during the winter months.

Belding's Savannah Sparrow *Length 5 1/2"* This handsome songbird is one of Ballona's endangered species. It may soon become extinct unless we help protect its remaining habitat. If you are lucky, you may see one flying low over the marsh or singing softly from its perch on the pickleweed.

House Sparrow *Length 6 1/4"* House Sparrows use their strong, cone-shaped bills to crack open seeds. They frequently build their nests in street signs or on people's houses.

House Finch *Length 6"* House Finches have thick bills which help them crack large seeds. The males have bright red or orange on their heads and chests. The females have brown stripes which make them harder for their enemies to see.

Mourning Dove

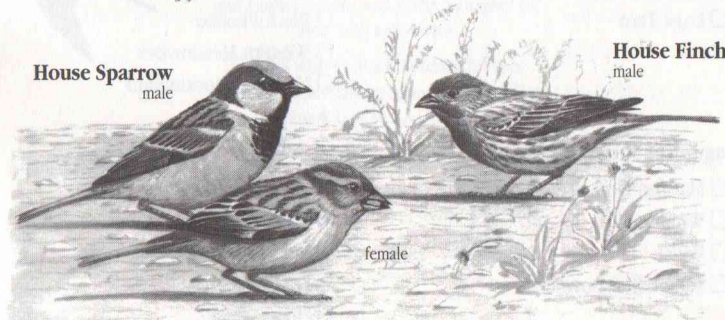


White-crowned Sparrow adult



Belding's Savannah Sparrow

House Sparrow male



House Finch male

female

CHECKLIST

Stabbers and Grabbers

- Great Blue Heron
- Snowy Egret
- Great Egret



Short-billed Shorebirds

- Black-bellied Plover
- Ruddy Turnstone
- Least Sandpiper
- Sanderling



Surface Divers

- Common Loon
- Double-crested Cormorant
- Western Grebe
- Red-breasted Merganser



Gulls

- Bonaparte's Gull
- Heermann's Gull
- Ring-billed Gull
- Western Gull



Diving Ducks, Dabbling Ducks and Coot

- Mallard
- American Coot
- Lesser Scaup
- Bufflehead
- Surf Scoter



Birds of Prey and Scavengers

- Red-tailed Hawk
- Turkey Vulture
- American Kestrel
- Loggerhead Shrike



Plunge Divers

- Forster's Tern
- Belted Kingfisher
- Brown Pelican
- Least Tern



Specialists and Generalists

- American Crow
- Anna's Hummingbird
- Barn Swallow
- Black Phoebe
- Western Meadowlark
- Northern Mockingbird



Long-billed Shorebirds

- Marbled Godwit
- Whimbrel
- Willet
- Long-billed Dowitcher



Seedeaters

- Mourning Dove
- White-crowned Sparrow
- Belding's Savannah Sparrow
- House Sparrow
- House Finch



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THE NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY

The National Audubon Society was founded nearly 100 years ago to help protect birds that were being slaughtered by hunters who sold their feathers to decorate ladies' hats. Today, the Audubon Society works to protect not only birds, but all wildlife and the habitat on which it depends. Audubon has more than one million youth and adult members nationwide. Its scientists, lobbyists and educators work to save threatened ecosystems, including the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest, the Platte River, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and America's vanishing wetlands. Audubon's award-winning education program, Audubon Adventures, enrolls more than 600,000 children across the country and helps young people develop an active interest in caring for the world around them.

JONATHAN ALDERFER

Jonathan Alderfer is a Southern California artist who specializes in painting birds. He grew up on the East Coast, and has always been interested in nature. When he was seven years old, he started drawing and painting birds by copying pictures he found in nature magazines and field guides. After graduating from high school, he went to art school where he studied painting, drawing and sculpture. Jonathan spends a lot of time watching birds with a telescope and binoculars. He also takes photographs of the birds he sees and makes quick sketches in a notebook. Later, back in his studio, his photos, drawings and observations help him make his bird paintings look true to life.

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