
Salinas River National Wildlife Refuge - Wildlife's Coastal Retreat

by Ivette Loreda

Editor's Note: In March 2003, the National Wildlife Refuge System will be celebrating its 100th anniversary. This system is a unique network of lands and waters set aside specifically for the conservation of fish, wildlife and plants. President Theodore Roosevelt established the first refuge, 3-acre Pelican Island Bird Reservation in Florida's Indian River Lagoon, in 1903. Roosevelt went on to create 55 more refuges before he left office in 1909; today the refuge system encompasses more than 535 units spread over 94 million acres.

Leading up to 2003, the Tideline will feature each national wildlife refuge in the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex. This complex is made up of seven Refuges (soon to be eight) located throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and headquartered at Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge in Fremont. We hope these articles will enhance your appreciation of each refuge and the diversity of habitats and wildlife in the San Francisco Bay Area.



Growing up in California, I have always been drawn to the sea. There's something incredibly soothing in the rhythmic sound of the surf on the beach, the fresh kelp-infused air, the gulls and sea lions in a chorus of squawking and barking, the warm sand beneath your toes. Even the name speaks of tranquility, the Pacific. So, it may not be surprising that the Salinas River National Wildlife Refuge, a coastal refuge 11 miles north of Monterey, is my favorite place to work and breathe.

But before you pack up your picnic and head to the sands, I should tell you - this is no ordinary public beach. This secret treasure of the Monterey Bay serves as a haven for wildlife rather than a recreation area for people.

This 367-acre National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1973, is located where the Salinas River empties into Monterey Bay. The refuge is roughly triangular in shape with the Pacific Ocean forming the western border, the Salinas River forming the northeast border (hypotenuse of the "triangle"), and the southern border running adjacent to two privately owned parcels of land. The Salinas River State Beach is just north of the river. Refuge lands include a range of terrestrial and aquatic habitats, including coastal dunes and beach, grasslands, a saline pond and salt marsh, and riparian habitats. Because of its location within the Pacific Flyway, the refuge is used by a variety of migratory birds during breeding, wintering, and migration periods.

The refuge also provides habitat for several threatened and endangered species. Imagine the difficulties encountered by a small shorebird that nests on sandy California beaches from March through September. This is prime BBQ, frisbee, and sun-bathing season for the human species. The threatened western snowy plover, just 6 inches tall, lays its eggs in simple scrapes on the sparsely vegetated foredunes of the refuge, as

well as other beaches and salt pannes in California. This bird has already been eliminated from much of its former range due primarily to disturbance. The little sand-colored birds are easily missed, as are their cleverly camouflaged eggs. Unfortunately, that means they can unknowingly be trampled by humans, dogs, horses, or vehicles on the beach. For this reason, dogs, horses and vehicles are prohibited. And if the beaches are crowded with people, as many of the Monterey Bay beaches are in the summer, the plovers won't nest there.



Snowy plover chicks

Yet along the beach and river mouth at the refuge, where human use is low, there were a total of 26 snowy plover nests last year which fledged 32 chicks. Each season volunteers and staff from the Point Reyes Bird Observatory monitor survival and reproductive success of snowy plovers on the refuge and throughout the Monterey Bay area. They painstakingly locate each nest, follow development of the eggs, and band each chick with unique color coded leg bands. For the remainder of the season, chicks are "sighted" with a spotting scope and binoculars, and leg bands are recorded.

Sightings are used to establish the "fledge rate" as well as survival rates. A snowy plover chick is considered fledged at 30 days of age. At this point they have reached independence and are considered juveniles rather than chicks.

During the first 30 days, adult male plovers can be seen "brooding" chicks, streaking along the tide or the saline pond with a couple of chicks in tow, showing them the prime feeding spots for invertebrates. Run-stop-peck, run-stop-peck. This is also the time for chicks to learn the crouch-and-blend technique for fooling predators. Tiny puffs of feathers crouching in the sand formations, blending into oblivion. In the Monterey Bay, where many of the beaches are crowded, the refuge provides one of the few havens for nesting plovers.

Plovers are also found on the refuge in the winter. Walking along the beach slowly, you may notice the little birds taking cover from the wind in a foot print.



Smith's blue butterfly

In the more densely vegetated and stabilized backdunes can be found several other rare species. The Smith's blue butterfly is an endangered species that relies on two coastal buckwheat species as host plants. Small flits of orange and grey wings fluttering from flower to flower, the adults emerge in summer to mate and lay eggs on buckwheat flowers. After hatching, the larvae feed on buckwheat for several weeks and then molt to a pupal stage that lasts ten months. Also found in the dunes are several federally listed plants including the Monterey spineflower, a threatened species, and Monterey gilia, an endangered species. And just underneath a layer of sand, lies another rare species, the California legless

lizard. Although not federally listed, it is a California species of special concern, and it's an oddity worthy of a freak show. A lizard without legs looks a lot like a short snake, but do not be fooled. It tells you it's a lizard by the eyelids. Snakes don't have them; lizards do. Lizards can blink.

Because these species are sensitive to disturbance and/or trampling, dune habitats on the refuge are closed to the public year-round. However, there is a stretch of the Beach Trail that goes through the dune habitat, providing visitors with the opportunity to see the stunning springtime blooms. The bursts of color from the bright red Indian paint brush, the orange poppy's warm sun glow, the bush lupine's and lizard tail's blaze of yellow, and the sand verbena's pink globes perform a memorable show while hiking.

While heading back toward the refuge entrance, a visitor will run into the other of the Refuge's two trails. The River Loop trail circles through the grassland habitat along the eastern portion of the refuge. Most visitors do not realize that until the 1980's this grassland was in agricultural production. Like the farmlands adjacent to the refuge, this area used to be an artichoke field. It was left fallow for years and became a field of invasive weeds. The refuge is working with California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB) to restore this fallowed land to a mixture of native grasses and coyote brush scrub. Currently, the grassland is maintained through a combination of weed-wacking and mowing. In the future, the refuge proposes to include prescribed fire as a management tool to enhance and maintain the native grassland habitat.

Wildlife is abundant in this part of the refuge. Groups of deer can often be seen foraging in the grassland and coyote brush habitats. Gopher snakes and garter snakes slither through the grass, as skinks and alligator lizards sun themselves during fog intermissions.

Of course, the Salinas River itself forms the backdrop for the refuge and hosts a variety of wildlife. The lagoon along the river mouth and the sand bar provide roost sites for endangered brown pelicans, elegant and Forster's terns, gulls, and shorebirds. Islands provide nesting habitat for avocets, stilts, and ducks and escape cover for a variety of waterbirds. Numerous birds forage along the lagoon shoreline and it provides nesting habitat for stilts, avocets, and waterfowl. The lagoon also has large concentrations of cormorants, occasional osprey, diving and dabbling ducks, gaggles of geese, great blue herons and snowy egrets and much, much more. Lest we forget the fish, there are fish here also. Peregrine falcons can sometimes be seen in the lagoon area, mostly from August through March. Along the refuge's stretch of the Salinas River, staff is working with cooperators from CSUMB to restore riparian vegetation as well. Here we find willows, cottonwoods, box elders, alders, and some creeping wild rye to hold it all together.



Riparian restoration efforts along Salinas River

The Salinas National Wildlife Refuge provides a unique, contemplative visitor experience - a tranquil connection with nature. When you visit, and we hope you do, please help us in protecting this haven for wildlife. Consistent with keeping the refuge

as natural as possible, you will not find any restrooms, picnic tables, nor garbage cans. Given the sensitive nature of the habitats, it is necessary to prohibit dogs, horses, bikes, camping, campfires, barbecues, and off-trail use. In exchange, you will experience the beauty and spirit of this wonderful place.

As with all National Wildlife Refuges open to visitors, there are a variety of activities available. Waterfowl hunting during waterfowl hunting season is allowed on the Salinas River. Access is provided to surf-fishing opportunities adjacent to the refuge. Two trails exist to provide varied wildlife observation and photography opportunities. Several trail-side interpretive panels are planned to give visitors a higher quality wildlife experience in the years to come.

This special place is not very easy to find. Before your next day trip along the Monterey Coast, call the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex for driving directions at 510-792-0222.

Ivette Loreda first came to the San Francisco Bay Area as the biologist for Salinas River, Ellicott Slough, and Antioch Dunes National Wildlife Refuges. She is now the Refuge Manager for Salinas River and Ellicott Slough National Wildlife Refuges.