

Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve, California, USA.

Trip Report

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The Bolsa Chica Wetlands

The Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve is located near Huntington Beach, California off the Pacific Coast Highway. The reserve is a 1200 acre (480 hectare) area adjacent to Inner and Outer Bolsa Bay. The reserve originated as the result of an agreement between the Amigos de Bolsa Chica, a local citizen group, and Signal Bolsa Corporation which owns oil extraction facilities in this area. The reserve is maintained by the Bolsa Chica Conservancy, a non-profit organization.

In 1899, access to the ocean was diked off which changed these wetlands into a freshwater marsh since salt marshes need a regular influx of salt water. The original channel silted over. In 1978, new culverts were installed relinking the wetlands to the ocean, returning the area to a salt marsh as it was before the original dike was built. Due to tidal variations, the water level in Outer Bolsa Bay varies by about 8 feet. The levels in Inner Bolsa vary by 2 to 3 feet. There are two high tides and two low tides daily.



The site supports not only permanent residents but also over-wintering populations and once-a-year visitors on their way to faraway destinations. Most of the birds that feed in coastal marshes during winter are part of a huge migration that starts in the Arctic, where long summer days promote phenomenal plant growth. Nesting birds exploit the bounty and, spurred by the onset of winter, start migrating. Many head for the tropics, fortifying themselves along the way at nutrient-rich wetlands. Other birds go no farther than these coastal wetlands. In addition, many oceanic birds and fishes migrate to coastal sites to reproduce in such habitat blessed with copious amounts of food.

Coastal Southern California is one of 25 nationally recognized "hotspots"-habitats harboring a vast diversity of threatened and endangered species that are under heavy pressure from urbanization. As these habitats become degraded or lost, so does the food supply for resident and migratory animals. California salt marsh species such as Belding's Savannah Sparrow, the Light-footed Clapper Rail and the Long-billed Marsh Wren.



The upland mesa of Bolsa Chica is now a disturbed region made up mostly of non-native grasses and weeds. However, the original coastal sage scrub habitat is restorable. An endangered plant community, sage scrub contains a great diversity of species in a small amount of land, including endangered or threatened birds such as the California Gnatcatcher and the coastal Cactus Wren. The mesa is large enough to support a full terrestrial ecosystem complete with top predators such as coyotes and hawks to keep the rodents in check. Coyotes, which do not prey on birds, also chase away non-native red foxes and house cats, both avid bird hunters.

If development is allowed, reduced natural habitat will discourage coyotes, leaving the area's birds at the mercy of cats and foxes. Bolsa Chica's wintering population of 30 to 40 red-tailed hawks is thought to be the largest concentration in Southern California. Numerous other raptors also feed on the mesa, including the white-tailed kite, a species of special concern, known to nest in the trees.

Trip Checklist

Common Loon	1	Black-bellied Plover	500
Eared Grebe	15	Semipalmated Plover	5
Double-crested Cormorant	5	Marbled Godwit	40
Mallard	10	Short-billed Dowitcher	8
Greater Scaup	16	Willet	30
Bufflehead	3	Greater Yellowlegs	1
Common Merganser	5	Least Sandpiper	500
American White Pelican	2	Western Sandpiper	5
Brown Pelican	25	Red-tailed Hawk	2
Western Gull	1	American Kestrel	1
Herring Gull	5	Turkey Vulture	1
Ring-billed Gull	15	Belted Kingfisher	1
Caspian Tern	2	Black Phoebe	2
Forster's Tern	50	American Crow	50
Great Blue Heron	3	European Starling	100
Snowy Egret	4	White-crowned Sparrow	5
Great Egret	2	Savannah Sparrow	2
Black-necked Stilt	30		
American Avocet	20		

For More Information

For more information on Bolsa Chica, contact Bolsa Chica Land Trust, 207 21st St., Huntington Beach, CA, 92648, (714) 960-9939, or visit www.bolsachicalandtrust.org.

Free guided tours are available year round on the first Saturday of the month. Tours can be arranged at other times by contacting the Amigos at (714) 897-7003; a modest fee may be requested. You can also visit their home page at <http://www.amigosdebolsachica.org/>. You can also contact the Bolsa Chica Conservancy at :

The Bolsa Chica Conservancy
3842 Warner Ave.
Huntington Beach, CA 92649
Tel: (714) 846-1114 / Fax: (714) 846-4065

Cover

Ring-billed Gull, *Larus delawarensis*, photographed at the main entrance of the Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve. © Stéphane Moniotte, November 2001.

I'm glad to acknowledge the contribution of Ian Boustead, who kindly offered me to use his scope to get some bird shots while birding in the reserve.