San Francisco Peninsula Birdwatching
Ocean Beach and Fort Funston
by Dan Murphy
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Spring ***
Summer **
Fall ***
Winter **

San Francisco's Fort Funston is located at the southwest corner of the city. This area of coastal bluffs and rolling dunes provides a contiguous open space between the ocean and Lake Merced. Its vegetation incorporates groves of eucalyptus and cypress trees. Albizzia, Myoporum, German Ivy and a number of other invasive weedy intruders along with a rich blend of California native plants comprise the understory. To the birder it offers two exciting and distinct opportunities. The upland dunes and islands of trees come alive during the fall and spring. The ocean and the southern sections of beach can be incredibly rich at any time of year. North along Ocean Beach birding is less productive, but it can be interesting from time to time.

The Uplands

August through October is probably the preferred time to visit Fort Funston's upland dunes. Access is best from the southbound Skyline Boulevard (Hwy 35). From San Francisco drive south on Skyline past Lake Merced. Up the hill to the right turn into Fort Funston. From the south drive north into San Francisco on Skyline to the stoplight at the bottom of the hill (John Muir Drive), make a U-turn, then return to the top of the hill and turn right into the access road. Turn right at the intersection and continue to the far end of the parking lot.

Except under the most adverse weather conditions you will find yourself sharing the parking lot with hang-glider enthusiasts. The bluffs over the ocean here are the most favored spot in Northern California for this sport. A hang glider viewing platform has been constructed southwest of the parking lot and provides an excellent view of the ocean below. From here check the ocean for flocks of feeding birds that may include Brown Pelicans, Brandt's Cormorants, Western and Heerman's Gulls as well as Forster's, Elegant and Caspian Terns. There is always a chance of a Pomarine or Parasitic Jaeger, particularly during late summer and fall. Although few birds stop in the shrubs near the overlook, this scrub growth has attracted vagrants, notably a Sedge Wren and a Blackburnian Warbler. Killdeer, Blackbird and American Pipits can be found along any of the trails at Fort Funston.

The Sunset Trail, beginning at the northwest corner of the parking lots, leads to the best birding areas. From the parking lot follow the trail north to its fork, then right around the east side of Battery Davis.

At Battery Davis check the trees for warbler. Eastern species, including Blackpoll,

Chestnut-sided, and Tennessee Warblers and American Redstarts and the more common Orange-crowned, Yellow, Black-throated Gray, Nashville, Wilson's, Townsend's and Yellow-rumped Warblers can be found in fall and to a lesser degree in spring. Warbling, Hutton's and Cassin's Vireos are also expected at one time or another during migration. Mourning Doves, Tree Swallows and Chestnut-backed Chickadees nest here.

From the middle entrance to Battery Davis go down the hill to the right. Keep an eye on the cypress grove and the Albizzia (the large fern-leafed shrubs) for flycatchers, warbler and sparrows. The grove at the fork, appropriately known as The Y Grove, should be birded carefully. Allen's Hummingbirds, Bewick's Wrens, Brown Creepers and White-crowned Sparrows nest near here. Fall insectivore flocks can be expected to include the same species mentioned in connection with Battery Davis. The coffeeberry shrubs on the hillside behind the north art of this grove provide berries for migrating Western Tanagers and White-crowned Sparrows during September. After checking this area carefully walk south (to the right) on the path as it descends past this grove and on to the next one. Check the shrubs between the cypress covered bunker and the eucalyptus grove farthest south. A large insectivore flock here was once found to include a Prairie Warbler. Though highly variable as a birding site, this may prove to be an area significant to migrants and vagrants that accompany them. After checking this area return to the Y Grove and make your way to the right over the dune to the cypress and eucalyptus grove which parallels Skyline Boulevard.

Skyline Grove is perhaps the richest migrant trap at Fort Funston. This grove offers the greatest diversity in terms of vegetation and thus in terms of birds. It can be accessed by crossing the dunes on any of a number of informal trails or bridle paths. The best areas are openings where light penetrates the grove and ecotones (areas where two major vegetation types blend together). Watch for of our common migrants and vagrants. Eastern Kingbird, Red-eyed Vireo, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler and Clay-colored Sparrow are only a few of the vagrants which have been recorded here. Allen's Hummingbird, Downy Woodpecker, Tree Swallow, Bewick's Wren, Pygmy Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Common Raven and White-crowned Sparrow nest in the grove. As you return to the parking lot keep any on the adjacent dunes for feeding flocks, any of which may include interesting birds from time to time.

To the south of the parking lot are some rather attractive areas that are generally not birded. The abandoned golf course just south of Fort Funston remains the private property of the Olympic Club. A number of so far unfulfilled plans call for it to be turned over to the National Park Service in exchange for land owned by the city of San Francisco. So far, this tree way transaction remains hostage to budgets and bureaucracy. If this land ever is opened to the public it will offer some very interesting birding opportunities to see vagrants.

The Beach

The beach is most easily reached from the Great Highway just south of Sloat. Boulevard. Use the southernmost parking lot, about a tenth of a mile south of Sloat Boulevard. Access can also be made from the upland dunes by a trail through the gully

just north of Battery Davis or by walking to the north end of the sand bluffs.

The primary attraction at Fort Funston's beach is the Bank Swallow colony. Located in the sand bluffs just south of the parking lot, this colony of more than one hundred burrows is active from April through July. This is the northern most major Bank Swallow colony on the California coast. The birds feed over nearby Lake Merced and illustrate the ecological link between the adjoining areas

The beach itself is a major resting area for migrating shorebirds in spring and fall. It is an excellent spot to see alternate (breeding) plumage Black-bellied Plover, Marbled Godwit, Willet, Sanderling, and other spring migrants. The offshore waters are quite interesting as well. From the Parking lot, the beach or any of the bluffs look for all three loons, Western and Clark's Grebes, our three cormorants, Brown Pelican, the three scoters including the locally rare Black Scoter and all local gulls and terns. Mixed flocks of frenzied seabirds follow striped bass runs into the surf. The bass hit the bait fish from below and the birds take them from above. The feeding flock may include all the previously mentions species plus Sooty Shearwaters, Pomarine Jaegers and Parasitic Jaegers. The best time to witness feeding frenzies is on incoming summer tides with in about 2 hours of high tide. Millions of Sooty Shearwaters patrol the coast between June and September and their feeding frenzies can be awesome. A telescope is usually needed to distinguish other shearwaters from the masses of Sooties but on occasion they will be close enough to distinguish them with the naked eye.

Summer can be a pretty good time at Ocean Beach north of Fort Funston. A walk along the beach for a couple miles can produce some interesting sightings both in the surf and resting on the dunes. Heermans's and Western gulls are most common. Be sure to check all flocks since some of them will be composed of Caspian, Elegant and Forster's Terns. Common and Arctic Terns show up in small numbers late in the season. Shorebirds form huge resting flocks on the beach. They can often be seen near the new section of seawall north of Taraval Street. The walking path, which follows the Great Highway, is a better observation point than the beach itself, particularly at the seawall. If you use the path be sure to watch for Killdeer, American Kestrel and Western Meadowlarks.

Winter birding is a bit slower along the beach. A Thayer's Gull can often be found among the small resting flocks of gulls between Fort Funston and the end of the beach about three miles north. Snowy Plovers occur at two locations along the beach. Look for a small flock about a block or two north of Sloat Boulevard. A second small flock can generally be found between Noriega and Irving Streets. This area is accessible from the Lower Great Highway at Judah Street. Look for the Snowy Plovers in the upland dunes among the wind-blown litter. They are seldom found on the wave washed areas that Sandlerings favor.

YEAR REPORT: Abundance

Report Details

Date range:	Jul 1, 2010 - Jun 30, 2011	**Total # of Species:**	32
		Total # of Checklists:	38

Location(s): Ocean Beach - Judah - Stair 23; Ocean Beach - Judah - Stairwell 26; Ocean Beach - Lawton -- Stairwell 22; Ocean Beach - Lincoln - Stairwell 23; Ocean Beach - Moraga to Stairwell 25; Ocean Beach - Pacheco - Stairwell 20; Ocean Beach - Pacheco -- Stairwell 24; Ocean Beach - Pacheco-- Lincoln; Ocean Beach - Quinter - Stairwell 25; Ocean Beach - Quintera - Kirkham; Ocean Beach - Quintera -- Lincoln; Ocean Beach - Quintera to Moraga; Ocean Beach - Quintera to Stairwell 23; Ocean Beach - Santiago - Stairwell 24; Ocean Beach - Santiago - Stairwell 25; Ocean Beach - Santiago - Stairwell 27; Ocean Beach - Santiago to Judah; Ocean Beach - Santiago to Lawton; Ocean Beach - Santiago to Stairwell 22; Ocean Beach - Santiago to Stairwell 26; Ocean Beach- Santiago to Lincoln

Summary

	Jul 2010	Aug 2010	Sep 2010	Oct 2010	Nov 2010	Dec 2010	Jan 2011	Feb 2011	Mar 2011	Apr 2011	May 2011	Jun 2011
Number of Species	17	15	11	9	12	14	15	14	13	13	13	--
Number of Individuals	1,074	1,362	1,702	1,119	1,053	1,272	902	1,159	846	1,714	247	--
Number of Checklists	3	2	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	2	--

Average Number of Birds per Checklist (sample size)

Species Name	Jul 2010	Aug 2010	Sep 2010	Oct 2010	Nov 2010	Dec 2010	Jan 2011	Feb 2011	Mar 2011	Apr 2011	May 2011	Jun 2011
Mallard	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.67 (3)	--	--	--
Surf Scoter	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.33 (3)	--	0.50 (2)	--
Double-crested Cormorant	0.33 (3)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.50 (4)	1.00 (2)	--
Brown Pelican	0.33 (3)	3.50 (2)	--	--	--	--	0.25 (4)	--	--	0.75 (4)	4.00 (2)	--
Black-bellied Plover	0.33 (3)	--	--	0.50 (4)	--	--	0.25 (4)	--	--	2.25 (4)	--	--
Snowy Plover	5.33 (3)	19.00 (2)	28.75 (4)	25.25 (4)	23.50 (4)	24.50 (4)	23.00 (4)	29.50 (4)	29.67 (3)	17.50 (4)	2.00 (2)	--
Semipalmated Plover	--	1.50 (2)	0.25 (4)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.50 (2)	--

Willet	0.33 (3)	2.50 (2)	0.25 (4)	--	--	--	--	2.25 (4)	52.00 (3)	20.00 (4)	--	--
Whimbrel	50.33 (3)	3.50 (2)	--	--	--	--	2.50 (4)	2.00 (4)	7.67 (3)	5.50 (4)	16.00 (2)	--
Marbled Godwit	45.33 (3)	80.50 (2)	17.00 (4)	--	--	0.25 (4)	0.75 (4)	6.00 (4)	20.67 (3)	50.25 (4)	13.50 (2)	--
Black Turnstone	0.33 (3)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Surfbird	0.33 (3)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Sanderling	146.67 (3)	242.50 (2)	283.75 (4)	169.00 (4)	144.00 (4)	127.00 (4)	77.75 (4)	143.75 (4)	140.67 (3)	295.00 (4)	13.50 (2)	--
Western Sandpiper	3.33 (3)	--	0.25 (4)	--	--	--	--	--	0.33 (3)	0.75 (4)	2.00 (2)	--
Least Sandpiper	0.33 (3)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Bonaparte's Gull	--	--	--	--	0.25 (4)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Heermann's Gull	26.00 (3)	102.50 (2)	29.00 (4)	2.50 (4)	1.00 (4)	0.25 (4)	--	--	--	--	--	--
Mew Gull	--	--	--	0.25 (4)	14.50 (4)	81.75 (4)	32.00 (4)	21.25 (4)	2.33 (3)	--	--	--
Ring-billed Gull	--	--	--	--	2.00 (4)	0.50 (4)	2.25 (4)	0.50 (4)	--	1.00 (4)	--	--
Western Gull	56.00 (3)	90.00 (2)	56.50 (4)	62.25 (4)	52.25 (4)	36.25 (4)	46.25 (4)	60.25 (4)	19.67 (3)	25.25 (4)	46.50 (2)	--
California Gull	0.33 (3)	0.50 (2)	--	10.25 (4)	1.00 (4)	8.25 (4)	3.75 (4)	0.25 (4)	1.33 (3)	--	--	--
Herring Gull	--	--	--	--	--	0.25 (4)	1.25 (4)	--	--	--	--	--
Thayer's Gull	--	--	--	--	--	0.50 (4)	0.25 (4)	--	--	--	--	--
Glaucous-winged Gull	0.33 (3)	--	0.25 (4)	--	0.75 (4)	0.25 (4)	4.50 (4)	2.25 (4)	--	--	0.50 (2)	--
gull sp.	--	--	--	--	3.75 (4)	12.50 (4)	--	2.50 (4)	--	--	--	--
Caspian Tern	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.75 (4)	--	--
Elegant Tern	--	91.50 (2)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Rock Pigeon	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.25 (4)	--	--	2.50 (2)	--
Common Raven	22.00 (3)	16.50 (2)	8.75 (4)	9.00 (4)	8.25 (4)	16.00 (4)	25.25 (4)	17.50 (4)	6.00 (3)	9.00 (4)	21.00 (2)	--
Barn Swallow	--	10.50 (2)	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.67 (3)	--	--	--

Brewer's Blackbird	--	16.00 (2)	0.75 (4)	0.75 (4)	12.00 (4)	9.75 (4)	5.50 (4)	1.50 (4)	--	--	--	--
Brown-headed Cowbird	--	0.50 (2)	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--