

The Site Guide

Site: Coastal Marin County, California

Location: Coastal mid-Northern California in three loosely timed trips, one of one-to-four hours, one of one-half to one full day and one of one full day, all in Marin County and all between five and sixty miles north and northwest of the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco and Marin Counties, Alta California.

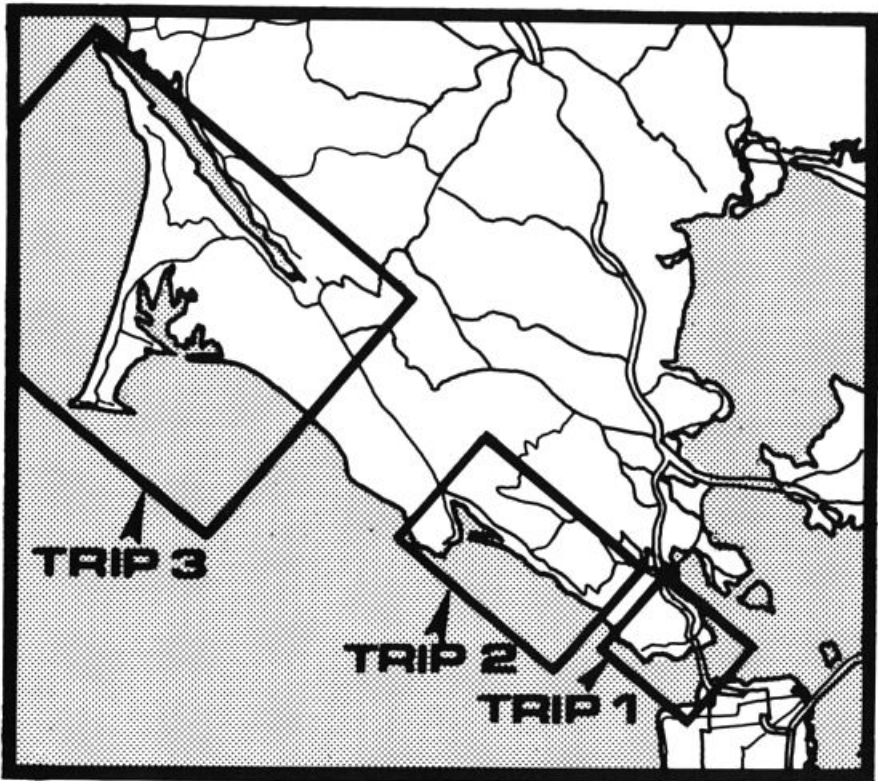
General Access: All of the following localities are easily reached by driving west from U. S. 101 (The Redwood Highway) on any of several main roads from the north end of the Golden Gate Bridge north to Novato.

General Description: It is amazing that an area such as coastal Marin County, directly adjacent to the populous San Francisco Bay Area, has been so well retained in a seminatural state. Thanks to Marin Headlands State Park, Muir Woods National Monument, Point Reyes National Seashore, Point Reyes Bird Observatory, Mt. Tamalpais State Park, Tomales Bay State Park, Audubon Canyon ranch and conscientious citizens of several small townships, notably Bolinas, Stinson Beach, Point Reyes Station, Inverness and Dillon Beach, much of the forest, brushland, grassland, riparian stream edge and many of the marshes, ponds, lagoons, estuaries and beaches have been virtually saved from the development of the machines of humans. Muir Woods on Mount Tamalpais and Bolinas and Inverness ridges are still richly forested with coast redwoods, Douglas fir, Bishop pine, madrone and bay trees which give way at lower elevations to dense chaparral. Headland bluffs and cliffs are thickly carpeted with bush lupine broken by grazed and regrown grassland of several exotic species. A number of streams and a few marshes edged generously with willows and alders maintain remnant habitat for riparian- and bog-loving animals. Several freshwater ponds and lagoons, tidal estuaries and bays as well as offshore rocks, reefs and open ocean offer an unequalled array of

shore and water birds to the eye of the naturalist. Maps, information, excellent bird checklists (\$0.10) and identification materials are available at the headquarters of Point Reyes National Seashore, Point Reyes Station, California 94956. In addition to birds (over 350 species recorded) there are about 72 species of mammals, 18 reptiles, 12 amphibians and numerous smaller animals, both terrestrial and aquatic. Insects should be no problem and rattlesnake, the only poisonous vertebrate here, is quite rare. Do not approach foxes, skunks or other mammals that act abnormally, as rabies has occasionally been detected in the area. The temperature is seldom below 35° F. or above 75° F., but it is often foggy and sometimes windy. After about 10 a.m. on weekends and in summer there may be moderately heavy car traffic. Wildflowers are abundant in spring and summer. Hiking and bicycling are encouraged in areas where auto traffic is prohibited. Stay on roads and designated trails and report violations against the land to the police or to rangers.

Accommodations: Many motels and hotels are available all along Highway 101 from San Francisco to Novato and a few are located in Inverness and the other small towns along Highway 1, but for guaranteed space, especially in the summer and on weekends, a reservation is recommended. Campgrounds are located at Samuel P. Taylor State Park (reservations necessary) on Sir Francis Drake Boulevard between San Anselmo and Olema and "back-country" camping is allowed in some areas of Mt. Tamalpais State Park and Point Reyes National Seashore. There are grocery stores, restaurants and gas stations in all of the small towns along Highway 1, and towards Inverness, but do not count on anything being open before 9 a.m. or after 4 p.m. as these merchants keep short daytime hours. Picnic areas are abundant.

Special Places: *Point Reyes Bird Observatory* is a full time, non-profit ornithological research station located on Highway 101 outside of Bolinas. There is a small display room with excellent literature and a small staff of trained ornithologists who will be helpful and friendly, but this is



Coastal Marin County, California. Maps/ Doug Rod.

primarily a research station and not a public attraction. It is open to visitors daily except Monday and is located near several good birding spots. For information send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to P.R.B.O., 4990 Star Route, Stinson Beach, California 94970.

Audubon Canyon Ranch, owned and maintained jointly by National and local Audubon Societies is centered on the east shore of Bolinas Lagoon. A heronry of Great and Snowy Egrets and Great Blue Herons at the headquarters presents a fine opportunity for observation and photography of the treetop nests from trails which rise above. In addition, A.C.R. has been responsible for the purchase and protection of much wild acreage in the coastal Marin area. For information, write to Audubon Canyon Ranch, 4990 State Rte. #1, Stinson Beach, California 94970.

General Birding: Migration periods and winter (late July to early June) are best for the greatest variety of birds in all the habitats

but many land birds are resident and a few of each species of shore and waterbirds can usually be found summering or as early fall or late spring migrants. The following land-birds are some of many that might be considered year-round residents. Band-tailed Pigeon, Spotted Owl, Pygmy Owl, White-throated Swift, Anna's Hummingbird, Acorn Woodpecker, Black and Say's Phoebes, Violet-green Swallow, Steller's and Scrub Steller's and Scrub Jays, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Plain Titmouse, Bushtit, Red-breasted and Pygmy Nuthatches, Wrentit, Winter Wren, Hutton's Vireo, Lesser and Am. Goldfinches, Brown Towhee and White-crowned Sparrow.

During migration periods the numbers and varieties of birds present are astonishing and, virtually any migratory North American bird might appear.

Trips here in winter are almost as productive as in spring and fall and the Point Reyes Christmas Bird Count averages $195 \pm$ species and 200 has been reached. In addition to the legions of waterbirds present, Short-eared

and Saw-whet Owls, Varied Thrush, Golden and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Townsend's Warbler, Tricolored Blackbird, Golden-crowned and Lincoln's Sparrow are relatively common as are many other landbird species.

Raptors are quite common especially during the fall and many overwinter. At least 16 species are found here annually and there is almost adequate protection for them against gunners and falconers.

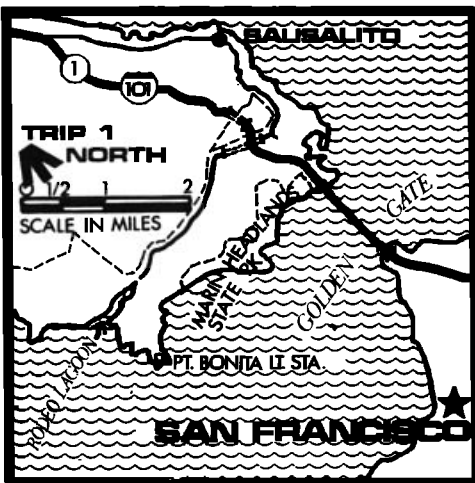
Trips: Three different locality trips are suggested and outlined. The Tamalpais-Bolinas one-half to one-day route is most highly recommended for variety of species, number of typically western species, special places and variety of habitat. The short trip to Rodeo Lagoon and Marin Headlands is good if there is not enough time for either of the other two trips and the Olema to Point Reyes whole day trip is designed for hiking as well as a good variety of birds.

1. Rodeo Lagoon-Marin Headlands — two hours to one-half day. Approaching from the south take the Alexander Exit from Highway 101 just north of the Golden Gate Bridge, or approaching from the north take the last Sausalito Exit just before the G.G.B. (These exits are the same.) Go northeast, downhill about 100 yards and turn left (west) to a tunnel operated by traffic signals. Go through the tunnel and follow the main road to the



Rodeo Lagoon showing brackish lagoon (foreground) and freshwater pond (rear) and surrounding grassy hills. Photos/ Rich Stallcup.

beach. Some of the area is military-owned and some is state park so respect the speed limit or expect to receive a coupon. The road parallels a long row of thick willows along a stream, then passes a freshwater pond surrounded by cattail marsh and finally a larger, brackish lagoon, backed up by the beach. Check all of these areas as well as exposed perches and the dry, brushy hillsides. Visit the Marin Headlands State Park office across the street from the beach parking lot for literature, lists and detailed access to



Rodeo Lagoon — Marin Headlands



Chaparral (foreground) and Redwood X Douglas Fir woods (rear) on Mr. Tamalpais.

secondary roads and trails. Walk south on the beach, checking the ocean for scoters, loons and grebes and check the beach and lagoon edge for shorebirds. South of the beach you will see a large, guano-covered rock where Brant, Pelagic Cormorant, and in the fall, Brown Pelicans perch. Groups of trees up towards the Point Bonita Lighthouse (access uphill from the freshwater pond) are often good for landbirds, especially during migrations and the headlands above the Golden Gate channel are great for observation of diurnal migrants, especially hawks. An average trip during migrations or in winter here may include from 50-70 species of birds. Summer is not as good but is still well worth a visit. Make the beach walk early in the morning to avoid crowds.

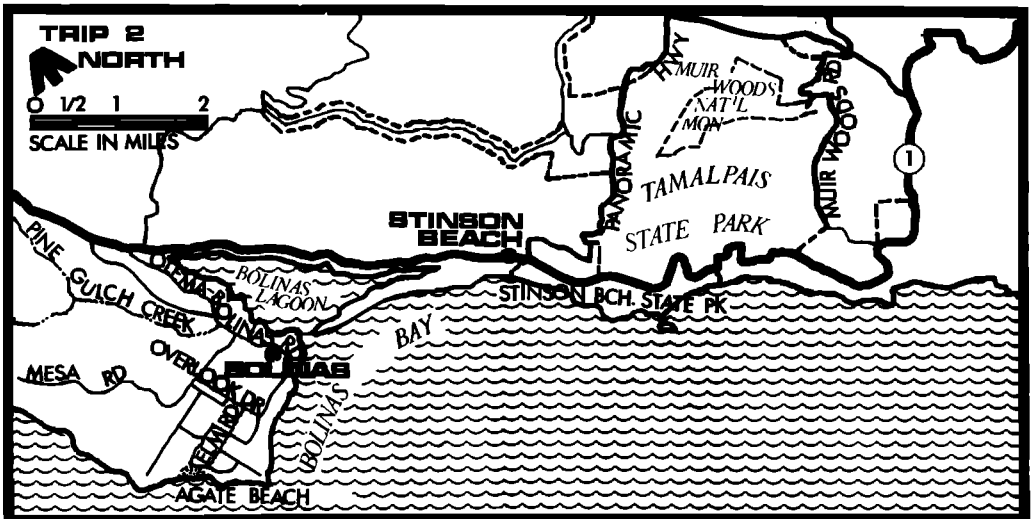
2. Tamalpais-Bolinas — one-half to one full day. This is the best of several avian-rich localities within minutes' drive of San Francisco. On any day during either migration period or during the winter, a single party should have little trouble in seeing 100+ bird species or getting to know a few species well, many of which have a quite limited United States range.

Begin before dawn, listening and "hooting" for owls in wooded places on Mount Tamalpais (Muir Woods Road Panoramic Highway) and in summer, listening for Poor-wills on brushy slopes or, at least, be up there early in the morning when landbirds are



Bolinas Lagoon from estuary channel and Tamalpais ridge in background.

most active. Next, find your way down to Stinson Beach, checking the chaparral for Wrentits, Rufous-crowned Sparrows and Brown Towhees. Continue along Highway 1 on the east shore of Bolinas Lagoon. There are numerous places to stop and scan the water and exposed flats. Spend much time here as this lagoon (estuary) is shallow, rich in food and is a major stopover for migrant grebes, cormorants, pelicans, herons, (Black) Brant, ducks and shorebirds, many of which also winter. At the north end of the lagoon, check a small pond on the east side of the road. It is



Tamalpais — Bolinas

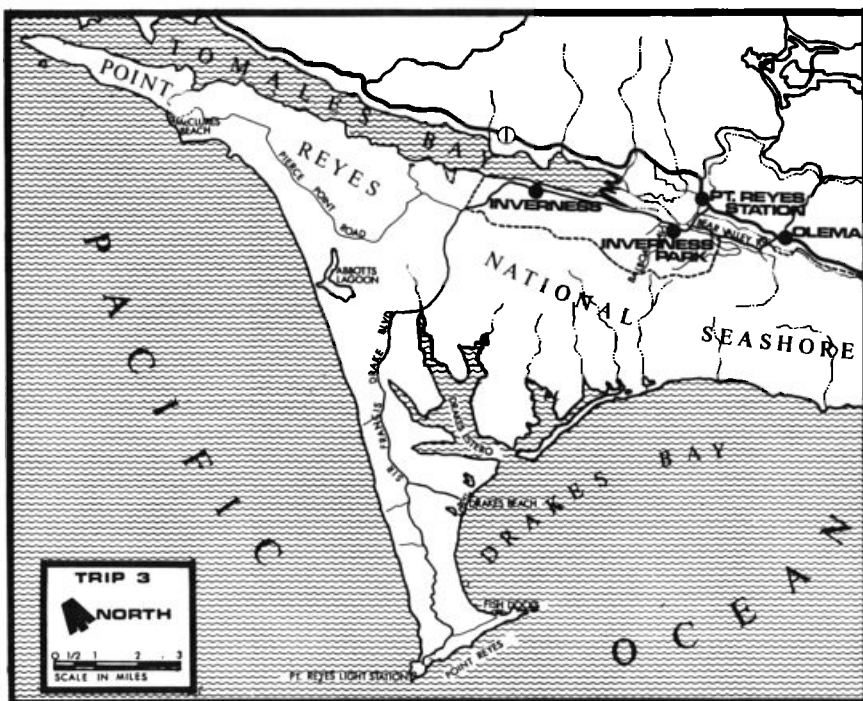
often dry but if not is usually very good for shorebirds including Pectoral and Baird's Sandpipers in fall and snipe that hide in the tall grass, summer, spring and fall. Turn left here, rounding the end of the lagoon, heading towards Bolinas and bird along this west shore towards the town. There are fewer spots to stop on this side but do so where possible. At Pine Gulch Creek the road turns right, leaving the shore and soon jogs left past the school and crosses some wet fields. Check these fields for geese, ducks, egrets, shorebirds and blackbirds. At the first stop sign, turn right into Mesa Road, cross the bluff, again checking ponds and damp fields to Overlook Road. Turn left. Go one block to Elm, turn right (west) and continue to the parking lot of Agate Beach. Here, climb the bluff overlooking the ocean and carefully check any exposed rocks for Black Oystercatcher, Black Turnstone, Surfbird, Wandering Tattler and Rock Sandpiper, and 'scope the ocean horizon for loons, grebes, cormorants, sea ducks, shearwaters and alcids. Return to Olema-Bolinas Road, turn right and go through the small town of Bolinas keeping to the left until the road ends at the estuary channel. This is another good vantage point, especially for gulls, loons and (Black) Brant. Go back around the lagoon once again as the tide will be different and the birds present will have moved, giving an entirely different impression of the area. Check the alders and willows, especially near the entrance to Stinson

Beach State Park (beach) and the tule-salicornia marsh at the southeast corner of the lagoon (diked off from tides).

3. Olema-Point Reyes — one full day. Begin by owling on Balboa Road, Inverness Park or around P.R.N.S. headquarters one mile northwest of Olema. In the early morning search around Olema Marsh, which is crossed by Bear Valley Road and bordered by Sir Francis Drake Boulevard on the north and Highway 1 between Olema and Point Reyes Station on the east. Look and listen for rails, Red-shouldered Hawks, bitterns, marsh wrens, yellowthroats and sparrows, then continue to Inverness along the west edge of Tomales Bay on Sir Francis Drake Boulevard. There are numerous turnouts from which one can scan the bay and look for forest birds across the road. Continue past Inverness 2.5 miles west across Inverness Ridge to the first fork. Take the right fork, Pierce Point Road, towards McClure Beach. You may wish to bird the woods of Tomales Bay State Park 1.3 miles past the fork, as they are very good for seedeaters, insectivores and birds of prey alike, but there is a fee per car and as much can be found by walking into the area from selected points along the main road. Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Pygmy Nuthatches and Steller's Jays are common and Red Crossbill is possible here. Continue towards McClure Beach and at 3.6 miles from the fork there is a small parking area on the west side of the road with a walk-through gate which leads to Abbott's Lagoon, a good freshwater lake with some marshy edges. This walk can be as short or long as you desire as the lagoon continues south, east and west to the ocean beach past the first smaller lake seen from the entrance, or skipped completely to save time. Abbott's is excellent for diving and dabbling ducks and depending upon the water level on the west side, shorebirds. In the car again continue 2.1 miles to another turnout on the left with a walk-through that is in a gully between grassy hills, comprised of a dry-looking marsh. This is Kehoe Marsh. Pass the gate and follow the dirt road to the ocean beach, poking into the adjacent marsh at various points. Watch especially for snipe, Long-



Olema Marsh with wooded Inverness Ridge (right rear).



Olema — Point Reyes

billed Marsh Wrens, sparrows and rails including the elusive Black. Take your car again to the parking area at the end of the road and another westward walk will put you on McClure Beach. Harlequin Ducks, three species of scoters, grebes and loons are often seen in and beyond the surf and Rock Wrens are occasional along the cliffs. There are beautiful tidal pools exposed here at low water. If there is still time, go back to the fork and take Sir Francis Drake Highway again, west towards Point Reyes. This road drops and winds by a stream in a shallow canyon, fine for landbirds such as Hutton's Vireo, Scrub Jay, hummingbirds etc. and, at the bottom, crosses Drake's Estero which is easily checked for shorebirds. From here the road passes mostly through pastureland and bush lupine with occasional stands of Monterey Cypress at farmhouses. Point Reyes Lighthouse is closed to visitors but birding anywhere along the road may be very good. During migration, landbirds often pile up on the point and may be seen in trees or often flocking through the brush. Scan the fish docks area on South Point (left at the last fork) for Oldsquaw, cormorants, loons, gulls



Point Reyes Beach from Pt. Reyes, looking toward Pierce Pt. (white water 10 mi distance). Bush Lupine in foreground.

etc., and visit the Drake's Beach area where there is a National Seashore office complete with snacks and toilets. Watch for raptors, plovers, Horned Larks and longspurs in open areas. There is nothing particularly interesting at Point Reyes beach (two entrances) but it is very beautiful.

Rating: Spring ****, Summer **, Fall ****, Winter ****.

—Rich Stallcup — 4409 44th Ave.
Sacramento, California 95824.