



Nature in Natomas

By Tela Hitzeman and
Mackenzie Hollender

The PACIFIC Flyway

Nature in the Natomas Basin

Tela Hitzeman (left) and Mackenzie Hollender (right) are youth climate activists with 350 Sacramento. They are high school students.

Mackenzie loves birds and is very active in the birding community. She founded the first young birders club based in the Sacramento Valley and is the Student Board Member of the Sacramento Audubon Society.

Tela grew up in Natomas, she works on climate issues and promotes sustainability through her 350 Sacramento internship. She recently started working with the Environmental Council of Sacramento.

Standing before vast rows of flooded agricultural fields, you see thousands of swimming feathered bodies of brown, white, black, and maybe traces of a deep shade of green or rusty orange. You wonder if they are ducks or geese. Up there in the sky, like a moving smudge of dirt, or a necklace, constantly reorganizing and changing shape, birds with great broad wings pass. You listen and hear the bugle sound of Sandhill Cranes. A flock of small brown and white birds zoom low over the water, flapping and turning along the corner of the field with incredible synchrony. A raptor slowly drifts across a patch of cattails, its wings up and

its white tail patch gleaming. This spectacle, bustling bird activity in a healthy and lively wetland, occurs every day in winter in the Natomas region.

In shallow flooded fields in the Natomas Basin, a quick scan with some binoculars reveals dusty brown, slender, long legged birds wading in the water. The Natomas Basin is known for hosting a wide array of Shorebirds year round. Small Dunlins run along the muddy shore in flocks, plucking worms and crustaceans from the surface. A flock of Long Billed Dowitchers, heads bent down to the water, probes into the mud for prey nestled further down. Embodying the humble grace of the wetlands,

the tall Long Billed Curlew strides through the deeper waters with ease, and uses the fleshy sensors at the tip of its impressive down curving bill to feel prey in the furthest parts of the mud.

The shallow agricultural fields in the Natomas Basin are extremely important for the habitat they provide shorebirds, a group of birds that are in more trouble than almost all others. According to the State of the Birds 2025 report compiled by the US Committee of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative, shorebird populations have plummeted since 1980, an overall decline of 33 percent, the second steepest decline of all major bird

groups. 19 out of the 28 shorebird species found in North America are tipping point species, meaning that if conservation efforts aren't put into place now, it will be too late for these species to get off the one way route to extinction. Out of all bird groups, shorebirds have the greatest number of tipping point species. Habitat loss is the leading cause of these drastic shorebird population declines. Here in Natomas, we have an incredible opportunity to save a portion of our world's shorebirds from disappearing by ensuring that their habitat here continues to be available for them.

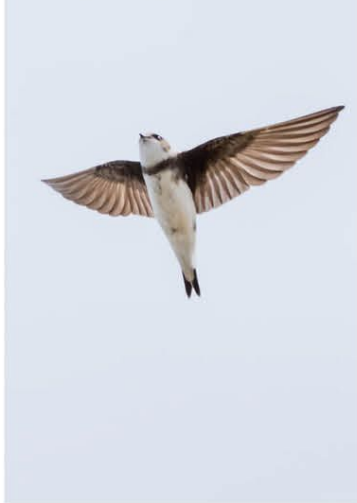
The Natomas Basin falls within the Pacific Flyway, a migration route taken by billions of birds, one of four flyways in the United States. Birds migrating north and south, from Alaska to Patagonia, use the valuable habitat in the Natomas Basin to rest and fuel up. As California



Swainson's Hawk photo: Daniel Lee Brown

has drained its wetlands and turned them into developments and agricultural land, the habitat that birds relied on has been significantly eliminated. Now, the state and local governments work with farm-

Bank Swallow Shorebird photo: Daniel Lee Brown



ers and other landowners to provide places for the birds to feed or overwinter. There are several nearby. For example, as you drive north on Highway 99 in winter, you can often see thousands of birds in the rice fields. More established refuges nearby are the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area near Davis, the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge about 80 miles north near Willows, the Gray Lodge Wildlife Refuge near Pennington, and the Cosumnes

River Preserve, near Galt. Habitat in the Natomas Basin is currently under threat as 8000 acres of land have been proposed for development in four separate projects. The farm-

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Nature continued on from p9 land proposed for development is also home to a number of endangered and protected species including the Swainson's hawk, the giant garter



Migrating Canada Geese

snake, and white-tailed kite, among many others. Many of the birds in Natomas require specific environmental conditions to survive. Swainson's hawks, in particular, depend on open habitats and lowland plains. For Swainson's Hawks,



Mackenzie with her birding scope and iPhone for pictures just North of Paso Verde High School

Sacramento, with its expansive Central Valley, serves as a vital migratory stop and summer home for these birds. During the summer, these hawks reside in the Central Valley before migrating to South

America for the winter. The Natomas Basin plays a crucial role in their life cycle, providing essential breeding grounds and preparation for their long migration. The Pacific Flyway is protected by an international treaty including the countries Mexico, the United States, and Canada. The Natomas Basin is considered a biodiversity hot spot and is one of 4 areas of Sacramento county that have been identified for preservation as part of a special state program, "30 by 30". The Natomas Basin was drained for flood and agricultural protection in the early 1900's. It has always been a part of Sacramento's history to protect this native area. The wetlands have been the key trait of the Sacramento Valley, the iconic landscape people depict when referring to our region.

The Natomas Basin Habitat Conservation Plan, approved in 2003, was designed

to forge a balance between the new North Natomas community and the need to preserve farmland and habitat for the resident endangered and protected species. This Plan ensures that growth will not lead to the destruc-



Western Sandpiper photo: Ray Rozema

tion of critical ecosystems. The Natomas Basin Conservancy is the agency responsible for acquiring and managing the land protected for resident and migrating species.

As Natomas continues to grow and welcome new residents, maintaining this balance between development and environmental habitats has become more important than ever. Over the past 20 years, new schools, homes, and shopping centers have been built, reflecting a thriving and dynamic community. While development is beneficial, we need to be mindful of where and how we expand. Growth should be ethical and sustainable, ensuring the preservation of vital wildlife habitats.

Take some time to explore the Basin and go bird watching. Visiting in the spring or summer, you might spot hawks, tadpoles, and even newly hatched birds. You'll also discover scenic trails and wildlife you may have never noticed before. These natural spaces are rare and valuable—take the opportunity to observe and appreciate the beauty of the Natomas Basin. In preserving the remaining open fields of Natomas, we have a chance to ensure that these incredible birds remain part of our culture and enjoyment of our place in the world.

LearnMore

Environmental Council of Sacramento: ECOS



Sacramento Audubon Society



Natomas Basin Conservancy



350 Sacramento



State of the Birds



Use the above QR codes to learn more and help preserve the Nature that is our Natomas Community.

