



Golden Gate Bird Alliance
San Francisco Conservation Committee

Birds of Sunset Dunes

A Baseline Inventory and Assessment



INTRODUCTION

In April of 2025 Sunset Dunes was officially dedicated as a public park under the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department (SFRPD). Golden Gate Bird Alliance (GGBA) has long recognized this 50-acre SFRPD parcel (which shares its western border with the Golden Gate National Recreation Area) as a significant habitat corridor, connecting Fort Funston and Lake Merced to the south with Golden Gate Park and Lands End to the north. As dedicated green space, Sunset Dunes now presents genuine opportunities to improve the habitat quality of this land, serving both wildlife and recreationalists alike.

With the opening of the park, GGBA commenced data collection with the intent of establishing a baseline understanding of avian diversity and use of Sunset Dunes. By better understanding how birds use this space, we hope the survey can inform future decision-making. This report, covering a time span of April 2025 through April 2026, describes the habitat corridor, identifies six focal species that have a significant presence within the habitat corridor, offers specific management actions that will benefit wildlife and people, and summarizes our findings of the 88 bird species observed from Sunset Dunes during the survey period.

One year of regular observation has given us a good understanding of the current environmental conditions at Sunset Dunes. In the coming months and years, decisions and practices of park management and use will affect the wildlife that rely on this habitat corridor. Careful planning and implementation could provide for appropriate recreational opportunities while improving environmental conditions and accommodating local wildlife. Sunset Dunes is poised to become a world class urban park and habitat corridor, providing for human recreation and for wildlife, and connecting people with the natural world.

AREA DESCRIPTION

Sunset Dunes can be parsed into three distinct areas:

EAST – The eastern aspect of Sunset Dunes includes a landscaped zone of iceplant, lawn, shrubs and trees, and is directly adjacent to the built urban edge of the City.



WEST – The west aspect of Sunset Dunes is comprised of coastal sand dunes vegetated by a mix of exotic plants (mostly iceplant) and native dune-scrub plants, and is adjacent to the GGNRA to the west, which is administered by the National Park Service (NPS) and includes Ocean Beach and the surf zone.



AIRSPACE – The airspace above Sunset Dunes and its adjacent areas is a component of the habitat corridor area. Birds move north and south throughout the corridor, some routinely interacting with the landscape of Sunset Dunes, others merely passing over towards more distant destinations.



FOCAL SPECIES

There are over eleven thousand species of birds worldwide, each occupying a specific ecological niche. Easy to observe, and present in most ecosystem types, birds serve as indicators of environmental health and can provide a good focus to inform stewardship actions. The following six species have been specifically selected as focal species. They have a strong presence within Sunset Dunes and rely on park resources, or are present as direct neighbors and are subject to impacts from park visitors. Stewarding Sunset Dunes for these species will create conditions that will broadly benefit local wildlife.



Nuttall's White-crowned Sparrow

Zonotrichia leucophrys nuttalli

HABITAT: coastal scrub

PRIMARY FOOD SOURCE: seeds

Endemic to the coastal fog belt from northern California south to Point Conception, these familiar seaside songbirds can be found year-round on both the east and west sides of Sunset Dunes. They require patchy landscapes, with grass and open ground for foraging, and sufficiently dense mounded shrubbery for nesting. Males can often be observed prominently perched and vigorously singing in an effort to defend territory and to pair bond with females. In

the spring, parents can be seen feeding and attending to fledged young as they learn how to fend for themselves.



Anna's Hummingbird

Calypte anna

HABITAT: open woodlands, coastal scrub

PRIMARY FOOD SOURCE: nectar

A common year-round resident throughout the Bay Area, Anna's Hummingbirds are regularly observed at Sunset Dunes and it is likely that they nest within the park. Males exhibit a dramatic aerial courtship display. Females choose nest sites, construct nests and rear chicks unassisted. Observed most frequently on the east side of the park. This species will benefit from a diverse native plant community that provides flower nectar year-round and suitable nesting sites.



Western Bluebird

Sialia mexicana

HABITAT: open woodlands, coastal chaparral

PRIMARY FOOD SOURCE: ground-dwelling insects and spiders

After a prolonged absence from San Francisco, Western Bluebirds returned in 2005 and have re-established in suitable habitats throughout the City. Several pairs were observed during the survey period on both the east and west sides of Sunset Dunes where they regularly forage for food. While nesting was not detected within the park, it is suspected that they nested in the nearby vicinity. Observations in spring and summer included family groups with fledged young. Providing nest boxes may attract Western Bluebirds to nest at Sunset Dunes which, in turn, could enhance the experience of park visitors.



American Barn Owl

Tyto furcata

HABITAT: varied open areas

PRIMARY FOOD SOURCE: nocturnal rodents

Though nocturnal and secretive, several American Barn Owls were detected at Sunset Dunes during the survey period and observed foraging on both the west and east sides of the park. American Barn Owls are year-round residents in San Francisco and they likely nest in the vicinity of Sunset Dunes. Artificial lighting, rodenticide ingestion and automobile collisions are among the urban hazards that can impact this species. Creating safe conditions for owls will encourage

their regular presence at Sunset Dunes, and will help to keep rodent populations in balance.



Say's Phoebe

Sayornis saya

HABITAT: open, dry scrubland

PRIMARY FOOD SOURCE: flying insects

Common in sparsely vegetated areas throughout western North America, the Say's Phoebe is a winter resident in San Francisco. At Sunset Dunes several individuals overwintered during the survey period, preferring the dune habitat on the west side of the park. Restoration of the native coastal dune scrub plant community will likely benefit this species.



Western Snowy Plover

Anarhynchus nivosus

HABITAT: open, sandy areas adjacent to water

PRIMARY FOOD SOURCE: beach-dwelling invertebrates

Federally listed as a threatened species, Western Snowy Plovers reside on Ocean Beach for much of the year (only absent during the nesting season, approximately May 15 thru July 1).

Though they do not have a presence within Sunset Dunes proper, they are direct neighbors, and all of Ocean Beach adjacent to Sunset Dunes is within

the GGNRA's Snowy Plover Protection Area. Snowy Plovers and other shore birds can be impacted by the behaviors of park visitors, and it is imperative that SFRPD, FoSD, and all other groups are supportive of NPS policies and values. The cultivation of an environmental stewardship ethos among park visitors will serve to protect Snowy Plovers and the many species that call Ocean Beach home.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Environmental stewardship supports both wildlife and human wellbeing. Responsible management of resources can promote ecological health, ensure sustainability, and shape positive cultural attitudes. The following stewardship actions will support avian abundance and diversity at Sunset Dunes:

Cultivate and Promote Environmental Literacy. Sunset Dunes provides excellent opportunities to engage and educate park visitors about the natural world. Environmental literacy translates knowledge into action and empowers individuals to be responsible stewards of the environment. Connecting people to nature promotes physical and mental wellness, social coherence, and pro-environmental behaviors.

Improve Signage, Trails, and Wayfinding. Both the coastal scrub habitat within Sunset Dunes, and the dunes themselves just west of the park, are sensitive ecosystems that can be impacted by human disturbance. Keeping park visitors on approved corridors to access Ocean Beach, and keeping visitors off the most sensitive restored dune areas requires better design and trail marking. Once better trail and wayfinding systems are in place, enforcement by parks staff is necessary to keep the balance between wildlife protection and park visitor experience.

Establish and Maintain Native Plant Communities. Native plants are the foundation of a healthy ecosystem, providing food and shelter for local fauna. Because of their long evolutionary history here, native plants generally support more insect species than exotic plants, which benefits birds and everything up the food chain. Establishing and maintaining site appropriate native plant communities at Sunset Dunes can increase resource availability and lead to a greater diversity and abundance of birds and other wildlife. Native habitat areas should be well defined and sufficiently protected from trampling to ensure safe nesting and foraging areas.

Adopt Bird-friendly Landscape Maintenance Practices. Mindful gardening practices can reduce potential harms to birds and other wildlife, especially during the nesting season (between February 1st and Aug 31st). Here are some Best Management Practices recommendations:

Landscape Maintenance Practices to Protect Wildlife Habitat

Minimize pruning to provide shelter from the elements and protection from predators.

Avoid premature removal of flowers, fruit and seed-heads that provide a food source.

Leave some leaf litter for insects and other soil-dwelling organisms that are prey for ground-foraging wildlife.

Avoid shearing plants, and prune to promote fruit and seed production.

Maintain the natural form of a plant to increase cover for wildlife.

Keep turf as high as possible to support birds that forage for insects in lawn areas. Or consider native ground cover as an alternative to turf.

Leave some dead logs or branches in areas that may be of less aesthetic importance.

Consider a sign that informs the public when deferred maintenance is in progress to support nesting wildlife.

Avoid using pesticides and other products harmful to untargeted wildlife, and avoid combination pesticides and fertilizer products.

As much as possible, use hand and mechanic tools when birds are nesting to reduce noise impacts that may startle immature birds from their nests.

Use wildlife-friendly plants (purchased from credible sources) and vegetation of different heights that are appropriate to site and climate conditions.

Choose plants that have a range of bloom times and that reduce irrigation and fertilizer needs.

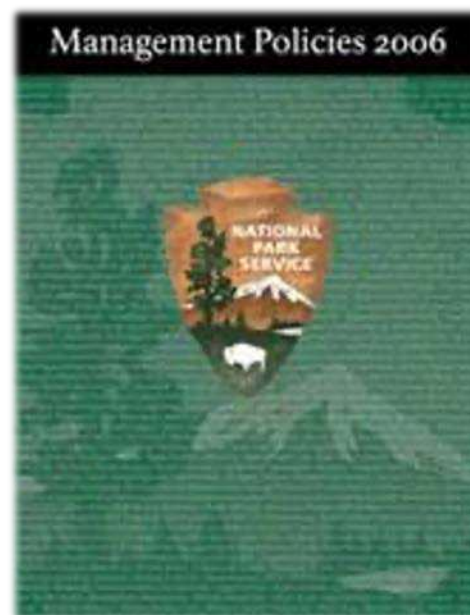
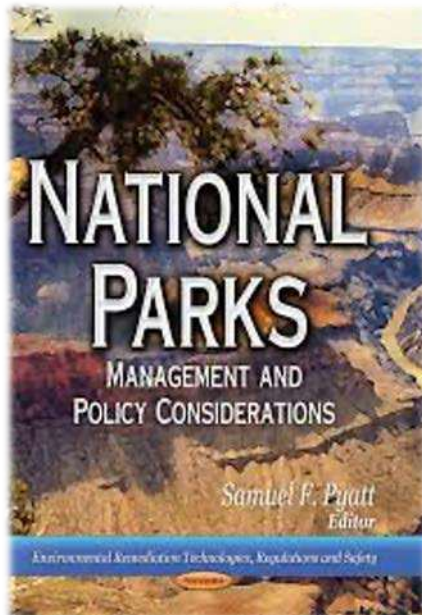
Limit use of non-native species that do not support wildlife.

Manage irrigation to reduce runoff.

Consider creating living fences or camouflaging unattractive fences with native vegetation.

SOURCE: Tree Care for Birds and Other Wildlife,
www.treecareforbirds.com

Align Policies to Compliment National Park Values. While some bird species routinely move between Sunset Dunes and the adjacent areas, others, like the Western Snowy Plover, reside solely within the GGNRA and do not enter Sunset Dunes proper. However, these species can be impacted by policies and practices influencing the attitudes and behaviors of park visitors. Consistent policies and messaging will cultivate positive sentiments towards the protection of natural resources. The maintenance of a collaborative and complementary relationship between the SFRPD and the NPS can serve to advance and sustain the best practices of environmental stewardship.



Use Best Practices to Address and Manage Artificial Light At Night (ALAN). Minimizing light pollution at Sunset Dunes can benefit wildlife and people. Artificial light, whether from streetlights, automobile headlights, or other sources, can be disruptive to local wildlife, affecting both diurnal and nocturnal species. Additionally, artificial light can diminish the ability of people to experience the night sky. Few places in San Francisco offer opportunities for astronomy-based recreation, Sunset Dunes could be one. It is recommended that NPS outdoor lighting standards are adopted for Sunset Dunes.



“The night sky is a natural resource. A naturally dark night sky is more than a scenic canvas; it is part of a complex ecosystem that supports an environment for natural processes to occur unimpeded for national park visitors to explore and learn about celestial objects, space research, and the human connection to the sky. The night sky yields scientific insights into our complex natural world. In such a landscape, inappropriately applied or overused light is potentially harmful to animals and plants.”

-National Park Service-

Address the Intentional and Unintentional Feeding of Wildlife.

Feeding wildlife can disrupt ecological balance and is not consistent with SFRPD and NPS policies. Observations indicate that some park visitors are intentionally feeding ravens and crows. Increasingly common in San Francisco in recent decades, the adaptable and opportunistic Common Raven and American Crow have a ubiquitous presence at Sunset Dunes. Among the smartest of bird species, ravens and crows can be crafty scavengers and predators, and supplemental feeding by humans is likely to have detrimental impacts to other species. Without proactive intervention this adverse behavior is likely to continue.





SURVEY RESULTS

METHOD

In April of 2025, eBird hotspots were established for *Sunset Dunes Park, North (Pacheco to Lincoln)* and *Sunset Dunes Park, South (Pacheco to Sloat)*, thus launching a citizen science driven database of presence and seasonality for bird species observed from within the park. Much of the data were collected during regular, comprehensive surveys done on weekday mornings, traversing the entire west and east laterals of the park by foot. Birds within visible or auditory range of the observer were documented. Additionally, incidental observations were made and recorded during informal outings and during organized events such as the October full moon nature walk.

All observations were made from within Sunset Dunes and include birds in nearby adjacent areas of the greater habitat corridor. While some bird species routinely move between Sunset Dunes and the adjacent areas, others do not enter Sunset Dunes proper but are easily observable from within the park.

SPECIES LIST

The following table lists all 88 species observed from within Sunset Dunes during the survey period (April 2025 through April 2026) and a brief description of the species occurrence relative to Sunset Dunes.

Resident = lives within Sunset Dunes, relies on the habitat for food and shelter.

Visitor = lives in the greater vicinity, is attracted to the habitat for some resources.

Neighbor = lives in habitat areas that are adjacent to Sunset Dunes.

Summer = refers to the time-frame within which breeding migratory species arrive, nest, fledge and depart. Locally, the time-frame for this annual event is from mid-January to mid-September.

Winter = refers to the time-frame within which overwintering migratory species arrive, reside during the non-breeding season, and depart. Locally, the time-frame for this annual event is early July to mid-May.

Flyover = uses airspace within the corridor.

Offshore = westward area beyond the surf zone, observable from seawall promenade.

Table 1.

SPECIES	OCCURRENCE RELATIVE TO SUNSET DUNES
Brant	irregular offshore, rarely on Ocean Beach
Canada Goose	irregular flyover
Mallard	irregular flyover
Surf Scoter	winter neighbor in surf zone and offshore
Common Goldeneye	irregular flyover
Common Merganser	irregular offshore
Rock Pigeon	year-round visitor, nests in local neighborhood
Eurasian Collared-Dove	irregular visitor, occurs in low numbers throughout local neighborhood
Mourning Dove	year-round visitor, nests in local neighborhood
Anna's Hummingbird	year-round resident, multiple nesting territories within Sunset Dunes
Black Oystercatcher	irregular offshore, rarely on Ocean Beach
Black-bellied Plover	irregular neighbor on Ocean Beach
Killdeer	irregular neighbor on western dunes and Ocean Beach
Semipalmated Plover	irregular neighbor on Ocean Beach
Western Snowy Plover	winter resident neighbor on Ocean Beach
Hudsonian Whimbrel	winter resident neighbor on Ocean Beach

Table 1, continued.

SPECIES	OCCURRENCE RELATIVE TO SUNSET DUNES
Long-billed Curlew	winter resident neighbor on Ocean Beach
Marbled Godwit	winter resident neighbor on Ocean Beach
Red-necked Phalarope	irregular offshore, rarely on Ocean Beach
Willet	irregular winter neighbor on Ocean Beach
Ruddy Turnstone	irregular winter neighbor on Ocean Beach
Sanderling	winter resident neighbor on Ocean Beach
Baird's Sandpiper	irregular winter neighbor on Ocean Beach
Least Sandpiper	irregular winter neighbor on Ocean Beach
Western Sandpiper	irregular winter neighbor on Ocean Beach
Parasitic Jaeger	irregular offshore
Pigeon Guillemot	irregular offshore
Common Murre	irregular offshore
Bonaparte's Gull	irregular winter neighbor on Ocean Beach
Heermann's Gull	summer neighbor on Ocean Beach
Short-billed Gull	winter neighbor on Ocean Beach
Ring-billed Gull	irregular winter neighbor on Ocean Beach
Western Gull	year-round visitor
California Gull	year-round neighbor on Ocean Beach, occasional flyover
Glaucous-winged Gull	winter neighbor on Ocean Beach
Iceland Gull	irregular winter neighbor on Ocean Beach
Caspian Tern	summer neighbor on Ocean Beach
Elegant Tern	summer neighbor on Ocean Beach
Red-throated Loon	seasonally offshore
Common Loon	seasonally offshore
Sooty Shearwater	seasonally offshore
Brandt's Cormorant	offshore
Pelagic Cormorant	offshore
Double-crested Cormorant	flyover
Snowy Egret	irregular neighbor on Ocean Beach
Great Egret	irregular neighbor on Ocean Beach
Brown Pelican	offshore, occasional flyover within habitat corridor
Turkey Vulture	irregular flyover

Table 1, continued.

SPECIES	OCCURRENCE RELATIVE TO SUNSET DUNES
Osprey	irregular flyover
Cooper's Hawk	irregular visitor
Sharp-shinned Hawk	irregular visitor
Red-shouldered Hawk	irregular visitor, though regionally common year-round
Red-tailed Hawk	year-round visitor, regularly forages within Sunset Dunes, nests in greater vicinity
American Barn Owl	nocturnal visitor, known to forage within Sunset Dunes, nests in greater vicinity
Burrowing Owl	irregular visitor, western dunes
Belted Kingfisher	irregular flyover
Nuttall's Woodpecker	irregular visitor, though regionally common year-round
Northern Flicker	irregular visitor
Peregrine Falcon	irregular flyover
Black Phoebe	year-round visitor, regularly forages within Sunset Dunes, nests in greater vicinity
Say's Phoebe	winter resident
American Crow	year-round visitor, regularly forages within Sunset Dunes, nests in greater vicinity
Common Raven	year-round visitor, regularly forages within Sunset Dunes, nests in greater vicinity
Chestnut-backed Chickadee	irregular visitor, though regionally common year-round
Tree Swallow	irregular flyover
Violet-green Swallow	irregular flyover
Barn Swallow	summer visitor, forages within Sunset Dunes, nests in greater vicinity
Cliff Swallow	irregular flyover
Bushtit	irregular visitor, though regionally common year-round
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	irregular winter visitor, though regionally common
European Starling	year-round visitor, nests in local neighborhood
Western Bluebird	year-round visitor, regularly forages within Sunset Dunes, nests in greater vicinity
American Robin	irregular visitor, though regionally common year-round
House Sparrow	year-round visitor, nests in local neighborhood
House Finch	year-round visitor, regularly forages within Sunset Dunes, nests in greater vicinity
Lesser Goldfinch	irregular visitor, though regionally common year-round
Dark-eyed Junco	irregular visitor, though regionally common year-round
White-crowned Sparrow	year-round resident, multiple nesting territories within Sunset Dunes
Golden-crowned Sparrow	irregular winter visitor, though regionally common
Song Sparrow	irregular visitor, though regionally common year-round

Table 1, continued.

SPECIES	OCCURRENCE RELATIVE TO SUNSET DUNES
California Towhee	year-round visitor, nests in local neighborhood
Western Meadowlark	winter resident, western dunes
Red-winged Blackbird	winter visitor
Tricolored Blackbird	irregular winter visitor
Brown-headed Cowbird	year-round visitor, opportunistic parasitic nester
Brewer's Blackbird	winter resident
Yellow-rumped Warbler	winter resident in low numbers
Townsend's Warbler	irregular winter visitor, though regionally common



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