







BirdReturns

2025 BIRDRETURNS YEAR-IN-REVIEW

Creating flooded habitat for migratory birds where and when they need it most

INTRODUCTION

California's Central Valley plays a crucial role in the state's water system, agriculture, and expanding communities, while also serving as an essential stopover for migrating birds. Two hundred years ago, millions of acres of wetlands across Central Valley supported vast numbers of waterbirds, but over **95% have since disappeared**, resulting in steep population declines. Even so, millions of birds continue to migrate through the region each year, relying on the remaining wetlands and flooded farmland to survive.

To address the loss of wetlands, BirdReturns was launched in 2014 as the Migratory Bird Conservation Partnership's cornerstone program, which works closely with wetland managers and farmers to provide much-needed habitat for shorebirds and waterbirds at a time when it is needed most.



HOW IT STARTED

1 Program In Sacramento Valley

33 Participating Rice Farmers

10,000 Acres of Habitat

TODAYS IMPACT (SINCE 2014)

5 Programs Across Central Valley and Suisun

200+ Participating Farmers and Wetland Owners

200,000+ Acres of Habitat

MORE THAN 1.9 MILLION BIRDS SUPPORTED!


Western Sandpiper © Tim Bowman

Today, BirdReturns is powered by a strong partnership among Audubon California, The Nature Conservancy, and Point Blue Conservation Science. Since 2022, California Department of Fish and Wildlife has been a major funder and collaborator, working to provide a cost-effective wildlife habitat marketplace designed to fill the habitat gap and increase shallow flooding on the landscape for migratory birds. Before receiving the large BirdReturns grant, CDFW awarded a 1-year emergency drought grant to the partnership to get habitat on the ground from 2022-2023.

Additionally, the program's success would not be possible without the dedicated farmers, wetland managers, agencies, and funders, demonstrating how working lands can benefit both people and wildlife. These strategically managed habitats improve water and air quality, reduce flood risk, enhance carbon storage, and provide critical habitat for species such as the western sandpipers, who migrate over 4,000 miles twice a year, and California's threatened giant garter snake, highlighting the growing need for resilient, multi-functional landscapes.

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2025 PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

In 2025, **BirdReturns celebrated its 10-year anniversary** and its biggest year yet providing nearly 50,000 acres of habitat across the Central Valley and supporting hundreds of thousands of birds between all Farmland and Wetland programs. In one decade, the program has grown into one of the most innovative and impactful working lands conservation programs in California, and continues to evolve, adapt, and scale, thanks to the commitment of land managers, researchers, and partners statewide.

MEET OUR TEAM!



Xerónimo Castañeda Ashley Seufzer Jodi Pinder Ian Souza-Cole

We're proud to announce the highlights of the 2025 BirdReturns year!

The following highlights summarize all Farmland and Wetland programs in 2025

49K+
Acres of habitat created across all programs

147K+
Birds Counted (across 1,100+ surveys)

168
Bird species recorded







ADVANCING SCIENCE OF BIRDRETURNS

Exploring New Crop Types!

As part of its pilot phase, the BirdReturns Farmland program enrolled large tomato fields with buried drip irrigation systems to evaluate innovative approaches for creating suitable wildlife habitat. In addition, pollinator-friendly cover crops were planted to assess their potential benefits to soil health.

What's in the Mud? Invertebrate Sampling

Now in its second year, our invertebrate research evaluates how BirdReturns management practices shapes shorebird food resources. The team sampled 44 ponds in Sacramento Valley for both wetland and farmland settings to understand how food webs will guide future habitat design and timing decisions.

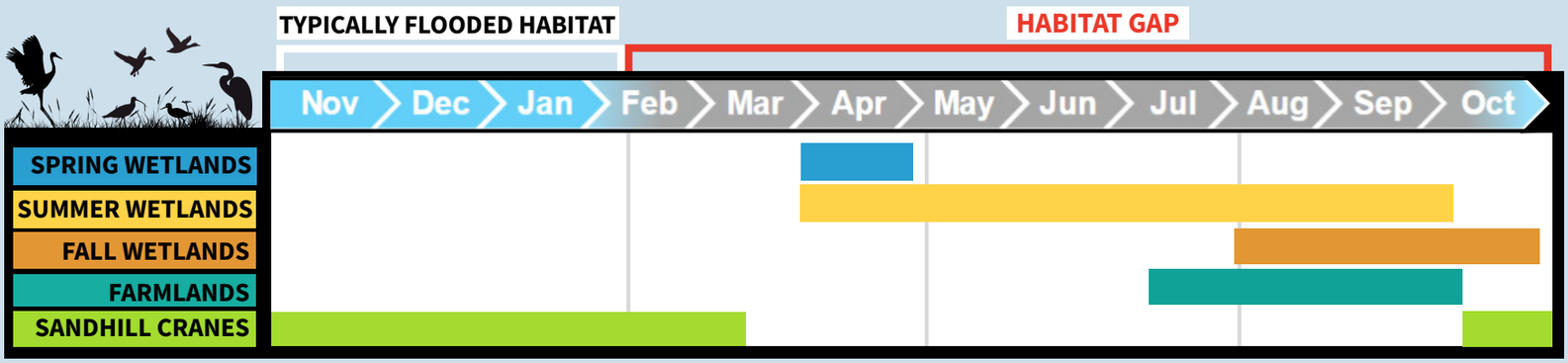
The People Perspective: A Social Science Study

This year BirdReturns launched the first social science study, designed to better understand land managers' values, motivations, and relationships to conservation programs. These insights will help refine how we engage with land managers and inform the development of future incentive programs.

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BIRDRETURNS PROGRAM TIMELINE



BirdReturns aims to create the habitat needed to support bird populations in the Central Valley through adaptive programs that responds to the Valley's changing conditions during both wet and dry years. Designed to overlap and complement one another, these programs address habitat needs of birds through all life stages, using the best available science and guidance from the **Central Valley Joint Venture's Habitat Implementation Plan**. Together, they work to fill the critical habitat gaps between March and November, when wetland habitat is scarce.

In addition, the programs within BirdReturns complement other conservation programs operating in the Valley, including Bid4Birds and The Presley Program.

CLICK ON THE LOGO

BirdReturns

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE PROGRAMS



Northern Pintails © Jim Morris

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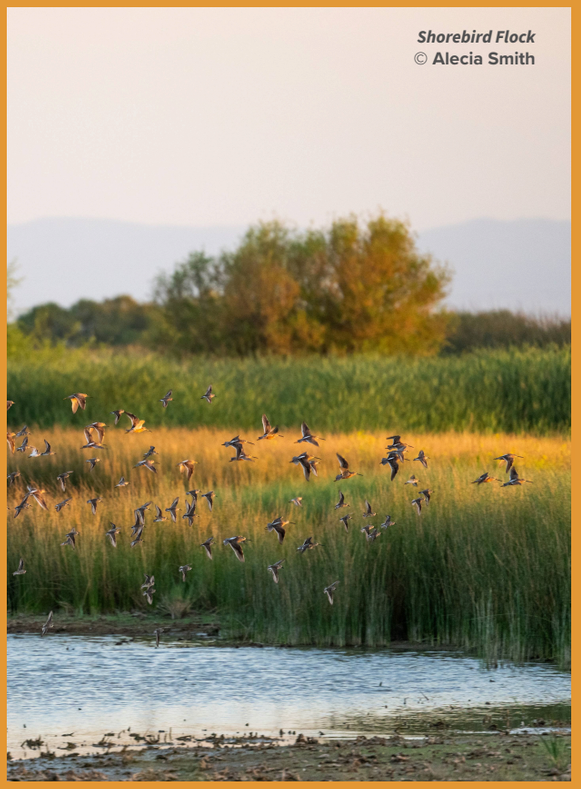
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Long-billed Dowitcher and Black-necked Stilt
© Jodi Pinder



American Avocet
© Briana Magner



Shorebird Flock
© Alecia Smith



Yellow-headed Blackbirds
© Jodi Pinder



Greater Sandhill Cranes
© Scott Hein



Spring Wetland
© Ashley Seufzer



Mallards
© Robert Walsh

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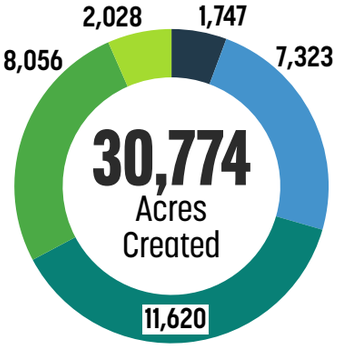
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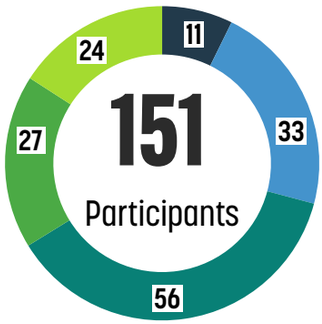
2025 WETLAND PROGRAM REGIONAL TOTALS

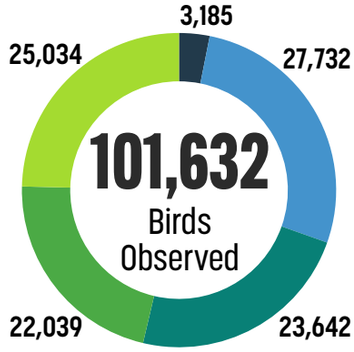
The following graphs summarize the Spring, Summer, and Fall Wetland Programs in 2025

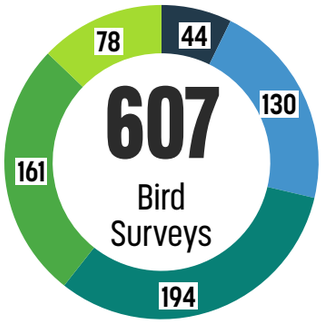
KEY

Sacramento Valley | Suisun | San Joaquin | Yolo- Delta | Tulare









2025 REGIONAL WETLAND SUMMARY



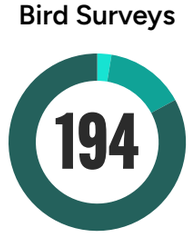
Data Note: *This report is based on preliminary data subject to change and was collected using two survey methods. Results are limited to surveyed locations and do not represent entire wetland areas.*

- *Point Counts: collected data on waterbirds within a 200 meter radius of a fixed point.*
- *Area Search: a walking survey method used to record all bird species and breeding bird data within a delineated summer wetland survey area; songbirds were recorded exclusively during area search surveys.*

Sacramento Valley

Spring | Summer | Fall



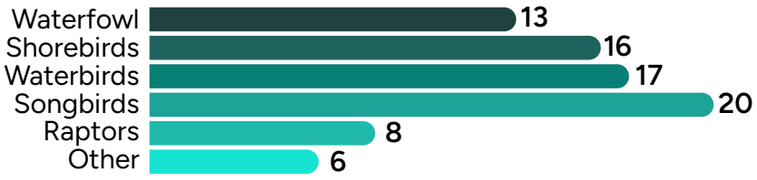




Species Observed in 2025

15 Confirmed Breeding Species

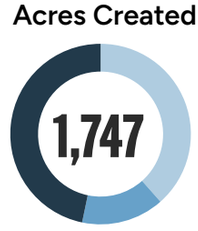
119 Species Recorded

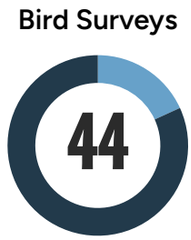


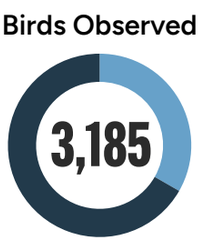
Other includes: Corvids, Kingfisher, Gulls, Terns, and Galliforms

Yolo-Delta

Spring | Summer | Fall



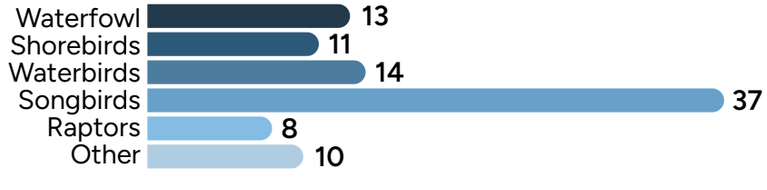




Species Observed in 2025

5 Confirmed Breeding Species

93 Species Recorded



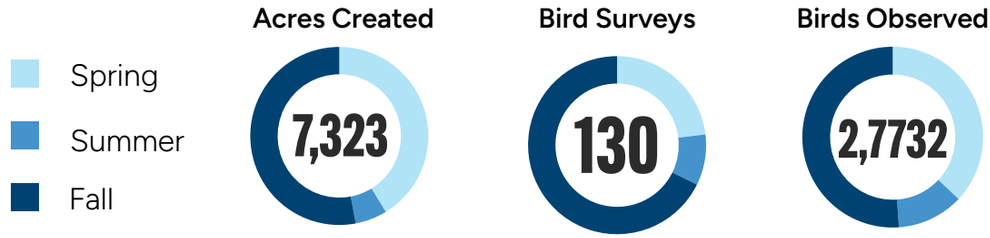
Other includes: Corvids, Kingfisher, Gulls, Terns, and Galliforms

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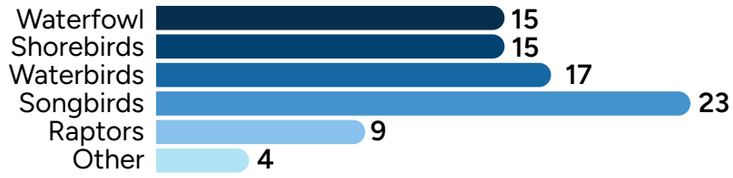
San Joaquin Valley



Species Observed in 2025

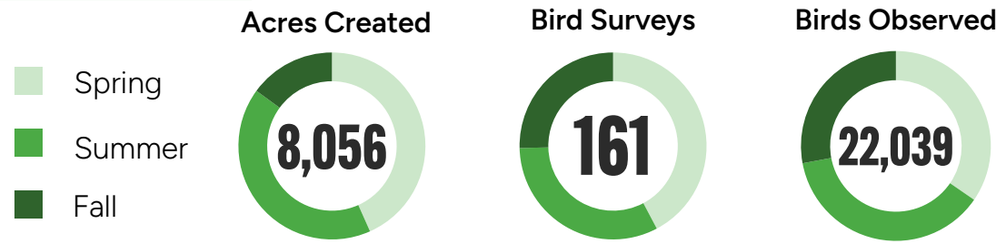
7 Confirmed Breeding Species

83 Species Recorded



Other includes: Raven, Nighthawk, Pheasant, and Sandhill Cranes

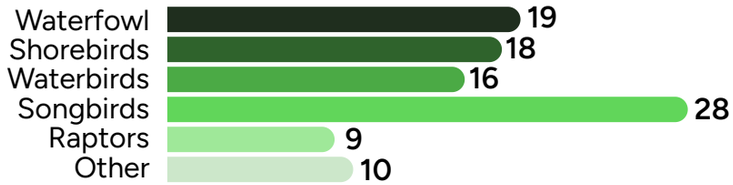
Suisun Marsh



Species Observed in 2025

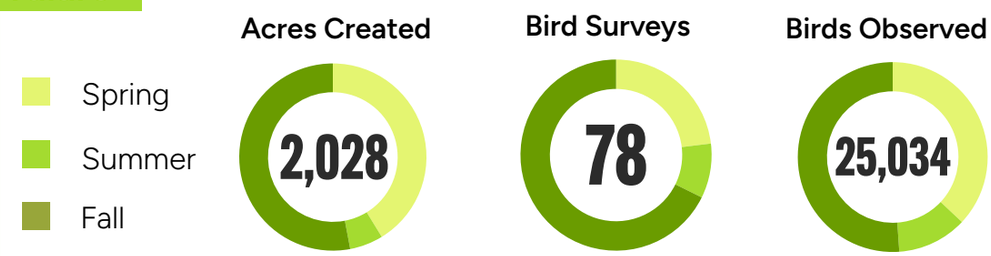
17 Confirmed Breeding Species

100 Species Recorded



Other includes: Corvids, Kingfisher, Gulls, Terns, Shirke, and Galliforms

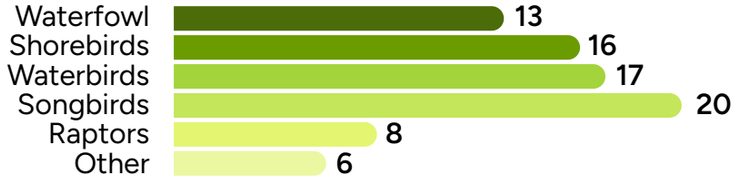
Tulare



Species Observed in 2025

16 Confirmed Breeding Species

80 Species Recorded



Other includes: Corvids, Gulls, Terns, Shirke, and Galliforms

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WHAT THE NUMBERS TELL US

Wetlands support abundance and diversity.

Many species benefit from BirdRetuns wetland habitat. In 2025, 146 bird species were seen on enrolled wetlands, including 21 shorebirds, 24 waterfowl, 19 waterbirds, 54 songbirds, 13 raptors, and 15 other landbirds.

Farmlands remain a powerful tool for conservation.

Nearly 400 surveys in Yolo–Delta and the Sacramento Valley recorded more than 33,000 birds in fall-flooded farmlands — dominated by small migratory shorebirds like Least Sandpipers, the world's smallest shorebird.

Crane habitat supports far more than cranes.

Although the Sandhill Crane program continues through December, early counts already show thousands of cranes alongside even larger numbers of waterfowl and shorebirds using the same fields.

Brooding waterfowl are thriving in summer wetlands.

BirdReturns' summer wetlands delivered significant benefits for locally breeding ducks, with waterfowl observed at 100% of enrolled wetlands. Surveys found nests or ducklings of 7 waterfowl species- including Gadwall, Cinnamon Teal, Wood Duck, and Mallards.

Here's what landowners are saying about BirdReturns

"BirdReturns helps us to deliver year-round benefits to shorebirds, waterfowl, and other wildlife on our wetland conservation property in the Suisun Marsh. It's a win for wildlife!"

Suisun Marsh Participant

"BirdReturns have helped our small duck club to pursue habitat improvement projects. The extra income from their programs is plowed into the property, which in turn benefits not only the shorebirds, but the ducks as well. A classic win/win! "

San Joaquin Participant

"Any time you can find some money that can help you stretch your dollars to do more for habitat and wildlife, that's kind of a no-brainer. Without wildlife and without wild things, so too will we go."

Yolo-Delta Participant



Least Sandpiper © John Troth

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THANK YOU TO EVERY

land manager, partner organization, field researcher, and supporter who helped make 2025 a year of meaningful habitat wins.

Additional thanks to California Department of Fish and Wildlife for their funding and support.



Dowitchers © Ryan McLaughlin