

## Point-count Protocol for Surveying Shorebirds along Transects

**PLEASE READ:** The usefulness of data collected as part of these surveys requires that all observers closely follow the protocol outlined here. Please read the protocol and associated documents (area description(s), map(s), and data forms) thoroughly before conducting a survey. If you have any questions please contact your area coordinator or Khara Strum ([kstrum@pointblue.org](mailto:kstrum@pointblue.org)). Thank you in advance for your hard work and enthusiasm for birds. This protocol and other documents recommended below can be found on The Pacific Flyway Shorebird Survey webpage under Resources ([www.prbo.org/pfss/resources](http://www.prbo.org/pfss/resources)).

### PURPOSE

These surveys are designed to obtain data on annual variation, long-term trends, and habitat associations of wintering shorebird use of the agricultural and wetland landscapes in the Pacific Flyway. These data will be combined annually with comparable data from other sites across California and the Pacific Flyway to assess spatial and temporal patterns of shorebird abundance at a broader scale.

### SURVEY DESIGN

Each transect consists of a series of fixed-radius point count surveys at pre-determined survey locations. Observers drive a predefined 10-mile transect (please see your road transect map) to each of 20 survey locations (some transects may be less than 10-miles and have less than 20 locations). Survey locations are located approximately 0.5 miles along each transect. In the process of developing the survey transects, the survey locations were evaluated for safety and visibility. Some locations have been adjusted away from the 0.5 mile locations and this is noted in the point-count transect narrative. At each survey location, observers count all shorebirds and raptors within a 0.1 mile (160 meter) radius and record survey area characteristics. Surveys are conducted once annually during the survey window (November 15 – December 15).

### IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER

- **Inclement Weather:** Surveys should not be conducted in weather with strong winds (>24 mph), heavy fog (<200m visibility), or steady rain.
- **Observers:** Under most conditions, surveys should be conducted by one observer. Having multiple observers counting simultaneously may bias results. We recommend working in pairs where one person counts birds (Observer) and a second person records data (Data Recorder). In large areas or areas with large numbers of birds, additional observers can split the count effort (by species or areas) to enable efficient counting. The observers (people counting) and data recorders should be listed on the data sheet and entered into the California Avian Data Center (CADC).
- **Survey Etiquette:** In most cases it is appropriate to get out your vehicle to count birds. If you risk flushing birds, please count from your car if you have appropriate visibility.
- **Pre-survey Scouting:** We encourage you to drive your transect prior to the day of the survey to familiarize yourself with the transect, surrounding environment and to assess potential obstructions and/or transect diversions.
- **Survey Distance Calibration:** Observers should calibrate their distance estimation prior to conducting surveys. The point count circle radius (0.1 mile) can easily be estimated by stopping at a

utility pole or other obvious landmark driving 0.1 mile, then getting out of your vehicle to look back at the starting landmark. Do this several times to get a sense of what 0.1 miles looks like in the field. You can then test yourself by predicting where 0.1 miles should be in front of you, then drive to that point and see if it was 0.1 mile. With practice, you will get used to estimating the 0.1 mile count circle radius.

- **Think Safety!** Some survey transects will be along gravel roads with low traffic volume, others will be along main roads with highway speeds where we feel there are adequate pull-offs for conducting surveys. The increased speed and traffic volume of some roads make them more hazardous. When conducting surveys please use the following common sense rules:
  - Use hazards when driving below the speed limit or looking for pull-out
  - Wait until traffic has cleared before moving around your vehicle
  - Do not enter private property even if it improves your view
  - Finally, do not survey if it is not safe!
- **Datasheet:** Please refer to accompanying datasheet along with this protocol.

### SURVEY PROTOCOL AND DATA COLLECTION

Begin each point-count transect at the starting location and indicate the **Date** (mm/dd/yyyy), **Observer(s)** who counted birds and **Data Recorder** on the datasheet. Record the observer's full name[s] – multiple observers should only be recorded if the primary observer changes during the transect or if a survey area was split between two observers. Then proceed in your vehicle along point-count transect to each survey location as indicated on your map and defined in the "Point-count Transect Narrative" document.

Begin each count of each survey area by indicating the **Survey Area** and **Start Time** on the datasheet (24-hr clock; e.g. 3PM = 1500). Then, count and identify to species all shorebirds using each survey area within the survey area (defined by the 0.1 mile [160-meter] radius circle) as indicated on the point-count transect map including areas on both sides of the road. This includes birds that enter or leave the survey area during the count. For a shorebird to be considered "using" the survey area, it needs to be on the ground within the defined survey area for at least part of the time it takes to do the survey. Thus, shorebirds that fly over, but do not land in, the survey area should NOT be counted. Keep track of bird movements and do not to double-count shorebirds if they leave and then re-enter the survey area or if they fly from one side of the road to the other. Also, record the number and species of raptors that are in, perched adjacent to, or foraging over the survey area. Record **Species** in the appropriate column of the datasheet. The total number of each species observed during the count of each survey area should be entered into the **Count** column, regardless of whether the observer tracks sub-tallies in the **tally** column for each species (visit [www.prbo.org/pfss/resources](http://www.prbo.org/pfss/resources) for data recording tips).

Conduct each survey from the pre-defined survey location along the point-count transect (see your point-count transect map). *It is critical to the validity of the analyses that the survey occur at the same survey location each year. Please do your very best to ensure that this occurs by following the Point-count Transect Narrative associated with each transect that details the transect route and pull-outs.*

There is no maximum time limit for counting birds. However, survey areas that appear to have 0 birds should be scanned for 2 minutes before continuing to the next survey location on the transect. Once all birds in the survey area have been recorded, the count is considered complete. At this point, note the **End Time** on the datasheet and thereafter NO additional birds should be recorded for that survey area.

### Counting Methods

It usually will be possible to make exact counts of small groups of birds (<50 individuals), but estimation may be needed for larger flocks. However, it may not be possible to identify a few or, sometimes, even large numbers of shorebirds because of poor lighting, quick or distant views, similarity of species, or other factors. Try to count or estimate numbers by whatever technique works best as listed here in order of preference (also see tips on how to estimate flock size at [www.prbo.org/pfss](http://www.prbo.org/pfss)):

- Identify species and their abundance (i.e., 148 Western Sandpipers, 153 Dunlin, 308 Least Sandpipers)
- Estimate the proportion of species in flock and use the proportions and total flock size to calculate the total of each species (i.e., 600 birds: 25% Western, 25% Dunlin, 50% Least = 150 Western, 150 Dunlin, and 300 Least). **Note:** only do this calculation if you are confident the proportions are accurate. Please use a mixed-species code if necessary (see next bullet).
- Estimate size of flock and species present (i.e., 600 birds, composed of Western Sandpipers, Least Sandpipers and Dunlin). Please see the species list provided. Please see the species list provided at the end of the protocol for commonly recorded species and mixed-species flocks.

Following bird observations fill out the remainder of the datasheet completely, including **Survey Area Conditions** before proceeding to the next survey area. Please fill out a datasheet completely **even if no birds were detected**. This will help us determine the total effort expended during each survey, and knowing that zero birds were observed are important data for determining the conditions that influence bird use.

### SURVEY AREA CONDITIONS

Record weather and habitat conditions for each survey area using the following codes.

#### WEATHER

Wind speed (Wind): Do not conduct surveys when wind speed is > 24mph (category 5 below).

0 – calm: smoke rises vertically (<1 mph)

1 – light air: smoke drifts (1 – 3 mph)

2 – light breeze: felt on face, leaves rustle (4 – 7 mph)

3 – gentle breeze: leaves and small twigs in constant motion (8 – 12 mph)

4 – moderate breeze: dust, leaves, and loose paper rise up; small branches move (13 – 18 mph)

5 – fresh breeze: small trees sway (19 – 24 mph)

6 – strong breeze: large branches in motion (25 – 30 mph)

Cloud cover (Cloud):

Enter numeric percentage (0 – 100) indicating the of amount of the sky covered by clouds

Precipitation (Precip): Do not conduct surveys in heavy rain, but if the survey is conducted despite rain please record 3

0 – none

1 – light intermittent; mist, sprinkle, drizzle

2 – fog

3 – steady rain

## CHARACTERISITICS

**Cover Type (Type):** Document the cover type(s) that best describes the **dominant characteristic(s)** of the survey area. Record the one or two cover types **that each comprise at least 40% of the survey area**; if no cover type meets this criterion, describe the composition of the cover types in the notes section of the datasheet and leave field blank.

- 1 – **Wetland:** open water with tules, cattails, and some grasses and sedges.
- 2 – **Rice:** flooded or dry field with clearly defined internal levees; if dry, the field may be tilled or have standing stubble.
- 3 – **Pasture:** predominantly grasses; if irrigated it will be green year round.
- 4 – **Hay:** various types of grass/herbs mowed and cured for fodder.
- 5 – **Irrigated Row Crop:** likely dirt field with raised beds or with standing stubble (e.g. corn, tomatoes, cotton)
- 6 – **Winter Crop:** emergent green vegetation from tilled soil (e.g. winter wheat)
- 7 – **Freshwater Lake/Pond:** large body of freshwater including reservoirs
- 8 – **Evaporation Pond:** settling pond constructed to collect agricultural wastewater
- 9 – **Wastewater Pond:** pond associated with wastewater from sewage or other industrial operations
- 10 – **Orchard:** trees (e.g. almonds, apples etc.)
- 11 – **Forest:** extensive woody vegetation, non-agricultural (e.g. willows in riparian)
- 12 – **Developed:** houses, cemetery, parking lot, other human-made structures etc.
- 13 – **Salt Pond:** impounded water (without vegetation) associated with salt production. This includes the levee around the salt pond
- 14 – **Tidal Salt Marsh:** coastal marsh with vegetation inundated by high tides
- 15 – **Tidal Mud Flat:** areas of mud, sand or gravel (generally lacking vegetation) alternately exposed and inundated by tides. If flats are covered at the time of the survey, the area should be considered Open Bay (see protocol).
- 16 – **Beach:** sandy shoreline
- 17 – **Rocky Shoreline:** includes riprap, i.e., embankments lined with rocks or chunks of concrete to limit erosion.
- 18 – **Agricultural field** (non-orchard) includes categories 3, 4, 5 and 6 from above. Use this category only when unable to determine a more specific field type.
- 19 – **Bay/Ocean:** open water within a tidal system. Includes waters over subtidal areas, water covering tidal flats at time of survey, and the ocean.
- 20 – **Diked Salt Marsh:** muted (not completely open) or non-tidal (entirely diked) salt marsh that usually includes some salt marsh vegetation. Muted tidal areas have a narrow break in the dike (or a tidal culvert or gate) allowing tidal flow to slowly enter or leave the diked area. In such cases, high and low tides are delayed relative to the adjacent portions of the bay. The proportion of tidal flat or marsh vegetation may depend on various factors, including time since restoration of tidal action, slope or profile of area, degree of subsidence, etc. This type includes salt ponds recently restored to tidal action.
- 21 – **Levee**
- 22 – **Islands**
- 23 – **Lagoon:** saline, alkaline, or fresh water pools separated from a main body of water by a shoal; pooled water may be from waves washing over the shoal, waters stranded by declining lake levels, or water from drains or streams that pools up behind beaches or other shoreline features. Lagoon shorelines may be barren or may support marsh plants or trees.
- 24 – **Saline Lake:** landlocked lake with high concentrations of mineral salts (saline or alkaline); e.g. Salton Sea.
- 99 – **Other:** describe in notes

**Area Surveyed (Visible Area):** Because visual obstructions (e.g. levee, tall vegetation, distance) may limit your ability to survey some portions of the survey area from the survey location, it is important to record the percent of the survey area you could see and subsequently count. If you cannot see over (e.g. vegetation >5ft tall) or through vegetation it is blocking part of the survey area and should be accounted for by reducing the Visible Area. However do not reduce the visible area if there is short vegetation obscuring the ground but that does not block your view. Enter numeric percentage: (0 – 100) -OR- U: Cannot Determine

**Percent Flooded, Percent Bare Ground, Percent Vegetated**

*\*The following 3 variables should NOT sum to greater than 100% but will often sum to 100%.*

When estimating proportions of these variables, it may be useful to mentally divide the survey or visible area into a grid to better visualize the extent of each. Another option is to sketch the extent of the flooded, vegetated, and bare areas on your map.

**Percent Flooded (PercFlood):** Percent of visible area with open standing water; encompasses the sum of flooded fresh or brackish areas, salt ponds, and open bay waters, including tidally inundated areas at the time of the survey.

Enter numeric percentage: (0 – 100) -OR- U: Cannot Determine

**Percent Bare Ground (PercBare):** Percent of visible area with open dirt or mud

Enter numeric percentage: (0 – 100) -OR- U: Cannot Determine

**Percent Vegetated (Perc Veg):** Percent of visible area with vegetation

Enter numeric percentage: (0 – 100) -OR- U: Cannot Determine

**Vegetation Height (VegHt):** Visual estimate of the average vegetation height in the visible survey area. If the survey area is flooded, estimate the height of the vegetation emerging from the water.

- |                |                 |
|----------------|-----------------|
| 0: Bare        | 3: >12 – 18 in. |
| 1: 1 – 6 in.   | 4: >18 – 24 in. |
| 2: >6 – 12 in. | 5: >24 in.      |

**Notes:** Record additional details about factors that may have influenced the accuracy of your count in the notes section of the datasheet. Such factors might include intense disturbance by raptors or large mammals (coyotes, dogs), machinery harvesting crops, crop dusters flying overhead, etc.

**WHAT TO TAKE IN THE FIELD:**

- |                              |             |
|------------------------------|-------------|
| Survey Area Map(s)           | Watch       |
| Protocol                     | Sunscreen   |
| Datasheets                   | Water       |
| Pencils or Permanent Ink Pen | Field guide |
| Binoculars                   | Clipboard   |
| Scope and tripod             |             |

**DATA ENTRY**

Data should be entered directly into the appropriate project in CADC within a few days of the survey. If you have not registered for a CADC account please see the CADC Protocol on the PFSS website (<http://www.prbo.org/pfss/resources>) for instructions on how to register with CADC and enter data into your specific project.

## SHOREBIRD SPECIES IDENTIFICATION

View or download instructional shorebird identification materials on the Pacific Flyway Shorebird Survey website: <http://www.prbo.org/pfss/resources>.

## PACIFIC FLYWAY SHOREBIRD SURVEY SPECIES LIST

The following list contains the primary species of shorebirds, including mixed flocks, and diurnal raptors that may be seen in or around shallow-water habitats in the Pacific Flyway in winter. Note that some of these species may be rare or absent as you move north to south or from the coast to the interior of the state. Also, this list is NOT comprehensive and we ask that you record all shorebirds and diurnal raptors that you identify. The California Avian Data Center (CADC) will allow you to look up the “Species Code” for species that are not listed here (please see the CADC data entry protocol for more information).

### SHOREBIRDS

Black-bellied Plover (BBPL)  
American Golden-Plover (AMGP)  
Pacific Golden-Plover (PAGP)  
Snowy Plover (SNPL)  
Semipalmated Plover (SEPL)  
Killdeer (KILL)  
Mountain Plover (MOPL)  
Black Oystercatcher (BLOY)  
Black-necked Stilt (BNST)  
American Avocet (AMAV)  
Spotted Sandpiper (SPSA)  
Solitary Sandpiper (SOSA)  
Wandering Tattler (WATA)  
Greater Yellowlegs (GRYE)  
Lesser Yellowlegs (LEYE)  
Greater/Lesser Yellowlegs (XYEL)  
Willet (WILL)  
Whimbrel (WHIM)  
Long-billed Curlew (LBCU)  
Whimbrel/Curlew (XNUM)  
Marbled Godwit (MAGO)  
Curlew/Godwit (XCGO)  
Whimbrel/Curlew/Godwit (XWCG)  
Godwit/ Whimbrel/Willet/Curlew (XWNG)  
Ruddy Turnstone (RUTU)  
Black Turnstone (BLTU)  
Surfbird (SURF)  
Red Knot (REKN)  
Sanderling (SAND)  
Semipalmated Sandpiper (SESA)  
Western Sandpiper (WESA)  
Least Sandpiper (LESA)  
Baird's Sandpiper (BASA)  
Pectoral Sandpiper (PESA)

Rock Sandpiper (ROSA)  
Dunlin (DUNL)  
Western/Least Sandpiper (XWLS)  
Western/Least/Dunlin (XWLD)  
Stilt Sandpiper (STSA)  
Ruff (RUFF)  
Short-billed Dowitcher (SBDO)  
Long-billed Dowitcher (LBDO)  
Short-billed/Long-billed Dowitcher (XDOW)  
Wilson's Snipe (WISN)  
Wilson's Phalarope (WIPH)  
Red-necked Phalarope (RNPH)  
Red Phalarope (REPH)  
Wilson's/Red-necked Phalarope (XWRP)  
Wilson's/Red-necked/Red Phalarope (XPHL)

### DIURNAL RAPTORS

Turkey Vulture (TUVU)  
Osprey (OSPR)  
White-tailed Kite (WTKI)  
Bald Eagle (BAEA)  
Northern Harrier (NOHA)  
Sharp-shinned Hawk (SSHA)  
Cooper's Hawk (COHA)  
Sharp-shinned/Cooper's (XSCH)  
Red-shouldered Hawk (RSHA)  
Swainson's Hawk (SWHA)  
Red-tailed Hawk (RTHA)  
Ferruginous Hawk (FEHA)  
Rough-legged Hawk (RLHA)  
Golden Eagle (GOEA)  
American Kestrel (AMKE)  
Merlin (MERL)  
Peregrine Falcon (PEFA)  
Prairie Falcon (PRFA)