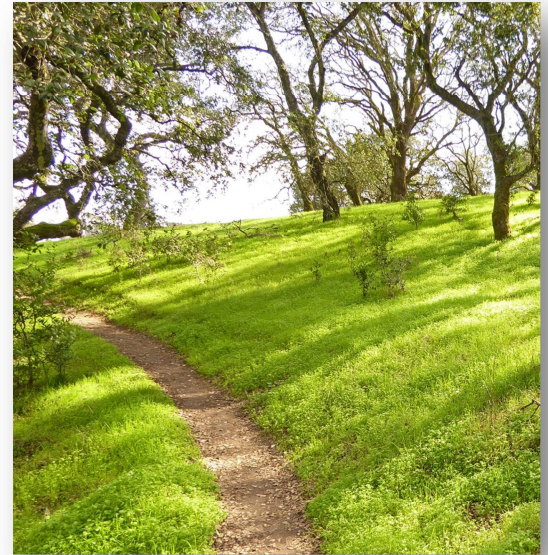


Deer Island is not exactly an island, at least not anymore. These days it is a lightly-used open space preserve in eastern Novato, centered around a hill which rises from the surrounding lowlands which were once part of the Petaluma River delta, and which can still occasionally get pretty soggy in wet winters. But this hill's topographical aspirations suggest one of Deer Island's prime attractions: its enclosed, digestible *smallness*, with a short and level 1.8 mile loop encircling the "island." The preserve is mostly covered by mixed oak woodland, but its unique surroundings mean that it also offers views of waterfowl and open country raptors, particularly in winter when both of those groups are most abundant. The limited extent of the elevated woodland means that there are few land birds to be seen here which are not seen elsewhere in our larger preserves, but it is a place rich with the common – the ideal place to visit when you are seeking not exciting and rare splendors, but familiar and comforting ones, not laborious climbing but gentle strolling, when you just want a peaceful hour or two to ramble among the jays and juncos.



Deer Island in February freshness



A wintering merlin is to a kestrel what a Harley-Davidson is to a bicycle. Analogy by Pete Dunne; photo by Don Bartling.

For the sake of illustration, I'll describe a clockwise route around the Deer Island Loop Trail, heading left from the entrance. The first short stretch runs parallel to the neighboring storage facility and is the least scenic part of the walk. But once that's out of the way, there's a lot to look forward to. You soon get some views of nearby ponds and surrounding open fields which can attract waterfowl, pelicans, and hawks like harriers or merlins. In general, you won't be very close to the water throughout most of your time at Deer Island—often just at the outer range of bird identification by binoculars. You'll also come fairly soon to a huge multi-trunked "octopus" California bay, with numerous large limbs stretching outward, arching to the ground, and climbing back into the air like so many tentacles.

But on to the birds. In winter, the woods may seem quiet until you run into one of the roaming mixed-species flocks that suddenly surround you with a hectic multitude. Wintering ruby-crowned kinglets and yellow-rumped warblers join resident birds like chestnut-backed chickadees, oak titmice, white-breasted nuthatches, brown creepers, bushtits, and dark-eyed juncos in exploring the oaks for insects and other food. Deer Island has sufficiently dense woods to also host lesser numbers of the more forest-inclined birds in winter, such as golden-crowned kinglets, Townsend's warblers, and hairy woodpeckers. In spring, some of these birds will leave, but the woods may well seem more consistently alive with the musical songs of warbling vireos, purple finches, and orange-crowned warblers periodically interrupted by the carrying *ker-Brick!* of an ash-throated flycatcher.



The octopus bay! This photo does not do it justice.

Towards the far end of the island from the starting point are some larger ponds, which tend to offer the biggest variety of water birds, though admittedly at some distance. Some common ducks and waterfowl to sight here in winter include northern pintail, bufflehead, ruddy ducks, coots, pied-billed grebes, and Canada geese. Look closely around the pond edges for various egrets and herons, as well as the occasional otter. This part of the preserve is another good place to watch out for raptors: the wide open seasonal wetlands offer good hunting for kites, kestrels, and harriers while also attracting lower numbers of the exciting winter hawks like the huge ferruginous hawk, peregrine falcon, and merlin.

The last third or so of the loop is on average less densely wooded than the earlier portion and attracts a slightly different group of birds. Some of the oak regulars will still be present, like juncos, titmice, and acorn and Nuttall's woodpeckers. Look on fences and other perches on the increasingly open lower slopes for black phoebes and, in winter, Say's phoebes. The flat lowlands which you eventually enter can host a variety of sparrows in winter, including the ubiquitous white-crowned and golden-crowned sparrows, but also the subtly distinctive savanna and Lincoln's sparrows. You may often see a flock of dull portly birds take flight from



Look for the peach-bellied **Say's Phoebe** on open perches in winter. Photo by Tom Benson.



A **white-breasted nuthatch** strikes a characteristic pose. Photo by Syd Phillips.

these flat open areas, then be struck by brilliant gold if they turn towards you to reveal their front sides. These are western meadowlarks, who even in winter (when they are most abundant here) can occasionally be heard singing like more musical blackbirds, but with some of the same liquid fluting quality of their relatives.

There's one other thing to look for as you gaze across the Novato Creek floodplains: us! Careful scanning with binoculars will reveal the back side of the Vintage Oaks shopping center and, while we don't have a prominent sign in back, those in the know—like you—will pick out a small gray door between Extreme Pizza and BevMo and think *hey, don't I need some birdseed?* From there it's a short walk back to the parking area—and one more short hop to visit us and let us know what you've been seeing!

Practical Details

How to Get There: From Hwy 101 in Novato, take the exit for Atherton Ave east for 1.8 miles. Turn right onto Olive Ave for .7 miles and left at Deer Island Ln. The gate and small parking area will be on your right.

Rules & Access: Deer Island is a Marin County Open Space Preserve and so is open to free public access 24 hours a day, but lacks amenities such as garbage cans, restrooms, or tables. Leashed dogs are permitted on trails. There's generally little need for a map: most visitors simply enjoy the obvious level loop around the island. You could bisect the circle and go over the top, in which case you need only exercise a little caution to stay on the clear De Borba trail—there are a few side trails that peter away to dead ends or steep descents. As with all Open Space Preserves, however, excellent downloadable maps are available at marincountyparks.org or you can consult our favorite printed map, *Trails of Northeast Marin* by Pease Press.