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Restored salt ponds are for the birds

Researchers conducting annual census of waterfowl

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Inside Bay Area

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The ducks are back in town. Millions, or so it seems, crowded along the Bayshore, the restaurant row for the waterfowl set. If there were a duck Zagat Survey, the old salt ponds ringing the South Bay would score high on decor ("request a levee-view") and food ("the invertebrates are to die for").

Winter is here, and so are the usual suspects — the ruddy ducks, the scaups, the wigeons, the redheads, the goldeneyes. And, of course, the northern shovelers, one of the so-called "dabbling ducks," says Cheryl Strong, biologist with the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory in Alviso, "because of the way they feed with their duck butts sticking up in the air."

In the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, where scientists are monitoring wildlife as part of a huge salt-pond restoration project, the ducks started arriving in October from parts north.

"Since we retrofitted the Cargill salt ponds we bought in 2003, the salinity is a lot lower, and we've had a 100 percent increase in duck use," says refuge manager Clyde Morris. "We've had as many as 10,000 ducks at one time in some of these ponds."

Catch the action on Pond N1A, one of about 70 numbered-and-lettered ponds in the South Bay. Ducks hang in the air like quotation marks. They bob and weave on the ice-blue water. They rush skyward for no apparent reason. They fight like we do for parking places. They squeal and squawk, shoehorning themselves into the pondscape as if nestling into a favorite old shawl.

People love counting ducks as much as they love ducks themselves. And if anyone cares to count the counters, here you go: The Audubon is doing its annual Christmas tally; the nonprofit observatory folks are surveying the refuge's 22 ponds each month to learn where ducks do best; and the feds are taking to the sky for their yearly flyover.

"Next week, our staff will count every single duck in the Bay, and we'll do it by plane," says Joelle Buffa, supervisory wildlife biologist at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Last January, they counted 133,340.

Picture a pilot and two human counters, each earning 25 percent hazard pay, talking into a tape recorder as they spot ducks 200 feet below.

Down at Pond N1A, dawn is peeling back. From behind marsh-grass curtains, the northern pintail, bufflehead and occasional mallard emerge. A raft of snow-white canvasbacks drops in from nowhere like Times Square confetti.

One pond over, biologist Cynthia Padula squints through her Swarovski scope, notebook in hand, wind in her hair. A map grid breaks Pond N3A into dozens of squares, each of which she scans for birds then jots shorthand code into her book: NSHO is a northern shoveler. 1L means one bird on the levee; 1F means it's foraging; 1M means it's standing on a man-made structure.

Those numbers will be shoved into a computer with other data being collected from agencies restoring some of the old salt ponds. Long-term plans are being drawn up for all 16,500 acres, but to know how wildlife will fare in this new low-sodium world, biologists like Padula are checking out duck behavior in ponds Cargill will still use to produce salt.

"We want to know if these ponds have any wildlife value," Strong says. "If other ponds are allowed to go back to tidal marsh, they won't be available to ducks anymore. But will birds use the ones that may remain as ponds? No one has ever documented how well they use them."

So the counting at Pond N3A continues, an exercise Padula says never gets old: "When I used to think of ducks," she says, "I'd think of mallards like everyone else. But once you start discovering all the different species, you realize how incredibly beautiful they all are."

Ducks are also a reliable bunch for birdwatchers. Because they're fairly territorial, says Audubon's Goldberg, ducks are "pretty dependable on where you can see them, as opposed to, say, songbirds, who are fairly fickle." And ducks, especially males, are colorful, with "bill shapes and feather types and patterns that make the different species easy to pick out, especially for people who are just learning."

Most of all, she says, ducks "are very charismatic birds, with chunky bodies that make them look — and I hesitate to use this word because people in the birding world hate it — cute."

"They walk on land with that little waddle that humans find adorable," Goldberg says. "But once in the water, they become very graceful."

So why do duck purists have a problem with the word "cute"?

"It doesn't tell you much about the duck itself," Goldberg says. "But then again, I'm guilty of calling nearly every bird cute."