



Raised wooden boardwalks let bird-watchers get close to the action; watch for great egrets at the Bolinas Lagoon.

The birds of Bolinas

■ At Audubon Canyon Ranch's Bolinas Lagoon Preserve, June is the perfect month for a bird's-eye view into the life cycle of the magnificent great egret. With the aid of spotting scopes, visitors can peer directly into the nests of the 4-foot-tall white birds and observe fledglings as they clamor for food and struggle to master the intricacies of flight.

The egret show takes place at Audubon Canyon Ranch, 3 miles north of Stinson Beach. There, the tidal waters of Bolinas Lagoon harbor one of the richest concentrations of bird life in California, attracting more than 75 species and 15,000 individuals annually, including an abundance of great egrets. Every spring, about 100 pairs nest here along with great blue herons and snowy egrets.

Your visit begins with a spectacular, winding drive on coastal State 1. After a brief stop at the preserve's display hall and bookstore, head for the hike-in bird-watching overlook. Follow Alice Kent Trail from behind the ranch buildings; it climbs steeply $\frac{1}{2}$ mile under a shady forest canopy. In minutes you'll gain your first glimpses of the egrets, clustered in a high treetop colony across Picher Canyon.

The trail deposits you at Henderson Overlook, where viewing benches are stacked like bleacher seats at a sporting event. Visitors bring their own binoculars or take turns looking through the preserve's spotting scopes. In addition to seeing two or three fledglings per nest, you also gain a magnified view of the stately adults in their feathered finery. The egrets' exquisite plumage was the cause of their near extinction: The birds were indiscriminately

WHERE: From San Francisco, cross the Golden Gate Bridge and drive 4 miles north on U.S. 101. Take Stinson Beach/State 1 exit and go less than 1 mile to State 1 (Shoreline Hwy.). Turn north (left) on State 1 and drive about 16 miles to Audubon Canyon Ranch.

WHEN: 10–4 Sat–Sun and holidays, Mar 17–Jul 15.

COST: Free; donations accepted.

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hunted to provide decoration for women's hats until 1918, when federal legislation protected them. (They are no longer endangered.)

After marveling at the birds, return the way you came or continue hiking on a 3-mile loop: Proceed on Griffin Trail from the overlook, heading uphill through an oak and bay forest. Where Griffin Trail meets North Loop Trail, follow North Loop downhill into a fern-filled woodland enveloping a ravine.

The trail swings away from the canyon and ascends gradually to a high, open bluff. Have a seat on the strategically placed wood swing and sway to your heart's content.

The return trip is all downhill on a sloping hillside of coastal scrub and chaparral. North Loop Trail carves a leisurely curve back to preserve headquarters, providing sweeping coastal views all the way. — Ann Marie Brown