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A great blue heron samples the catch of the day at Elkhorn Slough Wednesday morning.

CENSUS IS FOR THE BIRDS

Quarterly surveys help researchers assess avian and slough health

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Birds

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✓ ELKHORN SLOUGH — One bird, two birds, three birds, four. Volunteers conducting a census of shorebirds Wednesday at Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve expected the count to reach 10,000 or more.

The 8-year-old survey project, conducted quarterly by foot and boat, provides data for researchers on numbers and species, as well as serving as an indicator of reserve health.

"It reminds you that the slough is such a beacon for many birds," said research biologist Susie Fork, who supervises the project.

There were plenty to see, from tiny sandpipers pecking in mud flats not far from the Moss Landing harbor to large white pelicans resting near Kirby Park.

Totals weren't immediately available for the count, but last year 10,215 individual birds from 52 different species were spotted.

Fork said while the census provides only a "crude snapshot," it gives a baseline for evaluation. Though some species may dip some years, so far the statistics haven't indicated any big trends, she said. But the location of birds year to

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Though seemingly omnipresent, seagulls also are included in the bi-annual bird count.



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Sandpipers forage in the Elkhorn Slough mudflats at low tide Wednesday.

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CENSUS

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year can be evidence of environmental disturbances. When erosion, for example, degrades a feeding ground favored by short-legged birds, they shift to a new spot.

"Gathering is just the first step," Fork said.

The follow-up work includes building databases and analysis. The results

also are shared with other regional and national research groups doing their own counts.

"We get to see that we're part of a bigger picture," Fork said.

Wednesday's count is one of several avian monitoring efforts at the reserve, which is managed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Shirley Murphy, who's been a volunteer at Elkhorn Slough for 25 years, has participated in the quarterly

counts since the start, but she's excited about other projects, as well.

She mentioned the monitoring of a rookery in a eucalyptus grove near Moonglow Dairy, where great blue herons, egrets and double-crested cormorants soon will begin to raise their young. Between now and July, a volunteer will visit the rookery weekly to record when birds show up for mating, when they begin nesting and laying eggs, when offspring first appear and when they fly off, she said.

She'll spend the next few months visiting more than 150 nesting boxes set up around the reserve to encourage breeding chickadees and titmice. She'll peer into boxes with a dental mirror and a flashlight to count eggs, and she'll watch to see how many chicks fledge.

Why does she do it?
"I like birds," Murphy said. "They're pretty."

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