

The Role of Raptors in the Morro Bay Estuary and Watershed

If you stood in the middle of the Morro Bay Estuary and turned a slow circle, (without sinking in the mud!) you could watch a bird of prey utilize each estuarine habitat in your view.

To the west, a [Northern Harrier](#) soars low over the dunes, while a small [American Kestrel](#) sits on a silver lupine bush eating the lizard it just caught. To the north, a male [Peregrine Falcon](#) emerges from its eyrie on Morro Rock as its young chicks scream for more food.

Along the eastern landscape of the estuary, the pine and eucalyptus trees in downtown Morro Bay and State Park lands provide nests and shelter for [Great-horned Owls](#), [Red-shouldered Hawks](#) and [Red-tailed Hawks](#). If you look carefully into the canopy at the Heron Rookery you can see a [Red-shouldered Hawk](#) patiently surveying the scenery. A young [Osprey](#) sits on a dead snag at windy cove watching the water. At first you didn't see it, until it lets out a sharp, distressing call. It's watching the [Peregrine Falcon](#) that has just flown over your head toward the salt marsh. The falcon stoops to hit a cinnamon teal causing a flock of western sandpipers to rise in a swirling cloud. A [Red-tailed Hawk](#) flies in to investigate the commotion.

If you could crane your neck up into the watershed, along the forested gullies of the Morros, you would see a pair of delicate [White-tailed Kites](#) perched together atop a live oak. In the flat lands of Chorro and Los Osos Valleys, [Barn Owls](#) sit on the fence posts of the open agricultural fields. A [Northern Harrier](#) is there too, flying so low it looks like it will hit the ground. It flanks the slope of Cerro Cabrillo and drops into the salt marsh to see what rodents the [Peregrine Falcon](#) may have flushed in its flurry.

As the sun sets you look to the south, to the Elfin forest, where a small [Sharp-shinned Hawk](#) hides in the cover of a pygmy oak while its larger cousin, the [Cooper's Hawk](#) dives into a coyote bush after a scrub jay. Around the bend at Sweet Springs Preserve, a [Great-horned Owl](#) opens its wide yellow eyes, alerted by the loud intense screams of its neighbor, a [Red-shouldered Hawk](#).

You've come full circle now and are facing west once again when you hear a splash behind you. The [Osprey](#) has made its move. A large yellow perch struggles in its talons as the black-and-white masked fish hawk heads back to its favorite snag. The sun has dropped into the ocean now, and the dunes rise like mountains from the bay, etching a graceful line along the horizon. Ecstatic and satisfied, you smile, thinking you have seen all the resident raptors, more really than such a small area should contain. You take a deep breath and head to shore, but then that last elusive one catches your eye. In the last light of dusk, you barely make out the rounded silhouette of a [Short-eared Owl](#) who flies silently from its protected roost to soar low over the black sage on the hillsides, headed for its hunting grounds in the tidal lagoons and mudflats of the Morro Bay Estuary.

This is the incredible abundance and diversity of raptors that share our estuary and watershed. Join Kara Hagedorn and a live Red-tailed Hawk named Sunshine for an interactive program and bird's eye view of the role of raptors in Morro Bay.