

Nesting Stilts & Avocets at the San Joaquin Wildlife Sanctuary

Irvine, Orange County, CA



Black-necked Stilt pair by Trude Hurd



American Avocet with chick and egg by Trude Hurd

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Where the Action Is

In spring, the marsh becomes home to long-legged cotton balls—baby stilts and avocets! You don't have to go far to see breeding Black-necked Stilts and American Avocets; they're in Pond E next to Audubon House.

Who's Who?

Stilts and avocets are long-billed shorebirds. Stilts have solid black wings, while avocets have black and white wings. Avocet heads are cinnamon during breeding season.

Breeding

Avocets and stilts stay with just one mate throughout the breeding season.

The avocets perform an endearing mating display in which the pair walks together with their bills crossed and the male's wing over the female's back!

Building a Nest

Males and females work together to form a shallow scrape nest using their feet and breasts. The nest might be lined with just a few pebbles or grass blades, or piled high with plants to keep eggs and chicks dry.

Time to Lay Eggs

Stilts and avocets usually lay 4 buff-colored, speckled eggs. For a little over 3 weeks, the male and female will switch off incubating during the day, though only the female incubates at night.

When it's hot out, a stilt may wet its belly in water to keep its eggs from frying!

Defending the Nest

Danger comes from the sky and ground in the form of crows, peregrines, and raccoons. Stilts and avocets are very alert and protective parents. You can listen to their shrill calls and watch them try to lure or chase predators out of the pond.



Stilt eggs and chicks by Port of San Diego

Finally, the Chicks

Chicks hatch covered in down. How long do you think they stay in the nest? The answer: just one day! After only a day, they can already walk, run, and dive to escape predators. They even find food on their own, though parents continue to keep their chicks warm and covered ("brooding") and protect them from predators.

Chicks learn to fly ("fledge") within 4-6 weeks, and 2-3 years later they are ready to start a family of their own.

You can protect nesting stilts and avocets. Please obey all trail signs and stay out of the pond.



Avocet chick by Trude Hurd