



Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

I am happy to announce that Great Blue Herons are back at Stow Lake! At least four have been spotted, two of them settled in the middle nest on Heron Island.

Each month in this column I will elaborate on their activities. Here is a brief timeline for this breeding colony:

January/February: Herons arrive and form partnerships at a particular nest; courtship rituals begin—mutual preening, bill dueling, stretch greetings, and copulation.

March: Females lay eggs in nests, and partners take turns incubating eggs for about thirty days.

April: First chicks hatch and emerge from the bottom of the nest; parents feed chicks every two hours and take turns standing guard and brooding them at night.

May: Parents take turns feeding the chicks at longer intervals—fish, gophers, small birds, even mice are regurgitated, producing a feeding frenzy.

June: Chicks begin to stretch their wings, hop from branch to branch, and take flights off the island.

July: One by one chicks leave the nest permanently. When the last chick has departed, parents leave too. All go their own ways.

In April and May we will run our Heron Watch program. SF Nature Ed. interns and volunteers will be stationed at Stow Lake with spotting scopes and information on this thriving colony. Special tours will leave at 10:30 each Saturday to observe the herons and other nesting birds.

I hope you will join us.

To support Heron Watch and our other Saturday programs, please give generously.

Nancy

Nancy H. DeStefano
SF Nature Education
3450 Geary, Ste. 208
San Francisco, CA 94118



e-mail: info@sfnature.org
telephone: 415-387-9160
www.sfnature.org

Birding for Everyone in January

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist



It was a sunny, beautiful, and quiet morning in the SF Botanical Garden on January 4th. Nine of us gathered at the main gate and started our walk by spotting one of our most commonly-seen species, **Anna's Hummingbird**, zooming around

the garden. In the Fragrance Garden we heard an unusually delicate and melodious song from a **Song Sparrow**.

We then had a good look at a flock of more than a dozen wintering **Golden-crowned Sparrows**. This species summers in the tundra of British Columbia and Alaska, making it one



Golden-crowned Sparrow

Photo: Rick Lechte



White-crowned Sparrow

Photo: Len Blumin

of our longer-distance winter residents. We observed how its golden crown is restricted to the center of its forehead, with black lateral crown stripes wide enough to encompass the supercilium (or eyebrow) region. This is in contrast to the **White-crowned Sparrow**, which has narrow black lateral crown stripes and white eyebrows.



Photo: Matt Knoth

Hermit Thrush

Nearby a **Black Phoebe** perched and called.

As we approached the Waterfowl Pond we saw a feeding **Brown Creeper** on a large cypress tree. We appreciated how well the bird is camouflaged against the tree bark, but in the bright morning sun we all had a good view. Brown Creepers are year-round residents in the arboretum; they are so well camouflaged that it is always a treat to see one.

In the Waterfowl Pond we saw what were presumably the same two **Green-winged Teal** females that have been seen continuously in the pond since early December. Other winter residents were **American Coots** and **Mallards**, with **Yellow-rumped Warblers** in the trees nearby.

Common Ravens and **Western Gulls** accompanied us overhead as we walked through the Andean Cloud Forest, as did a flock of **Chestnut-backed Chickadees**.

continued on next page

On the pages ahead:

- 2 More *Birding for Everyone*; Heron Watch Internships
- 3 Heron's Head Park: First Walk of the Winter
- 4 eBird: Avian Database & Community; Upcoming Events
- 5 *Around the Bay*, a photo essay



Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

Brown Creeper

In nearby trees dozens of **American Robins** were very active. **Pygmy Nuthatches** flew among tall pines and high eucalyptus on either side of the Succulent Garden. A **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** was active in the agave.

During the last quarter of our walk we had views of **California**

Towhees (we'd been hearing them call throughout the morning). We had an unusual straight-up-from-below view of a perching light morph **Red-tailed Hawk**, with a breast and belly of almost pure white. Its belly band of dark spots was thinly scattered. We identified it by its chestnut hood and back, and by its red tail.

Along the path were **Scrub Jays**, **Song Sparrows**, and **White-crowned Sparrows**. As we gathered at the main gate and reviewed our sightings for the day, we were rewarded with views of a pair of **Townsend's Warblers** feeding nearby.



Photo: Judy Harter

Ruby-crowned Kinglet



Photo: Rick Leche

Red-tailed Hawk

San Francisco Nature Education Heron Watch Internships Available

Every spring San Francisco Nature Education volunteers show the public the nesting Great Blue Herons and their chicks at Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park. This year we have eight openings for high school students to train as interns for our Heron Watch program.

Interns will receive two Saturday training sessions in March and April. During April and May, interns and adult volunteers will use spotting scopes to show the nesting herons to the public, answer questions, and team up to lead short walking tours of other nesting birds at Stow Lake.

Students will receive community service hours, training in the life cycle of the Great Blue Heron, and will be taught identification skills for observing local birds.

In addition to the two Saturdays of training, each student must participate in five of the six Saturdays of our Heron Watch public program between April 12th and May 17th. Each intern who satisfactorily completes the program will receive a pair of good binoculars and documentation of their participation from SF Nature Education.

For an application and more information please visit us at www.sfnature.org.



Photo: Megan Prelinger

The Birding for Everyone group in the SF Botanical Garden on January 4th.



Photo: © SFNE 2012, courtesy Jim Sullivan



Photo: Bill Hunnewell

Above: **Long-billed Curlew**



Left: **American Avocet**

Below: **Double-crested Cormorant**

Photo: Bill Hunnewell



Photo: Judy Harter



Photo: Judy Harter

American Wigeon (above); **Willet** (top right); **Least Sandpiper**

First Walk of the Winter Season in Heron's Head Park

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist

We inaugurated 2014 with an early January field trip to Heron's Head Park on an overcast Saturday. Eight of us spent two hours combing the Heron's Head peninsula for birds, aided by an outgoing tide and an oncoming rain. Midwinter is a fruitful time for exploring the fascinating world of aquatic birds because some species migrate later than passerines, and many species from the Pacific Flyway winter in San Francisco Bay, and along its shores, in January and February.

We had a good opportunity to compare and contrast several species. Of the large shorebirds, **Long-billed Curlew** and **Whimbrel** were easily differentiated. The Curlew's ultra-long downward-curved bill is unique, and the Whimbrel's striped forehead and small head relative to body size are unique among similar birds. We saw the pale base of the bill that characterizes this species in its winter plumage.

We compared those species with nearby **Willetts** and **Spotted Sandpipers**. We had a good view throughout the day of a number of Spotted. Their winter plumage is characterized by a uniform brown above that contrasts sharply with a bright white belly and pale legs below. Over the course of the day we were able to compare Spotted Sandpipers with **Western** and **Least Sandpipers**. Both Western and Least have barring or feather outlines above. The Least Sandpiper is tiny at only six inches in length.

The mid-depth waters offshore hosted an array of wintering diving ducks that included **Ruddy Ducks**, **Buffleheads**, **American Wigeons**, **Surf Scoters**,

and **Greater** and **Lesser Scaups**. Other diving birds included **Western** and **Clark's Grebes**, **American Coots**, and **Double-crested Cormorants**.

Our other pelicaniform of the day was a **Brown Pelican**. The peninsula was thick with various shorebirds in addition to Sandpipers: a number of **Black-bellied Plovers** in winter plumage, **Killdeer**, **American Avocets**, **Black-necked Stilts**. Some people saw **Short-billed Dowitchers** and **Black Oystercatchers**.

There were two raptors monitoring the peninsula: a **Kestrel** and a **Red-tailed Hawk**. There were a large number of **Mew Gulls** mixed with **Ring-billed Gulls**, **California Gulls**, a **Thayer's Gull**, and **Western Gulls**. We had a good look at a **Forster's Tern**, which can be confused with the **Elegant Tern**, as both are mid-sized with white foreheads. Unlike the Elegant Tern, Forster's has a white forehead only in its winter plumage.

Along the path were **White-crowned Sparrows**, **Golden-crowned Sparrows**, and **Fox Sparrows**. Near the end of the walk we spotted a **Brown-headed Cowbird**, a **Western Meadowlark**, and a **Northern Mockingbird**. As we headed back it started to rain, so our timing was perfect.



Photo: Judy Harter



Photo: Judy Harter

EBird: a Worldwide Avian Database and Birdwatching Community

Logan Kahle, Naturalist



In recent years I have been involved with a program called eBird. It contains a database of hundreds of millions of observations. Birders from around the world of all skill levels participate by entering data into this database, creating possibly the most comprehensive dataset in ornithological history.

EBird is a compilation of many checklists. People submit lists of the birds they see on a given outing, specifying their method of observation, from feeder-watching to strolling on trails or shorelines to scrambling up hillsides.

When I stumbled upon eBird four years ago, I was amazed at the quantity of information it offered. I could search for where a species had been seen recently or in the past, what time of year a species was most likely to be seen, and what life birds had been seen in my region recently. I was thrilled to find these incredible resources, and decided to start entering data.



Photo: Judy Harter

EBird has helped me as a birder in several ways. It has helped me organize my observations into a searchable dataset. I can look up exactly how many times I have seen a certain bird, where, and when. With this data eBird can generate your lists for different countries, states, counties, sites.

These statistics can be fun to play with for those who are inclined. However, there is a more important use of the organization of this data. I can see trends in my observations over time: if certain species are more or less numerous at certain times of year or during one year or another. EBird has also helped me find out about interesting birds, rare or common.

There are many birding hotlines and email listservs for people to report rare birds. On these forums common birds are rarely mentioned, but in eBird people submit checklists of all the birds they see, enabling an interested birder to find out where locally common

birds have been found recently. This can be particularly helpful when traveling, since in foreign areas even common birds can be exciting to a visitor.

Likely the most important use for eBird is conservation. EBird has helped inform various conservation institutions, including the Audubon society, about the status of certain species of concern. Because its database encompasses observations from around the world it offers an unmatched breadth of data. This allows institutions to see a bigger picture.



Sightings of Downy Woodpeckers in SF, January 1-15, 2014.

EBird can bring out patterns in species' ranges that were not apparent before, and which could potentially improve our knowledge about that species' habitat or population. EBird is also constantly being updated, so data can be searched over many years. This allows for long-term studies over a larger area than individual research would allow.

EBird also simplifies the process of exploring new areas, and supports taking the road less traveled. This has brought me to some incredible hot spots in my travels that I otherwise would have overlooked. I have made several interesting discoveries at these places.

The greatest part is: it's all free! People can contribute their sightings, browse data, and view personal sightings without usage fees. This is one of the amazing aspects of citizen science, and part of what makes this dataset so critical to the scientific community.

Ebird was launched in 2002 by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon Society. They encourage you to get involved:

- Record the birds you see
- Keep track of your bird lists
- Explore dynamic maps and graphs
- Share your sightings and join the eBird community
- Contribute to science and conservation

Explore the site at <http://ebird.org/content/ebird/>

Upcoming Events*

SF Nature fees for all walks: Adults \$10, children free. Please bring binoculars if you can, and a pencil.

Birding for Everyone: first Saturday of every month. The Feb. 1 and Mar. 1 walks will be led by Megan Prelinger: 10 am–noon. Meet at SF Botanical Garden bookstore, 9th Ave. near Lincoln.

SF Botanical Garden Admission: FREE for all SF residents with proof of residency; nonresidents pay varying fees. See the [Garden's Web site](#) for details.

Birding Crissy Field: Saturday, Feb. 15, 10 am–noon, with Megan Prelinger. Meet at warming hut at Crissy Field. Naturalist will bring scope.

Heron's Head Park: Saturday, Feb. 22. A single tour will be led by Alan Hopkins at **10 am**. He will have a spotting scope. Meet at entrance to path. Adults \$10; children free.

Birding for Kids and Families: No walks in January or February; program will resume March 1, with Christine Malfatti in the SF Botanical Garden.

*Please see our [online events calendar](#).

SF Nature Education
3450 Geary, Ste. 208
San Francisco, CA 94118

e-mail: info@sfnature.org
telephone: 415-387-9160
www.sfnature.org





Northern Pintail (above); **Hooded Merganser**



Black-necked Stilt

Around the Bay

Sandi Wong has been photographing some of the handsome birds wintering in the Bay Area.



Northern Shovelers

