

Blue Heron Nesting Time

Blue Heron Newsletter • March 2010

Executive Director's Corner

Nancy DeStefanis

San Francisco Nature Education is celebrating its tenth anniversary of working with underserved SF elementary school students, and now provides five popular Saturday programs for the public.

This spring will bring a new event: **Birding Safari**. Plan to come out with us for a friendly competition on either March 27th or April 10th here in San Francisco. It's a great way to see lots of birds with groups of up to six people led by a top-notch birding guide. Reserve your place now with the mail-in coupon provided.

Heron Watch begins Saturday, April 10th. We currently have four nests with herons incubating eggs. Come out and see our latest batch of chicks!

Best regards,
Nancy DeStefanis

Support SF Nature Education:



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Heron Watch Program Begins in April

Nancy DeStefanis, Director, SF Nature Education

In 1993, I discovered the first pair of nesting Great Blue Herons in treetops on an island in Golden Gate Park's Stow Lake. This turned out to be the first



Great Blue Heron in a Stow Lake island treetop nest.

Photo: © Monte Travis

recorded sighting of nesting Great Blue Herons in the city of San Francisco. The herons court, build their nests, mate, and lay eggs between January and March. By April, at least one or more nests will hold chicks.

San Francisco Nature Education's interpretive program starts in April. Experience first-hand the excitement of seeing these four-foot-tall birds with six-foot wingspans flying in and out of the nests, brooding and feeding their chicks. Naturalists and interns from SF Nature Education will be at the observation site with spotting scopes, ready to share close-up views into the nests and to answer questions.

Heron Watch runs six Saturdays from April 10th through May 15th. The observation site is open



Photo: SFNE

The Great Blue Heron observation site is located fifty steps from the Stow Lake boathouse.

from 10 am until 1 pm. This program is free; donations are welcome. Naturalist-led walks to observe herons and other nesting birds will start at 10:30 am and end at noon. No charge for children; adults \$10. No one will be turned away due to lack of funds. This program is appropriate for *all* ages.



Photo: Ernest Gaudreau

Two nests occupy the top of this tree; here three of four herons are visible.

Nesting Birds of Lake Merritt

Everyone is invited to participate in a new birding program to be held at Lake Merritt in Oakland. Families and children are especially welcome. Learn about the charismatic birds that frequent Lake Merritt.

Naturalists from San Francisco Nature Education will be stationed at the observation site with spotting scopes, ready to share spectacular views into the nests, and to answer your questions about the various birds of Lake Merritt. You might see Great and Snowy Egrets, Black-Crowned Night Herons, and Cormorants with their chicks.

Please join us on the following Saturdays from 10 am until noon: April 17, April 24, May 1, and May 8. Note: *rain cancels*. This event is free; donations greatly appreciated.

Field journals will be distributed to youths, and birding checklists to adults (while supplies last).

Meet outside the Rotary Nature Center, 600 Bellevue Avenue (in Lakeside Park) at Lake Merritt, Oakland.



Great Egret

Photo: Len Blumin

Morning Birding at Heron's Head

Rosanna Chiu, Lowell HS Intern



What do you like to do on Saturday mornings? Many of us prefer sleeping in and catching up on some well-deserved z's. Others, like myself, have discovered the joys of getting up early to bird-watch.

At Heron's Head Park, we Lowell High School interns are trained by our leaders from San Francisco Nature Education to identify migratory birds, and to educate the public about these wondrous creatures.

From Buffleheads to Brown Pelicans, Black-necked Stilts to Long-Billed Curlews, every species of bird that I learn to identify begins to



Intern Melissa Barrios (right) shows a bird to a participant.

Photo: © Monte Travis

share its stories in front of my eyes. Observing the beauty and grace in these dabblers and divers, as they take a break from traveling, makes birding a truly valuable experience worth every one of my Saturday mornings.

I've realized that the term *birds* includes all types of feathery flying friends. Waterfowl, raptors, shorebirds, passerines—all of these families of birds are unique, and it takes patience to recognize and genuinely appreciate their different traits. Long gone are those days when I held onto my notions that birds were exclusively rock pigeons and black birds common on the streets.

At the park we saw birds that had curled bills, hooked bills, long necks, chubby bellies, white crowns, gray masks, iridescent coats, pointed tails, baggy throat pouches, red eyes, yellow eyes, pink slippers, black slippers, and many more. Their appearances and plumages change throughout the year as they mature into adults and prepare to mate.

Small and chunky Ruddy Ducks, usually brownish-gray, turn a rusty red, with perky tail feathers and distinctively blue bills. Tall and slender American Avocets, white and gray-black, turn rosy bronze on their heads as mating season nears.

I've observed that sleek, black, Double-crested Cormorants like to perch after a swim and hold out their wings to dry, as if they were sunbathing. With their posture erect and bills tilted upwards, these birds have battled against the threat of harmful pesticides like DDT and won. Great Egrets and Snowy Egrets were once hunted for their beautiful white feathers. They now grace the perimeters of the park and move quickly and agilely to peck at their prey with sharp bills.

Anna's Hummingbird is a ruby-red iridescent beauty whose body weighs little and whose wings beat rapidly. It zings through the air and dives to flash its bright throat patch in a display of courtship. Anna's Hummingbirds may be small, but they attract birds and humans alike.



Anna's Hummingbird

Photo: © Monte Travis

Finally, I discovered one day the singer of a morning bird song. The melodious wake-up call I've been hearing at dawn is sung by the White-crowned Sparrow, a round gray-brown bird streaked with white and black. It wears three white crests on its head and whistles an ascending melody that continues with a series of repeated notes. It forages around shrubs on the

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Justine Creed and Rosanna Chiu (second & third from left) prepare to lead their tour; Nancy DeStefanis gestures at right.

Photo: © Monte Travis



Intern Megan Hui (second from left) and naturalist Ken Moy (center) lead their tour.

Photo: © Monte Travis



Our youngest birder.

Photo: © Monte Travis



Interns Aileen Luo, Ruby Lam, and Ariana Lopez lead tour.

Photo: © Monte Travis

Morning Birding at Heron's Head

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ground. The call seems to sympathize with us that the beginnings of days are always lonely.

I encourage everyone to go out and try birding. The experience is joyous and incredible. Birds are gripping characters, and to spot them, identify them, and observe their appearances and behavior sparks the birder's imagination. Birding requires patience and skill to discern all the details that make each species unique. We might relate their journeys to our own lives, to discover mutual feelings when one wants to mate, sing, dance, hunt for food, or seek company on a cold Saturday morning.

We will all have our own interpretations of what we see. The best place I've been to experience this is Heron's Head Park, once an industrial dumping ground that is now cleaned up and restored to natural wetland marshes.

A new EcoCenter, managed by Literacy for Environmental Justice, will be celebrated on its opening day: Sunday, April 18, 2010.

Lowell HS interns will lead birding tours that day at 10 and 11 am. In the future, birders who join our tours will have a warm shelter to rest in after their birding adventures. Now there is no excuse to not get out of bed.

Heron's Head Park Report

Arty Zhang, Lowell HS Intern



Saturday, March 6, was a sunny day: a great day to go bird-watching at Heron's Head Park. It was a lovely day to relax and enjoy the bay, the sunlight, the sounds and sights of birds.

Megan Hui and I led one of the first tours with Ken Moy, a naturalist from SF Nature Education. One of the first things that surprised us was an Anna's Hummingbird turning its head to reveal bright magenta feathers.

We passed an American Avocet sleeping on the marsh in its breeding plumage: a lovely rust-colored wash on its head and shoulders. We heard the sounds of spring—the pleasant trilling birdcalls all around us—and were pleasantly surprised to encounter more than a dozen White-crowned Sparrows on the path.

We saw 45 different species of about 290 birds. It's hard to say what was the highlight of the tour: the Great Blue Heron landing we witnessed through our scopes, or the Willet that plodded alongside us as we walked.



Snowy Egret with golden slippers.

Photo: © Monte Travis

Perhaps it was the Western Meadowlarks chasing insects at a distance. We can be sure that the tour at Heron's Head Park was the highlight of everyone's day.

I'd like to send a special thanks to our instructors, Alan Hopkins and Allan Ridley.

This public program is co-sponsored by **Literacy for Environmental Justice** & the Port of San Francisco.

Birding for Everyone Report

Angie Geiger, Naturalist

In spite of weather reports predicting rain, Saturday, March 6th, was warm and sunny at 10:00 am. About twelve participants gathered at the entrance to the SF Botanical Garden for the March first Saturday *Birding for Everyone* walk. Surrounded by birdsong we headed out to the Great Meadow to examine a nest hole in the great Monterey cypress at the entrance. The **Chestnut-backed Chickadees** that



Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

Yellow-rumped Warbler

have taken up residence did not emerge from the hole, but instead they or their relatives chattered at us from the surrounding trees.

We were drawn by a chorus of chip notes to the area just beyond the Fragrance Garden. There we found a gleaner flock consisting of more Chickadees, one beautiful male

Townsend's Warbler,

and a number of **Yellow-rumped Warblers**, some attired in bright breeding plumage.

On the ground below were an immature and a mature **White-crowned Sparrow** for easy comparison, while a **Song Sparrow** emerged from the underbrush to serenade us. A movement drew our eyes to the hillside above, where a bouncing flight suggested a woodpecker species.



Photo: Judy Harter

Immature White-crowned Sparrow



Photo: Judy Harter

Red-breasted Sapsucker

When the bird landed on a thick branch we were surprised to see that it was a **Red-breasted Sapsucker**.

Our next stop was the Wildfowl Pond. On the lawn were two large grazing **Canada Geese**. The pond was quite deserted, but on the edges we saw a pair of **Mallards**, a number of **Coots**, and a **Black Phoebe** hawking for insects. We decided to check the "Sapsucker" tree in the Chilean Garden, hoping to get lucky a second time. We were surprised and delighted to spot a Sapsucker immediately. It was just above eye level, affording great views. We were even more surprised to note that this Sapsucker displayed characteristics between Red-breasted and



Photo: Judy Harter

Allen's Hummingbird

Red-naped species. The bird had a bright red head and a faint black necklace with some red below. It also showed a white eyebrow, something not expected on a pure Red-breasted Sapsucker. A number of the group got good photos of the bird as we studied it.

Since we were feeling lucky we decided to look for the **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** that had been reported

at the back of the Arboretum. On the way we found a number of male **Allen's Hummingbirds**, including two making courtship displays. We did not find the Grosbeak (which I had spotted earlier in the day), but were rewarded instead with flocks of **Bushtits** and a number of bright **House Finches**.

Later, in the Redwood Grove, we heard **Winter Wrens** singing. To our delight one of the birds came



Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

Winter Wren

to investigate us while we got good looks at it. Our next find was a pair of **Purple Finches** that we had been hearing, but not seeing, all morning. These birds were in a tree filled with flower buds that they were enthusiastically eating.

We had such clear and excellent views that we could study their plumage in detail, noting the differences between them and the House Finches we had seen earlier.

Our final sightings of the day, just as we were about to leave the Great Meadow, were soaring far overhead—a **Double-crested Cormorant**, a pair of **Ravens**, and a pair of **Red-tailed Hawks**. It was a good ending to an enjoyable day of early spring birding.



Photo: Rick Leche

Purple Finch

Note: I am leading *Birding Safari* tours on March 27th and April 10th. Please join me! See page 5 for details.

Still Time to Register for our *Birding Safaris!* Andy Kleinhesselink



Field trips take place on two Saturdays: March 27th and April 10th (select one date), from 8 am to 3 pm. Trips will cover the entire city starting in different locations, and will wrap up with a tallying of our lists and recounting of highlights at the end of the day.

Groups will be limited to six attendees; trips will go rain or shine. Field leaders include: Josiah Clark, Angie Geiger, Alan Hopkins, Andy Kleinhesselink, and Dominic Mozur, among others.

Participation requires a donation of \$100 per individual (only about a dollar per bird—a great deal!). *Registration closes March 24th for our March 27th trip, and April 7th for our April 10th trip.*

Click  and e-mail us contact information and the date you have selected in order to register now. *Space is still available on both dates.*

Few cities have as many bird species as San Francisco. Over 390 bird species have been recorded in the city to

date, and 149 species have been seen in a single day! Anyone who lives near San Francisco is in one of the most exciting places to watch birds in the United States.

This is especially so in the spring when migrating birds surge north along the California coast. Each spring birders celebrate the season by touring the city for a day and trying to see as many species as they can. However, a successful “big day” is not simple, it requires advanced planning and lots of knowledge about where to look for birds.

So to help more people enjoy this seasonal spectacle, we have enlisted expert guides from the city’s birding community to lead you through an exhilarating day of birding in the city this spring. Each leader will design a special route to find as many bird species as possible in one morning and afternoon. Over 100 species might be possible!

The spring *Birding Safari* will be a special fundraising event for the educational programs of SF Nature Education. The money raised will go directly to our mission to introduce public school students to the diversity of life and nature in San Francisco.

Interested in Volunteering as a Naturalist?

San Francisco Nature Education welcomes volunteers in its School Program, Tuesday through Friday mornings, and its Saturday programs: Heron Watch and Birds of Lake Merritt. We provide training—no experience necessary.

You can download an application at the bottom of this web page: http://www.sfnature.org/get_involved/volunteer.html

Please send your application to: volunteer@sfnature.org. We will get back to you shortly.

Wish List: Used or new backpacks for our programs.

Upcoming Events

Birding for Everyone

First Saturdays: April 3 and May 1, 10 am—noon. Meet us near the bookstore inside the main gate of the SF Botanical Garden in Golden Gate Park (MLK Drive near 9th Ave. at Lincoln). Adults \$10; no one turned away due to lack of funds.

Birding Classes for Kids

First Saturdays: April 3 and May 1, 10 am—noon. Meet us near the bookstore inside the main gate of the SF Botanical Garden in Golden Gate Park (MLK Drive near 9th Ave. at Lincoln). Adults \$10; no one turned away due to lack of funds.

Birding Safari 2010

Saturday, March 27, OR Saturday, April 10. Pre-registration is required. Please see story on this page.

Great Blue Heron Watch

Saturdays, April 10—May 15th. At Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park; follow sign at Boathouse, 10 am—1 pm. Naturalist led walks at 10:30 each Saturday. This program is free; donations welcome.

Birds of Lake Merritt

Saturdays from 10 am—noon: April 17, April 24, May 1, and May 8. Note: *rain cancels*. This event is free; donations greatly appreciated. Meet outside Rotary Nature Center, 600 Bellevue Avenue (in Lakeside Park) at Lake Merritt, Oakland.

Last Heron’s Head Park Tours

Sunday, April 18: Intern-led birding tours at 10 and 11 am. Last tours of the season. Celebrate the new EcoCenter’s opening day with SF Nature Education.

Location: Jennings Street & Cargo Way, two blocks south of Pier 96. Free parking is available.

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