



# Spring Is in Full Swing

*Blue Heron Newsletter • April–May 2011*

## Executive Director's Corner: Nesting Birds of Lake Merritt

In 2010, San Francisco Nature Education initiated a new program at in Oakland: Nesting Birds of Lake Merritt. For four Saturdays in April and May, our dedicated volunteers reached out to folks near the Rotary Nature Center and the children's playground.

It had been our belief that citizens and visitors to Oakland would benefit from such a program, much like our ten-year-old Saturday program, Great Blue Herons of Golden Gate Park.

Sure enough, adults and children flocked to the spotting scopes to see the nesting Black-crowned Night Herons, Snowy Egrets, and Double-crested Cormorants. Volunteers answered questions, handed out Rotary Nature Center brochures of local birds, and encouraged visitors to come back and bring children and friends.

The locals repeatedly voiced their appreciation: "I've been coming to Lake Merritt every week for 20 years, and I have never noticed birds nesting over there on those islands before! It's amazing!"

We were also fortunate to spot 29 birds, including some exotic ones, including Green Herons, Common Mergansers, Buffleheads, and even a couple of Great Blue Herons, which were a surprise to many locals.

Bringing a slice of nature education to the edge of Lake Merritt was special—not only for volunteers, but for people in Oakland, many of whom were unaware of the area's natural treasures.

This year San Francisco Nature Education is pleased to pass the program over to Golden Gate Audubon Society under the capable leadership of Noreen Weeden. The program will run in May and June 2011.

As a co-sponsor we will continue providing volunteers, publicity, and advice as necessary. We look forward to our collaboration with GGAS.

Best regards, **Nancy DeStefanis**

## Heron Watch Kicks Off April 9th

**Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director, SFNE**

The herons have returned! Seven pairs of Great Blue Herons have been busy building nests and incubating eggs at Stow Lake. The herons are four feet tall with a six-foot wingspan.

We spotted the first two chicks—perhaps one week old and one foot tall—on our training walk, April 2nd. Their spiky hairdos were quite visible. The chicks look like baby dinosaurs and have appetites to match.

Beginning April 9th, and for the following five Saturdays, San Francisco Nature Education volunteers will be available to show these remarkable birds to the public using high-powered spotting scopes.

Our observation site is just around the bend from the Stow Lake boathouse; follow signs at the boathouse until you see the scopes set up on a grassy area next to the lake. Observation at the scopes is free, but donations are appreciated to support and continue our Saturday programs for adults and children.

Each year our volunteers collect data on the nesting herons. One hundred thirty-nine chicks have fledged since the first nest was observed in 1993. This is our eleventh year of offering public tours and views of the nesting herons and other birds of Stow Lake. Our interns can answer questions and provide a wealth of information about the herons.

Also, we are pleased that volunteers from ERM Corporation are volunteering for the third year at Stow Lake. Like the interns, they are well versed in the behavior and breeding cycles of these charismatic birds.

We start at 10 am each Saturday between April 9th and May 14th, and wind up at 1 pm. Nature walks



Photo: SFNE

At Heron Watch training, from left to right: Nancy DeStefanis; Angela Tremolada, naturalist; Mina and Logan, interns.

leave from the observation site at 10:30 am each Saturday and conclude at noon. We offer two different nature walks: adult walk and family walk, for groups with children.

For the tours we ask \$10 per adult on the adult walk, and \$10 per family on the family walk. No one will be turned away due to lack of funds. Each child will receive a great blue heron mobile to color and assemble (while supplies last). We look forward to seeing you there!

*more photos on next page*



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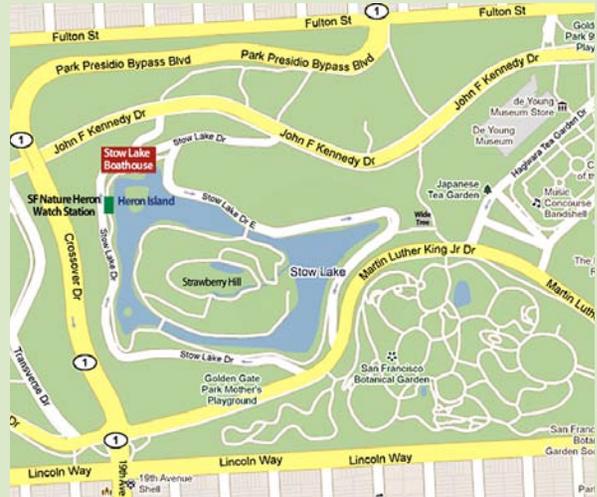
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A Great Blue Heron above its nest on Heron Island.

Photo: Jesse Krider

Join us from 10 to 1 at the SFNE observation site just south of the Stow Lake boathouse any Saturday between April 9th and May 14th.



Follow signs from the Stow Lake boathouse to our observation site and see heron nests on Heron Island.

Map: Google



Adult heron watches over two newly hatched chicks.

Photo: © Glenn Nevill www.raptor-gallery.com



Great Horned Owl with an owllet at Stow Lake.

Photo: © Glenn Nevill www.raptor-gallery.com



Photo: Jesse Krider



Photo: Jesse Krider



Photo: Jesse Krider

Great Blue Herons engage in typical behavior in their treetop nests near the Stow Lake boathouse in Golden Gate Park. We will be ready with spotting scopes every Saturday from 10-1 through May 14th.

## My Experiences at Heron's Head

Arty, Intern



The first time I went birding I showed up at Heron's Head Park in Hunter's Point on an early autumn day and saw the other Lowell interns, some of them familiar, some of them new, and all—for some inexplicable reason—female. I was nervous that I wouldn't measure up somehow, and scared that we wouldn't be able to find any birds. It took about half an hour for me to learn that my fears were unfounded.

Heron's Head Park is teeming with life: the tides washing in and out of the bay, splashing against the rocky shore and a lone tree, and meadows dotted with shrubs. The wetland ecosystem, with little inlets hidden among the abundant pickleweed, is a wonder. This natural gem is surrounded by shipping docks to the north and what was once an energy plant to the south. And there are the birds, the omnipresent residents of the park: nesting, flying, walking, hunting, and coloring the world.

I remember the first bird that was ever pointed out to me: a Say's Phoebe. We had been walking for a few minutes, heading across the meadow, and our instructor, Alan Hopkins, pointed out a little bird that was flying in circles and resting every few seconds on a wooden post. I raised my binoculars, desperately looking for the movement again. And there: I caught it in my binoculars!



Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

Say's Phoebe

"You can tell a Say's Phoebe by its straight-backed posture, much straighter than other birds," Mr. Hopkins said. I remember the thrill of seeing a bird, of capturing the memory in a way that I never had before: knowing its name, what made it different, seeing it closely through binoculars, and I was excited to see more.

Heron's Head Park is a stop along the Pacific Flyway, of which San Francisco Bay is a major resting spot. Birds from as far as Alaska and the tip

of South America travel along the Pacific Coast while migrating, and during the winter we see waterfowl, ducks and grebes. In the springtime the plants burst into bloom. On my last visit the assorted Ceanothus bushes were a glorious indigo, and the passerines, the sparrows and songbirds, like the flocks of White-crowned Sparrows that fly along the gravel pathway, never stop singing.

We have our year-round residents, American Avocets which nest in flocks and sift through the marsh waters with upturned beaks, the magnificent egrets, and shorebirds that range from the minuscule sandpipers to the imposing Long-billed Curlew. I remember when a Red-tailed Hawk swooped among a crowd of birds, and hundreds of gulls and shorebirds took to the sky, and when a Belted Kingfisher put on a show for us, swooping and diving.

But what I realize and appreciate most is that lessons I learned while birding will stick with me throughout my lifetime. From leading tours for first-time birders on overcast mornings to laughing with my fellow interns about our difficulties, I have gained so much more from Bayview Birders than I had ever expected. And to whoever is reading this right now: I hope to see you at Heron's Head Park soon! *Editor's Note: Arty Zhang has signed up for a third year at Heron's Head Park.*

## Bayview Birders Intern Report

Eddy, Intern



Saturday, March 5th, began with a mildly warm morning in Heron's Head Park as we used spotting scopes to see which birds we would be able to point out to the public. Nurse Maryann

Rainey helped us get a grip on what we could expect during our tour.

Shortly after my partner Arty and I began our tour we spotted a Greater Scaup. As we continued we were



Bufflehead

greeted by our usual visitors, the Buffleheads; not surprisingly, we saw about 100 of them by the end of the day. After making our loop we noticed some Canada Geese overhead.

We noticed another Greater Scaup trying to infiltrate a group of Ruddy Ducks.

My group shortly joined the other interns at the scopes and we heard quite a bit about a Harlequin Duck being sighted nearby. We noticed a few Great



Photo: Len Blumin

Great Egret

Ms. D. treated us to lunch and beverages. The graduation was quite fun as we took ridiculous pictures of each other.

We found out what everyone was going to do next, as most of the students were seniors. Only Arty and I were juniors, and both of us then committed to another year of internship with Bayview Birders!

As our graduation lunch ended, I thought about all the things I had received: the relaxation only birding can offer; meeting funny individuals during our tours; and learning about my local environment. That concludes my first year with the Bayview Birders, and I hope to see a lot more individuals and families at Heron's Head Park next year!



Harlequin Duck

Photo: Rick Leche

Egrets over by the marshes, which intrigued our tour group.

The rest of the tour went by quickly and soon we reached our graduation destination at the nearby Javalencia Cafe. All the new graduates received high-powered Eagle Optics Vortex binoculars.

Ms. Rainey and

## International Delegation Meeting

Zoë Unruh, SFNE Naturalist

On March 9th, Executive Director Nancy DeStefanis and Board President Megan Prelinger shared the mission and activities of SF Nature Education with an international delegation at the Institute of International Education. The delegation, entitled Science and Technology Education Management, boasted participants from Bahrain, Bangladesh, Egypt, Hungary, Israel, Liberia, Mexico, New Zealand, Russia, Samoa, Thailand, and Uruguay, with members' occupations ranging from elementary and high school teachers to researchers in educational development.

The goal of the delegation's trip to the United States was to study U.S. policy in developing education curricula to improve science instruction practices worldwide. There was a special focus on environmental education, and the delegation was particularly interested in learning how SF Nature Education uses local parks as natural classrooms.

Nancy's presentation was the last activity of the delegates' packed agenda in San Francisco. She

introduced the SF Nature school program, internship program, and the Saturday public programs, focusing on the importance of getting kids outside and giving them tools to enjoy the natural habitats around them.

When Nancy opened the floor to questions, the delegates were particularly interested in whether or not there is continuity of environmental education throughout science education in the SF United School District (SFUSD). While SFUSD does not have firm environmental education standards, SF Nature's internship program works to encourage high school students to pursue jobs in wildlife biology and ecology, and gives them an opportunity outside of their school's curriculum to learn firsthand about environmental issues.

The school program ties environmental education into educational standards in language arts, science, and art. The program is also involved with the same students at least twice a year, which provides a certain measure of continuity. However, SF Nature's breadth of service is limited, and SFUSD needs to write environmental education into its educational standards in order to involve more students in the outdoor experiences that SF Nature provides. The delegates' questions

highlighted global interest in outdoor classrooms as a consistent experience for schools within the curricula.

The delegates were also particularly interested in San Francisco's colony of Great Blue Herons, and greatly enjoyed the majestic pictures that Nancy shared with the group. They were eager to share birding experiences in their own countries, and spent a good portion of the meeting doing so.

On the whole, it was incredibly interesting to see people from widely diverse geographical locations interested in incorporating environmental education into international curricula. We are lucky as Bay Area residents to have open spaces available just a walk, jog, or bus ride away. The proximity of outdoor classrooms makes outdoor education within our school system entirely possible. We need to capitalize on these opportunities to provide hands-on, tangible learning experiences—not just as an isolated curriculum, but integrated into the entire school year. And where better to do this but in the student's own backyard?



The International Delegation for Science and Technology Education Management meeting with SF Nature executive director, Nancy DeStefanis, (first row, far left). Last row, fourth from right, Zoë Unruh; fifth from right, Megan Prelinger, SFNE president.

### Photo of the Month



Dancing egrets at Crissy Field in San Francisco.

Photo: SFNE

Photo: © Monte Travis

## Birding for Everyone Report

Angie Geiger, Naturalist



A large and enthusiastic group gathered at the entrance to the SF Botanical Garden on April 2nd for the *Birding for Everyone* walk. Children and adults set off to look for birds that were singing all around. The first was a **Western Scrub Jay** that streaked by with nesting

material. It soon flew in the other direction to a shrub where it carefully selected another perfect twig. It returned to the same tree where it surely had a nest. A second Scrub Jay appeared at the top of tree, scolding loudly.

A movement in the sky caught our attention, and we looked up to see a **Red-shouldered Hawk** soaring above us. Next a cawing **American Crow** flew by. We continued in the direction of the Wildfowl Pond. Along the way, loud singing drew our attention to an aptly named **Song Sparrow**. We stopped for a few moments to listen. Soon we were at the pond. As I remarked that there was nothing in it, an **American Coot** protested loudly. In fact, there were at least seven Coots in the pond, and they did their best to entertain us by chasing each other and "walking on water" as Coots do.

We stopped to watch a **Black Phoebe** darting out to catch insects. We were surprised to see it fly onto the lawn and gather grass that it carried under the bridge. Yet another nest! We worked our way through the Chilean Garden and spotted a **Western Gull** perched on a tree stump as a number of Rock Pigeons flew around. Closer by we noticed **Anna's** and **Allen's Hummingbirds** perched at the tops of trees around us.



Photo: Doug Greenberg

Tree Swallow

In the Succulent Garden we were pleased to see two **Townsend's** and **Yellow-rumped Warblers** looking for insects. Several **American Robins** made an appearance. We were happy to see our first-of-season **Tree Swallows** circling overhead.

As we headed out we made sure to take a look at a **Bushtit** nest (like a sock hanging from the branch)



Photo: Matt Knoth

Bushtit

in a small fruiting tree at the edge of the garden. We decided to check the area around the Children's Garden. That decision paid off as we were serenaded by a **White-crowned Sparrow**. Across the way, a **California Towhee** scratched in the dirt, looking for a meal. Just a little further down the path yet another song greeted us. This time a **Golden-crowned Sparrow** sang his sad, "Oh poor me."

At the John Muir pond a male **Mallard** surprised us on the bridge. He sat calmly while a group of 20 or so humans admired his dapper plumage. Then he plopped into the pond to join another male and a female. We saw a **House Finch** that was singing above us and **Chestnut-backed Chickadees** hanging upside down from branches. Movement in a bush turned out to be a fast-moving **Ruby-crowned Kinglet**. We spotted two **Red-tailed Hawks** circling high up and a number of **Common Ravens** that were perched in the Monterey Pines nearby. **Pygmy Nuthatches** were heard but hard to spot.



Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

Pygmy Nuthatch

At the Salvia Garden we were delighted when we spotted two **Downy Woodpeckers**. Two little yellow birds flew in: **Lesser Goldfinches**. Finally we moved on to the Redwood Grove. It was very quiet, and we deduced the reason for that from the large number of pigeon feathers along the path. On our way back to the entrance we heard many singing birds, including **Pacific Wren**, **Purple Finches**, **Townsend's Warblers**, and **Song Sparrows**. We decided the theme for the April bird walk was "Songs and Nests." It was a great day!

San Francisco  
Nature  
Education



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## Upcoming Events

### Heron Watch at Stow Lake

**Saturdays:** April 9, 16, 23, 30, May 7 & 14 from 10 am–1 pm. Free observation at spotting scopes. Tours: 10:30–noon, \$10 donation. Find us in Golden Gate Park just south of the Stow Lake boathouse, near the path that surrounds the lake. See map on page 2.

### Birding for Everyone

**First Saturdays:** May 7 and June 4, 2011, 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 for Kids and their Families

**First Saturdays:** May 7 and June 4, 2011, 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). Each family: \$10

### Nesting Birds of Lake Merritt, Oakland

Meet near the Rotary Nature Center on grass in front of the children's playground. Sponsored by GGAS-SFNE.

### Rotary Nature Center

600 Bellevue Avenue  
Oakland, CA 94612  
510-238-3739

### On the following Saturdays:

May 14, 10 am until noon  
May 28, 10 am until noon  
June 4, 10 am until noon  
June 11, 10 am until noon

## Volunteers Needed for School Program!

Please visit [www.sfnature.org/get\\_involved](http://www.sfnature.org/get_involved) for information about how to apply.

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