



Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

In this season of giving I am asking you to help us share the joys of nature—quiet hikes and sightings of wild birds—with our underserved elementary school students, with our middle and high school interns, and with nature enthusiasts in the Bay Area.

Many of you have enjoyed our Saturday programs, which have served thousands of adults and children since 2000. This year we added four walks to new places: Chain of Lakes, the Presidio, and two more to be announced, for a total of 37 Saturday events!

Connecting with nature is the first step toward environmental stewardship. We now have served more than 10,000 young students in San Francisco.

Please give generously so we can continue our award-winning programs. Your donations are tax-deductible to the full extent allowed by law.

Best regards,

Nancy DeStefanis



SF Nature Education
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San Francisco, CA 94118

Upcoming Events

Birding for Everyone: First Saturdays: Dec. 3, Jan. 7, and Feb. 4, 10 am-12 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, children free, no one turned away due to lack of funds.

Birding the Presidio: Saturday, Feb. 25, 10 am-noon. Meeting place to be announced.

Heron's Head Park Public Tours: Jan. 14, Feb. 11, Mar. 10, 10 am-12 noon. Free.

Elementary School Field Trips Take City Children Outdoors

Linda Grant, Naturalist



On the crisp morning of November 17th, Ms. Cooper's kindergarten class from Bret Harte Elementary arrived for a guided field trip in the San Francisco Botanical Garden.

Naturalist Anastasia Marin guided ten children from the class, and I led another group. We began our walk in the Garden of Fragrance, where students used their sense of touch on the velvet-like salvia plant.

Next our attention was caught by a high-flying **Anna's Hummingbird**. After nearly disappearing from sight the hummer zoomed down, forming the letter "J" in its flight path. The wind rushing through its tail feathers made a loud "chirp" sound. We then noticed some movement on the grass and were excited to spot a covey of **California Quail**, our state bird.

At the Waterfowl Pond we were treated to a close-up view of the large yellow-green feet of an **American Coot**. The Coot has a duck-like appearance but is part of the rail family. It has lobe-webbed toes unlike webbed duck feet. Also seen at the pond were **Mallards** and a fly-catching **Black Phoebe**.

A flock of **Rock Pigeons** flew over, and a **Turkey Vulture** soared with characteristic rocking motion. We saw and heard **Western Gulls** and **Chestnut-backed Chickadees**.

We ended our trip with a walk through the Bamboo Forest, followed stepping-stones up to the Asia Garden, and finished in the Demonstration Garden, where the students were ready for lunch. Everyone had a wonderful day!



Examining a small creature.



Right: students on the bridge at the garden's Wildfowl Pond.



Students show off newly-colored birds in their journals.

On the pages ahead:

- 2 More photos from Bret Harte field trip
- 3 Intern Training at Heron's Head Park
- 4 *Birding for Everyone* Report
- 5 Birds of San Francisco Photo Essay; Season's Greetings



Children wear handmade binoculars and display their field journal work.

Students from Bret Harte Elementary observe some local birds and bugs in the SF Botanical Garden.



Naturalist Ms. Anastasia with some of her students.



Children examine a picture of the American Coot on their laminated bird cards.



Above: observing birds in the water. Below: American Coot.



A chaperone and Ms. Cooper (far right) with students near the library.



Looking into the pond in the Fragrance Garden.



Anna's Hummingbird.

Volunteers Needed for 2011- 2012 School Program!
Please visit www.sfnature.org/get_involved for information about how to apply.



Hiking through the SF Botanical Garden.

At Heron's Head: November 5th Intern Training Report

Logan K., Intern



We started the day with an excellent lecture and slideshow by Anthony Khalil, Heron's Head Park naturalist, about the natural history of Heron's Head Park. We learned that the beautiful marsh used to be home to a nuclear power facility that polluted the whole area. He told us how,

in 1999, the area around Heron's Head Park was transformed from a wasteland to a thriving natural community, now home to wildlife and the EcoCenter.

We learned that marshes are the most diverse biological habitats in North America, making the restoration of Heron's Head Park a significant environmental

movement. Two of the species inhabiting Bay Area marshes include the endangered California **Clapper Rail** and the critically endangered **Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse**. Mr. Khalil then gave us a tour of the new EcoCenter.



Anthony Khalil shows us the rainwater tanks that hold up to 15,000 gallons.

Photo: SFNE



Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse

Photo: darthdowney

After the lecture by Mr. Khalil, Allan Ridley, our instructor and a renowned teacher of ornithology, treated us to a slide presentation on flight. He explained how the wings fall with the primaries (flight

feathers) flattened to maximize upward push, but rise with primaries slotted, like a Venetian blind, to minimize downward push. Mr. Ridley also showed us how birds tilt their wings on the upstroke as another way to minimize counterproductive pull toward the ground. He said the wrist of a bird is the bend of the wing,

designed so birds can maneuver the primaries to execute difficult tasks such as hovering. During the walk, we observed many of the patterns we had learned about in his lecture.



Photo: Jacob Arnold

American Kestrel

As we exited the EcoCenter, we saw a beautiful female **American Kestrel** hovering in the wind. We could tell it was a female due to the fact that it was brick red overall, and was less bright than a male's flashy blue and red. She effortlessly stalled in the sky, waiting for the next unwary mouse to pop up so she could pounce and grab him. This bird is one of the few American Kestrels to inhabit San Francisco, as little habitat remains for this species.

As we proceeded along the reed-lined trail, a harsh rattling caught our attention, and we noticed a bulky bird with white wing patches fly by. It landed, and we were able to get great scope views. It had both blue and orange stripes on its white belly, marking it a female **Kingfisher**. Kingfishers are one of the few birds in which females are more colorful than males. The kingfisher then took off with a piercing call, then hovered over the water, motionless. When it spied something to eat it plunged headfirst into the water, though it did not capture its prey. It proceeded to fly to the other marsh, where we lost track of it. There are sometimes fewer than 15 individual kingfishers seen in a given year in San Francisco.



Photo: Judy Harter

Belted Kingfisher



Photo: Len Blumin

Clapper Rail

As we were about to turn back, a bird flew into the pickleweed near us. It was the endangered and elusive **Clapper Rail**. This species hides deep in

marshes in the Bay Area and is found nowhere else. A year ago, one found at Heron's Head Park was the first Clapper Rail seen in San Francisco in over 25 years. When they were found to be nesting this summer at this location it was the first time Clapper Rails had been found nesting in the city in over 100 years! After the first bird flew near us, a second individual joined him. We observed that they both were juveniles: the same birds that had hatched this past summer. We studied the two birds extensively. They were the highlight of the day for me.

As we walked back, a magnificent **Red-tailed Hawk** flew by. With its bright crimson tail, it stood out in the brown grass of the marsh. It is the biggest raptor in San Francisco,



Photo: Trevor Lee

Red-tailed Hawk

approaching the size of the Bald Eagle. Ours is one of few cities to host this beautiful beast. The bird circled a few times, offering splendid views. In total, we saw 36 species, a lovely conclusion to an exciting day.

Coming in our January issue: directions and a map to Heron's Head Park.



Photo: SFNE

Allan Ridley shows an albatross skeleton to interns.

Birding for Everyone Report

Angie Geiger, Naturalist



The November 5th *Birding for Everyone* walk drew an enthusiastic group to the SF Botanical Garden despite the chill. After a quick walk through an unusually quiet Demonstration Garden, we headed for the Fragrance Garden. There was quite a bit

of activity, starting with a number of **White-crowned Sparrows** on the lawn and along the stone walls. They were not shy, allowing for good close-up views.



Photo: Len Blumin

Fox Sparrow

A **Fox Sparrow** was perched among some leafless twigs high up in a sapling, not where one would expect to find this usually skulking bird. At seven inches long the **Fox Sparrow** is one of the largest in this family. A flash of yellow was a **Townsend's Warbler** in a nearby tree. As we tried

to follow this hyperactive

bird with our binoculars, we discovered a male **Downy Woodpecker** with a bright red spot at the back of his head. We noticed a number of **American Robins** and saw the berry-laden shrub that had attracted them.

We moved on to the Wildfowl Pond, which contained at least twenty **American Coots**, three **Mallards** and a single **Western Gull** posing on a rock. Loud "chip" notes all around signaled the return of the wintering **Yellow-rumped Warblers** that had arrived in force since last month's walk. These birds can pose an

identification challenge due to their significant plumage variation. Some birds were still in bright alternate plumage, while others were already in their duller basic plumage. To complicate matters, there are two subspecies that winter in the Bay Area, and they also differ in



Photo: Judy Harter

Downy Woodpecker



Photo: Judy Harter

Red-breasted Sapsucker

search for it, but with no luck. We walked up the stairs above the Moon-viewing Pond to try the next "Sapsucker" tree, a small weeping sequoia. Someone called out "there's the bird!" and so it was. After a few moments it flew into a different tree.

We were unable to find the Sapsucker again, but noticed a number of shrubs full of ripe berries. Here two other thrushes were feasting: a **Varied Thrush** and **Hermit Thrush!** Both of these are wintering birds that we always hope to see but usually do not.

We continued toward the west end of the garden, but did not get very far before we heard birdcalls in a nearby eucalyptus.

We had excellent views of **Pygmy Nuthatches** moving up and down the branches of the tree. The sun was bright at that point, so we could see the slate-gray backs, buff flanks, pale napes, and white bellies of these tiny birds.

A number of **Chestnut-backed Chickadees** were calling. Then Monique, a regular participant, called out "**Ruby-crowned Kinglet**," and she was spot-on with her ID. Someone pointed to another bird, which turned out to be a **Dark-eyed Junco**, one of a pair. As we



Photo: Andy Purviance

Varied Thrush



Photo: Matt Knoth

Hermit Thrush

appearance. Much easier to identify was our next bird, perched on a bench, a **Black Phoebe**, in his or her crisp tuxedo.

A **Red-breasted Sapsucker** had been reported, so we moved on to the

Chilean Garden to

turned away, we noticed another pair of birds foraging along the path: **California Towhees**.



Photo: Rick Leche

Ruby-crowned Kinglet

Out of the corner of our eyes we caught some movement. We looked up to see two **Anna's Hummingbirds** in aerial battle, spinning around one another in mid-air while loudly

scolding. This exchange lasted for only some seconds before they shot off, one in pursuit.

In the Succulent Garden we had good views of a **Song Sparrow**. From there we cut through the Redwood Grove, where we were frustrated that several **Brown Creepers** could be heard but remained out of sight.

The California Garden was more rewarding. We accidentally flushed a flock of **Lesser Goldfinches** foraging for seeds. We stood still for a few moments and they all returned. Most were females and fairly dull, but there were also at least three bright yellow males with black crowns. While we were there, a **Golden-crowned Sparrow** popped up on a nearby shrub. It sang its sad song that sounds like "Woe is me."

On our way to the exit through the Temperate Asia zone, we heard loud screeching by the small lily ponds. We were amazed to see as many as six **Steller's Jays**

screeching at some unknown foe. Then we heard a different kind of screeching, that of **Western Scrub Jays**, and we couldn't help wondering if we had come across an epic "Battle of the Jays." It was quite unusual.

As we were saying our good-byes at the library fountain, a kettle of six **Ravens** appeared, gracefully soaring and gliding in an aerial ballet—a fitting end to another excellent morning of birdwatching!



Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

Steller's Jay



Photo: Sandi Wong

Male (left) and female Hooded Mergansers seen at Lloyd's Lake in Golden Gate Park.



Photo: Sandi Wong

Dinner!



Photo: Sandi Wong

Another Lloyd's Lake pair: female (left) and male Wood Duck.



Photo: Trevor Lee

Snowy Egret is in paradise as a fish jumps directly into its mouth.



Photo: Sandi Wong

Four owlets on Strawberry Hill in Stow Lake.



Photo: Sandi Wong

Green-winged Teal



Photo: Sandi Wong

Red-tailed Hawk

Sandi Wong and her son Trevor Lee recently have been photographing birds in San Francisco. Sandi writes, "We've only taken up birding and photography this year with the Great Horned Owls in Golden Gate Park. Now every opportunity we get we're taking pictures or birding. We have the same drive and passion for both."



Photo illustration: Jim Sullivan

Happy Holidays

Season's Greetings from San Francisco Nature Education

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