



Springtime Sightings

Blue Heron Newsletter • June–July 2011

Executive Director's Corner:

Dear Friends,

We are excited to inform you that we have received a challenge grant of \$5,000 from two of our generous donors. Although we operate on a lean and mean budget of only \$120,000, the recession has reduced donation amounts and foundation grants.

Our deadline for reaching our goal has been extended to July 30th; each donation we receive will be matched on a dollar-for-dollar basis.

Our goal is to raise at least \$5,000 to match the challenge grant and to help us continue our work in schools and our Saturday programs for the public.

During the past year:

- We served over 1,000 elementary school students from underserved schools.
- Our Saturday birding programs for youths and adults have served well over 1,500 visitors in San Francisco and Oakland.
- We completed our third year at Heron's Head Park with high school interns leading the tours of that spectacular wetlands.
- We incorporated middle school students into our Heron Watch intern program, began recruiting high school interns, and served over 1,500 people.

Please take advantage of this wonderful challenge grant so that San Francisco Nature Education can continue our award-winning programs into fall, 2011.

Donations are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law. Please donate now, or mail a check to: SF Nature Education, 3450 Geary, Ste. 208, San Francisco, CA 94118

Best regards,
Nancy DeStefanis



School Program Field Trips

Nancy DeStefanis, SFNE Executive Director

In this issue we feature our spring programs with Bret Harte, George Moscone, and Lakeshore Elementary Schools. Stow Lake's natural wonders and nesting birds provided many thrills and teachable moments as the students hiked on Strawberry Island, over Huntington's Waterfall, past the Taiwan Pavilion (pagoda), and up to the reservoir and Strawberry Hill.

A good time was had by all thanks to our SFNE naturalists: Connie Armitage, Ruby J. Austin, Jeanne Crawford, Linda Grant, Zoë Unruh, and scope volunteers Jim Thurmond and Logan.

In the August issue we will feature more photos and stories about these three elementary schools.



Naturalist Connie Armitage and her students from Bret Harte.

Photo: Connie Armitage



Photo: Jeanne Crawford

Canada Goose with goslings.



On the pages ahead:

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Bret Harte Field Trip Report

Connie Armitage, SFNE Naturalist

On April 19th, we led a group of kindergartners from Bret Harte Elementary School who were very excited about seeing lots of birds around Stow Lake.

First of all we saw a black bird, and because of its yellow eye we could tell that it was a **Brewer's Black-bird**. We listened very carefully and heard a **Song Sparrow** in the bush, and then we found the little brown bird.

We saw lots of gulls, two **Pied-billed Grebes** hiding in the plants, a family of **Mallard** ducks and their ducklings, a family of **Canada Geese** with eight goslings, a **Black-crowned Night Heron** sitting in the shadows, **Rock Pigeons**, and **American Coots**.

At the top of the trees on Heron Island we saw the nests of **Great Blue Herons**. We even saw one flying in with a branch to make its nest. Our gardener friend Clayton helped us find them. On our way to lunch we saw the red shoulders of a **Red-winged Blackbird**. And for a final birdwatching treat we found a beautiful blue **Steller's Jay**.

We also watched some **Eastern-gray Squirrels** and **Red-eared Slider Turtles**, even though they don't really belong here. We had a great dad with our group who helped us notice the animals. It was a neat field trip for all!



Naturalist Zoë Unruh plays bird calls at George Moscone Elementary.



Ms. Amber Cooper (back row, second from left), with her class, chaperones, and Linda Grant, naturalist (wearing cap).

Kindergartners Visit Stow Lake

Zoë Unruh, SFNE Naturalist

On April 19th, a foggy Tuesday morning, Ms. Scott and her kindergarten class from Bret Harte Elementary joined San Francisco Nature Education (SFNE) for a nature hike at Stow Lake. A little over a month ago SFNE naturalists visited Ms. Scott's classroom to talk about birding and general ecology, and to prepare the youngsters for their field trip to Stow Lake. All the children were excited to see birds they had colored in their field guides, especially the Great Blue Heron.

The day started with a pair of **Western Gulls** hanging out with the **Red-eared Slider** turtles around the corner from the Stow Lake boathouse. Next, the children correctly identified **Mallards**. Logan, an intern with SFNE's Heron Watch, set up a spotting scope on a grassy area with a view of the east side of Heron Island, and the students took turns looking at the **Great Blue Herons** through the scopes.

As we headed toward Strawberry Island we stopped to observe a female Mallard and a handful of ducklings. The children had a difficult time counting them, as the ducklings were mostly hiding in the bushes. We continued around Strawberry Island and were rewarded with a sighting of a **Black-Crowned Night Heron** wading by the pagoda!

As we crossed the Rustic Bridge the students were ready for a snack, so we stopped at the nearest

bench. As the children ate their bananas we saw several **Canada Geese**, and one even came up out of the water as if he wanted to share our snack!

Before we moved on, the students pulled out their field journals and sketched a bird they had seen. Most sketched the **Canada Goose**, but others sketched a Great Blue Heron, and a few sketched a Mallard. We continued to the boathouse and came across a Canada Goose and her goslings. It turned out to be quite the day for spotting ducklings and goslings!

I bade farewell to the kindergartners as the field trip came to an end, and congratulated them on their keen observation skills. I hope they will be inspired to follow their ears the next time they hear a bird call.



Mallard ducklings at Stow Lake.

Photo: SFNE

Photo: Linda Grant



Photo: Connie Armitage

Bret Harte kindergartners at the Rustic Bridge at Stow Lake.



Photo: Jeanne Crawford

Jeanne Crawford with third graders from Lakeshore Elementary.

School Program
Spring Highlights:
Indoors and in
the Field



Photo: SFNE

Third graders show off barn owl and red-shouldered hawk wings.



Photo: SFNE

Third-grade students sketch the California Quail.



Photo: SFNE

Mr. Lee with third graders from George Moscone; Linda Grant at right.



Photo: Jesse Krider

Adult Great Horned Owl close-up.



Photo: Jesse Krider

Heron pair with a chick on Heron Island.



Photo: SF Parks Trust

Intern Mina and a helper at work on Strawberry Island.



Photo: SF Parks Trust

Logan, a Heron Watch intern, working on a weekend.



Photo: SFNE

Getting familiar with a (faux) heron.



Photo: SFNE

Participants take advantage of the spotting scope to get up-close views of nesting herons.

Heron Watch Report

Nancy DeStefanis, SFNE Executive Director

The SFNE Heron Watch program concluded on May 14th, and what a season it was!

In addition to observing the various Great Blue Heron chicks, we were thrilled to observe Great Horned Owls with their four owlets on Strawberry Island. We were able to show them off to visitors on our nature walks until the owlets fledged.

Meanwhile, a pair of Red-tailed Hawks occupied their old nest on Strawberry Island and produced three chicks.

The Great Blue Herons continued to add chicks to the various nests. Most folks observed the two chicks at nest #4 as they grew on Heron Island. They are not yet branch-hopping but are now on their own. The parents fly in and out to feed them. Meanwhile, next door at nest #3, our monitors spotted two chicks and possibly three. At nest #5, the parents appear to be incubating.

Our middle school interns, Logan and Mina, did an outstanding job of showing

the birds to the public and explaining the different behaviors of the birds. They also gave talks on the Stow Lake Heron Colony and masterfully answered questions from the public.

We are pleased that volunteers from ERM Corporation continued their association with the Heron Watch Program for the third straight year. We thank Mike Smylie, ERM Coordinator, Bailey Blosser, Sara Selden, Mark Smylie, Rachel Sultan, and Kavita Thakkar for using the spotting scopes to show all the visitors the fantastic herons and other birds of Stow Lake. They did a great job.

Finally, I wish to thank our SFNE naturalist, Angela Tremolada, and volunteers Anne Galjour, Jim Thurmond, Paul Weaver, and Candace Xanttopoulos for their generous donation of time to the Heron Watch Program.

The story of the Stow Lake Heron Colony will continue with more photos in our August newsletter.

San Francisco Nature Interviews a Heron Watch Intern



SF Nature: *How did you get interested in birds?*

Logan: My second-grade teacher, Ms. Jepson, taught us about birds and led us on field trips to neighboring parks, and I liked it and kept on doing it. I'm now finishing seventh grade and have experienced lots of local birding adventures.

Why do you like birds?

They're the most conspicuous, most easily found and unique form of life that you can see anywhere, from airports to local parks, cities, and foreign locations. I've seen eight hundred different species in my travels.

How did you learn so much about birdsong?

Through locating and recording singing birds and listening to them.

What did you learn during your two years at Heron Watch?

I learned how to take field notes, practice field sketching, and polish my talks with the public about birds. I really enjoyed watching the Great Blue Herons, and knowing that they're recent nesters in the city.

What kind of birds did you see at Stow Lake?

I observed four different species of swallows, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Cedar Waxwings, Great Horned Owls and their four owlets, and Red-tailed Hawks in the nest with their three chicks. I was most surprised when an Osprey flew past us at Heron Watch!

How did you like your Saturday Stewardship Program on Strawberry Island as part of Heron Watch?

We weeded grass and planted sticky monkey flower and other native plants. We worked hard and I liked it a lot.

Besides birding what do you like to do?

Tennis, biking, and playing ukulele.

What's your plan for the fall?

I am applying to serve as a San Francisco Nature Education intern at Heron's Head Park.

Do you have any special projects?

Yes, I'm working on the first bird guide to the Presidio that's not a checklist, including 250 species. I am hoping to finish it by the end of this summer.

Sounds like you'll be pretty busy this summer.

Yes, that's the way I like it!



Logan shows a visitor the herons nesting on Heron Island.



Interns Logan and Mina, left, and folks on a Heron Watch walk give the thumbs up after observing Great Horned Owls with four owlets. ERM volunteer Kavitta at right.



Owlets waking up.



Heron chick in nest.



Heron pair greeting each other at their treetop nest.

Photo: SFNE

Photo: Paul Chan

Photo: Paul Chan

Photo: SFNE

Photo: Paul Chan

Experiences of a New SF Nature Intern

Mina, Heron Watch Intern



Through the hazy fog of memory, I can see myself, a little girl of around six or seven, walking hesitantly toward a small group of birders, all clutching binoculars in their hands. Some were clustered around a small table while others stared intently at a nearby island with birding scopes, binoculars, or just their naked eyes.

There was an air of expectancy, as if the assembled mass were waiting for something to begin. That Saturday morning sunlight shone down on us, and as my father and I joined the group waiting at the edge of Stow Lake, Nancy DeStefanis, as I now know her, began to shepherd us along the nearby path, commencing our first birding tour with SF Nature Education! I first discovered SF Nature while wandering at Stow Lake with my father, coming across the Heron Watch site, and subsequently going on a birding walk.

I had not known about the herons before, but after my initial experience

piqued my interest I continued going to the Heron Watch site every year afterwards. During this time I learned about internships from some of the volunteers, and this year I interned at the lake for the first time.

Quite unsurprisingly, my favorite bird at the lake this year was the one the project focused on, the Great Blue Heron. So unearthly and magnificent, yet at the same time endearing in appearance, these herons were undeniably the stars of the experience. I loved seeing the first two heron chicks for the first time. Little more than blobs of fluff, the chicks seemed slightly alien and were adorable. It was definitely one of my favorite experiences.

I also enjoyed viewing the Great Horned Owls at their nest by the reservoir. The owlets were already fairly grown and were quite enjoyable to watch. Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed the internship and I plan to try to volunteer at Heron's Head Park next year.



Photo: SFNE

Heron Watch intern Mina uses the spotting scope to show a visitor two large chicks on Heron Island.



Photo: Paul Chan

Red-tailed Hawk and chick in nest.



Photo: Sheri Hartstein

Distant sighting of an Osprey.



Photo: Carol Dominguez

Great Blue Heron with its next meal.

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Photo: Paul Chan



Photo: Paul Chan

Parent owls in repose.

Upcoming Events

Birding for Everyone

First Saturdays: June 4 and August 6, 2011, 10 am–noon. **No walk on July 2.** 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: June 4, July 2, and August 6, 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:

June 4, 10 am until noon
June 11, 10 am until noon

Birding for Everyone Report

Angie Geiger, SFNE Naturalist



A cold wind did not bode well for the folks who came to the SF Botanical Garden for the *Birding for Everyone* walk on May 6th. Undeterred, we wandered through the Demonstration Garden looking for birds. No luck there.

Then we found our exit blocked by the powerful spray of water from a nearby sprinkler. In a spirit of adventure, the group of eight adults and one child darted out as the spray rotated slightly away. The first person who made it through grabbed the sprinkler head and turned it away so that the less spry could make it to dry safety.

Invigorated, we turned our attention to the Great Meadow, where we discovered our first birds of the day. Three male **Brewer's Blackbirds**, eyes gleaming yellow, foraged on the lawn. Close by were two **American Robins**. Finding our route to the Wildfowl Pond blocked by more sprinklers, we skirted the hill and looked in the Fragrance Garden. To our surprise, the bright green head of a male **Mallard** bobbed under the statue of St. Francis.

A movement in the sky caught our attention as a raptor soared by. It landed on a nearby cypress tree, where we could see the telltale rufous markings of a **Red-shouldered Hawk**. It took to the air, making loud repetitive screeching calls. It circled several times before flying away.

As we turned back to the path, we heard a repeated trilling song. In a small sapling we located the songster, a **Dark-eyed Junco**. Loud raucous calls alerted us to the presence of a **Steller's Jay**. We could not see the bird clearly but its crest showed up well, silhouetted against the sky.



Steller's Jay

Photo: Judy Harter

We climbed the hill above the Fragrance Garden for a better vantage point. We lingered to watch two **Common Ravens** in an aerial display. Across from the Wildfowl Pond a pair of



Western Scrub Jay

Photo: Judy Harter

Western Scrub Jays appeared before ducking into the foliage. At the pond we found three pairs of **Canada Geese**, two pairs grazing on the lawn and one pair in the water. A great commotion arose when a pair from the lawn took flight into the pond. The original pair was highly displeased and a lengthy "argument" ensued. A small black bird landed on the back of one of the benches. It was quickly identified as a **Black Phoebe**, San Francisco's year-round resident flycatcher.

Along the way to the Succulent Garden we noted a **Western Gull** perched on a tree stump near Stow Lake. Many Rock Pigeons were making their way between Stow Lake and the Botanical Garden. More interesting was a large flock of smaller birds that landed in a flowering eucalyptus. These were **Cedar Waxwings**, the first of several flocks we spotted that morning.



Cedar Waxwing

Photo: Rick Leche



Allen's Hummingbird

Photo: Len Blumin

At the Succulent Garden the wind died down and the sun started to peek out from the clouds. We paused there for a few minutes and were well rewarded. Both **Anna's** and **Allen's Hummingbirds** flitted about, sometimes hovering long enough for us to get a good look, sometimes launching into dramatic display flights high into the air. A pair of **California Towhees** was particularly bright in their breeding plumage.

Sudden movement at one of the two Century Plant spikes alerted us to the presence of a nesting cavity. We spotted the head of a **Tree Swallow** poking out of the lower hole. While we had our binoculars trained on the swallow, one of the group spotted a female **Downy Woodpecker** landing higher up on the same spike. It too ducked into a nest. Just then a **House Finch** flew

in and perched at the very top of the spike to serenade his avian friends and a group of delighted birdwatchers. To top things off, a **Red-tailed Hawk** soared into view high overhead.



Black-crowned Night Heron

Photo: Judy Harter

We next made our way through the Redwood Grove to the California Garden. The reservoir was almost empty, revealing a concrete bar in the center. Perched on the bar was a **Black-crowned Night Heron**, not quite in adult plumage. As we watched, it flew onto the adjacent bank, where it was still visible. A small bird started singing in a tree directly in front of us. True to its name, it was a **Song Sparrow**. We began making our way back to the entrance.

As we approached the Library Garden, we noticed a Robin bathing in the fountain. An **Anna's Hummingbird** flew in to bathe. Then, to our delight, a **Pygmy Nuthatch** landed on a rock in the birdbath, affording great views of this normally easy-to-hear but difficult-to-see canopy dweller.

Twittering drew our attention to a tree across the path. We discovered a nest box nailed to the trunk. Suddenly a **Chestnut-backed Chickadee** zoomed into the tiny entrance hole. The twittering increased in intensity and the Chickadee zoomed back out. As it took off a large black bird flew out of the same tree and landed on the lawn in front of us. Even though it is unpopular among birders as a "non-native," a **European Starling** in close view has a beauty that cannot be denied.



European Starling

Photo: Judy Harter

Suddenly a giant bird soared in and flew across the Great Meadow. The **Great Blue Heron** provided an exciting end to what turned out to be an excellent morning of bird watching.