



March Madness in SF

Blue Heron Newsletter • March 2011

Executive Director's Corner

In March we begin training our middle school and high school students to serve as interns at Heron Watch, our Saturday program that provides breathtaking views of the Great Blue Herons and their chicks. The students will learn all about their life cycle and behaviors.

They will also learn about the other nesting birds at Stow Lake. The interns are prepared to co-lead public tours, and to use spotting scopes to display activity in the nests. Applications for interns are available on our web site (see page 6).

Our Youth Development Initiative provides valuable training in leadership, stewardship, interpretation, and avian biology. Our goal is to expand the internship program so that up to 36 students can enroll from schools in San Francisco.

We welcome donations to help underwrite our intern-led programs. Our basic membership is only \$30. A gift of \$100 or more will help us continue our mission of educating students to the diversity of wildlife right here in SF!

Best regards, **Nancy DeStefanis**

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On the pages ahead:

- 2 More photos from Bret Harte
- 3 Herons Are Nesting at Stow Lake
- 4 Palace of Fine Arts Sightings
- 5 Graduating from Heron's Head Park
- 6 *Birding for Everyone* Report;
Upcoming Events; Volunteers Needed

Our Bret Harte Elementary School Kindergarten and First Grade Visit

Linda Grant, Naturalist

On February 15th, SF Nature executive director Nancy DeStefanis and I visited three kindergarten and first grade classes at Bret Harte Elementary School. Teachers Ms. Fergin, Ms. Scott, and Ms. Cooper had prepared the students for our visit.



Photos: SFNE

SFNE's Linda Grant and kindergarten students at Bret Harte Elementary learn about American Robins with help from a toy.

When we asked the children, "What is special about birds?" they told us: birds fly, have feathers to keep them warm and dry, and build nests in spring. The students enjoyed identifying several plush toy birds and learning the calls they make. These included American Robin, Steller's Jay, Mallard, Red-winged Blackbird, Canada Goose, and American Crow.

We then divided the class into two groups. One group sketched a California Quail or a Canada Goose, the two stuffed birds brought to the classroom by SFNE. It was very exciting for the children to see the birds up close.

The second group of students learned some of the special names given to bird calls and songs. They especially liked the "chi-CAH-go" call of the California Quail, the musical "cheer-up, cheer-a-lee, cheer-ee-o" of the American Robin, and the raspy "shack-shack-shack" of the Steller's Jay. We had a great time repeating these sounds together. The kids then switched groups so that all students would participate in both activities.

At the end of the lesson we told the students that in April we would guide them on a nature walk around Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park. Their responses: smiles of joy all around!



Ms. Cooper observes as her students sketch a California Quail.

continued on next page



All photos: SFNE

Kindergartners sketch a stuffed California Quail as part of the SFNE classroom enrichment program.



Photo: SFNE

Linda Grant, SFNE naturalist, plays the song of the American Robin.



Students try to flap like hummingbirds: 12 to 90 beats per second!

Kindergartners and first graders at Bret Harte School learn about their local birds.



Student squeezes Mallard toy to hear its call.



Using plush toys equipped with sound recordings, students demonstrate the calls of some local birds and the Bald Eagle.



Ms. Scott works with two students as they sketch.

Great Blue Herons Are Nesting at Stow Lake

Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director, SFNE

During the month of March the Great Blues are again incubating eggs at Stow Lake. At least three nests are occupied. Males and females take turns sitting on the blue-green eggs. They hunker down in their deep nests, standing up to turn the eggs every couple of hours. When their mates arrive for nest relief they exchange places. Then they go off to spear fish or prey on gophers.

Heron Watch, our Saturday program at Stow Lake, opens Saturday, April 9th and

runs through May 14th. Our interns and adult volunteers will be on duty with their spotting scopes to show these spectacular birds to the public. Volunteers will lead walking tours at 10:30 a.m. each Saturday to the best vantage points for observing the chicks and other nesting birds.

Mark your calendars and visit our observation site any time between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. on those Saturdays. We'll be waiting for you to make sure you get a bird's-eye view of the nests and any newly-hatched chicks. We call them "baby dinos."

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.



All photos: Jesse Krider

Female offers greeting to male, who brings a stick for their nest.



Another delivery to the nest.



Map: Google

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



Male heron delivers a large branch to female who renovates the nest. The twig presentation reinforces the pair bond between these antagonistic birds.

The Palace of Fine Arts Revisited

Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director, SFNE

I recently visited the newly restored Palace of Fine Arts, designed by renowned architect Bernard Maybeck for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition here in San Francisco's Marina District.

The reliefs around the rotunda are visible again—clean and impressive. The new stonework around the path and the newly-planted flowers add a fine luster to the entire area.

I noticed that the stones lining the edge of the lagoon were from the same group of monastery stones in the San Francisco Botanical Garden and around Stow Lake, and in other random locations in Golden Gate Park. The stones came from a medieval Spanish monastery purchased by William Randolph Hearst and laboriously dismantled and shipped in pieces to SF. A series of fires while in storage rendered illegible the key numbers on the packing crates and stones, and most of the buildings were never reassembled. The saga of the monastery stones can be found [here](#), at www.sfcityguides.org.

But I digress. My visit to the Palace became more exciting as I observed the **Black-crowned Night**

Below: Great Blue Herons nesting near the Palace of Fine Arts.

Hérons perching in a tree facing Baker Street. As I rounded the corner I saw a newly-constructed **Great Blue Heron** nest and its avian occupants nearby. Then a **Peregrine Falcon** flew to the rotunda and landed on a male relief figure. Monte Travis captured this magnificent falcon in the photographs below.

We'll keep you posted on the falcon and the progress of the heron nest. In the meantime, please visit the Palace of Fine Arts—a beautiful reminder of a great San Francisco exposition held almost 100 years ago.



Peregrine Falcon and reliefs at the Palace of Fine Arts.



Photos left, above, and below: © Monte Travis



Great Blue Heron photos: Paul Chamberlin



Black-crowned Night Heron

Graduating from Heron's Head Park

Yvonne Chang, Bayview Birders Intern



On the sunny morning of February 5th, SFNE interns led public bird walks at Heron's Head Park. As Black-bellied Plovers plodded along the marsh and busy Willets poked through the mud, we slowly made our way down the path. The American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, and Buffleheads were favorites with the crowd, and visitors asked questions about them: "What do they eat?" and "Can Avocets swim?"

During the walk people were energetic and enthusiastic, and spotted many creatures, among them a Killdeer, a Say's Phoebe, and even a sea lion in the bay! Following the last walks we were treated to a tour of the new EcoCenter by LEJ board chair Deanna Rossi and Heron's Head Park ecologist Raynelle Rino.

Leading tours at Heron's Head Park has been extraordinarily fun and educational, and I'm sorry that I will not be leading them next year because I will be at college. Although some of my peers agree that it can be stressful memorizing facts, identifying birds, and handling criticism, we all improved with experience.

I never thought I'd lead bird walks. I have always loved animals but never went out of my way to

observe or learn about them. Then, after being introduced to birdwatching in fourth grade by SFNE naturalists, I began noticing how "that sparrow-thing" was a House Finch, and "those tiny ninja-birds" were Pygmy Nuthatches. Birding with SFNE taught me so much and influenced my career choice.

I plan to study biology and wildlife ecology in college, maybe with a career that involves wildlife. Using what I learned from SFNE naturalists, I now volunteer at the Peninsula Humane Society's wildlife department. I am grateful for all that SFNE has taught me, and I encourage everyone to support this organization that brings nature and wildlife to children, as it did to me eight years ago.

The EcoCenter at Heron's Head Park, designed by Toby Long Design of San Francisco, recently received the 2010 EPA Environmental Justice Award.

This award, given annually to landmark projects that connect environmental sustainability and social equity, recognizes Literacy for Environmental Justice's (LEJ's) EcoCenter, the first environmental education facility in the Bay Area, and San Francisco's first 100% "off-grid" building, modeling solar power and alternative wastewater technologies.

Visitors may participate on volunteer days—9-11 a.m. every second Saturday of the month—and then tour the EcoCenter from 11 a.m. until noon. The building is also available for rentals. For more information about the EcoCenter please visit www.lejyouth.org



Nancy DeStefanis, Deanna Rossi, and Raynelle Rino.



Tour participants meet their guides in front of the heron mural in the parking lot at Heron's Head Park.



Arty and Alex, flanking the scope, with birdwatchers.



Yvonne and Kat, fourth and sixth from left, with their group of enthusiastic birdwatchers.

Birding for Everyone Report

Angie Geiger, Naturalist

On Saturday, March 5th, sunshine, blue skies, and birdsong greeted the participants of the *Birding for Everyone* walk at the SF Botanical Garden. As we approached the Great Meadow someone spotted a little head protruding from a crack in the lone Monterey Cypress at meadow's edge. A **Pygmy Nuthatch** soon emerged and made its way down the trunk of the tree before popping back into what was surely a nest cavity. A lone **American Robin** had the lawn all to itself.



Photo: Tom Leach

Red-shouldered Hawk

We made our way south to a new wooden walkway that led us above the Dwarf Conifer pond, where a group of **Mallards** was paddling around. We had glimpses of a beautiful **Townsend's Warbler** in a tree. A regular participant, Deborah M., showed her raptor-spotting prowess as she spotted at very close range a **Red-shouldered Hawk**. It soon started a shrill series of calls. Answering calls from another tree drew our attention to a second Red-shouldered Hawk. We were amazed to see three more soaring overhead for a total of five! This is certainly a record number of hawks seen from one spot and was an amazing sight.

We continued to the Wildfowl Pond, where we found two female **Hooded Mergansers** sleeping on rocks on the island. As we observed these two unusual-looking ducks we were delighted to spot three more Hooded Mergansers



Photo: Tom Leach

Male Hooded Merganser with turtle



Photo: Tom Leach

Female Hooded Merganser

and hunted. While we were watching the ducks a **Song Sparrow** serenaded us.

We spotted a **Black Phoebe** sitting on a palm frond while flicking its tail down and up. Several times it sallied out to snatch an insect.

Our next stop was near the top of a flight of steps that lead up from the Moon-viewing Pond, where a loud, long, and striking song caught our attention. We spotted the singer, a diminutive **Pacific (or Western) Wren**.



Photo: Matt Knott

Pacific (Western) Wren

We headed to the Succulent Garden. A small group of **Bushtits** darted among the leaves of a fruiting tree. An **Anna's Hummingbird** was singing from atop a flower spike. A **Pygmy Nuthatch** was inspecting a hole in a century plant. We caught glimpses of **Yellow-rumped Warblers**. They were joined by **Chestnut-backed Chickadees** and **Dark-eyed Juncos**. Nearby a **House Finch** was singing.

We continued west through the garden and spotted two **Red-tailed Hawks** soaring high in the sky. We noted two **American Crows** and a number of **Rock Pigeons**. Someone spotted a **Downy Woodpecker**. We walked to the California Garden. There we found two wintering species, **White-crowned** and **Golden-crowned Sparrows**. A **Scrub Jay** landed at our feet. By the time we reached the gate we had all removed our jackets, as the sun had warmed the day.

approaching. An adult drake, another female, and an immature male hopped out of the water to join their companions on the island. We enjoyed unhurried views as the ducks preened, swam,

Upcoming Events

Birding for Everyone

First Saturdays: April 2 and May 7, 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. See note below re: Botanical Garden fee.

Birding for Kids and their Families

First Saturdays: April 2 and May 7, 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; See note below re: Botanical Garden fee.

For nonresidents of San Francisco there is now an entry fee to the SF Botanical Garden, with discounts for children, families, seniors, and students. The complete fee schedule can be seen [here](#).

Heron Watch at Stow Lake

Saturdays: April 9, 16, 23, 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 encircles the lake. See map on page 3.

Volunteers Needed for School Program!

Please visit www.sfnature.org/get_involved for information about how to apply.

Volunteers Needed for Heron Watch!

Volunteers needed for Heron Watch at Stow Lake. Application available at www.sfnature.org/get_involved.

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