



A Change in the Weather

Blue Heron Newsletter • November 2011

Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends:

San Francisco Nature Education is now embarking on our twelfth year of introducing children in the underserved public schools to the wonders of nature in our city.

We have served more than 10,000 children in kindergarten through fifth grades. We continue our mission of getting children outside: walking and learning about birds that inhabit or pass through our city.

We are also celebrating twelve years of getting adults and children outside on Saturday mornings to observe the birds. We continue to provide a series of birding walks throughout the year: *Birding for Everyone* (monthly), *Birding for Kids* (summer months), *Heron's Head Park Public Tours* (led by high school interns), and *Heron Watch*, staffed by middle-school interns and some high school students, and *Nesting Birds of Lake Merritt*, in conjunction with Golden Gate Audubon Society.

This year we have added new locations for our birding walks:

- The Chain of Lakes: Saturday, November 12th
- The Presidio: Saturday, February 25th

If you have a class or school that you would like to recommend, or you want to suggest other locations for Saturday birding walks, just let us know by e-mailing us at info@sfnature.org.

We depend on your support to continue and expand these vital programs. Please give generously; your contributions help us to educate and inspire the next generation of environment stewards.

Best regards,

Nancy DeStefanis



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SF Nature Visits Classes at Bret Harte Elementary School

Our first classroom visits of the fall season were a great success. We visited two kindergarten classes and one first-grade class at Bret Harte Elementary, and the children were exuberant! We had prepared three activities to help them become more familiar with San Francisco's local birds, especially birds they are likely to see on their field trip to Golden Gate Park.

After introducing ourselves, we started with our feather and wing demonstration. We showed two sets of beautiful wings—one set from a Red-tailed Hawk and the other from a Barn Owl. The kids were in awe, and eager to participate when asked for volunteers. We asked pairs



Photo: SFNE

Students team up to become a Barn Owl.

of children to hold up the wings on the arms of a third child so that he or she looked just like a bird.

Then we asked three groups of children to draw and color one bird: a Great Blue Heron, a Canada Goose, or a female Mallard in flight. The children were impressed with our specimens, and enjoyed drawing their own versions. How proud they were of their drawings!



Photo: SFNE

Ms. Rha and her students embrace a Great Blue Heron.

Our final activity was a slideshow of birds to test the children's knowledge. They did a great job—and many children were able to identify birds.

We loved watching the children get excited learning about local birds. We look forward to leading them on field trips through the SF Botanical Garden.



Photo: SFNE

Student observes a Canada Goose while sketching; Ms. Fergin-Mavaega supervises.

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Heron's Head Park Intern Training Report

Mina C., Intern



On Saturday morning, October 8th, the weather was sunny and warm, with the sun shining down fiercely. I was greeted with the sight of a **Northern Mockingbird** in flight. Its distinctive black and white wings and tail are the easiest way to identify this bird. Moving along the path, I soon saw some

American Crows

chasing another crow in an attempt to steal food. This was interesting to watch, and provided an opportunity to study the crows' behavior.



Evening Primrose

Photo: Eric in SF

Mr. Ridley, our guide, stopped by the path

to examine some yellow flowers. He explained that this plant is known as **evening primrose**. It has sticky pollen and is fed upon by Goldfinches and Pine Siskins. He introduced us to the **gum plant**, a type of daisy, whose unopened flowers are sticky and ball-shaped. The seeds are primarily eaten by sparrows. Small orange clumps of strands were a parasitic plant known as **dodder**. Reddish berries on a large bush were **toyon berries**, eaten by American Robins and other birds. I gained a lot of information about the plants of Heron's Head.



Gum Plant

Photo: Franco Folini

Next I saw a raft of grebes floating out in the distance. There were **Western** and **Clark's Grebes** in large numbers, as well as one or two **Pied-billed Grebes**, **Eared Grebes**, and **Horned Grebes**. It was exciting to see all five species because only six species of grebes can regularly be seen in the entire United States!



Dodder Plant

Photo: Martin LaBar

After we saw a **Yellow-rumped Warbler**, several **White-crowned Sparrows** were spotted. These were soon joined by **Savannah Sparrows** which I'd not seen before.



Savannah Sparrow

Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

There were also some **Elegant Terns** and **Mew Gulls**. I saw some **Black Oystercatchers**,



Elegant Tern

Photo: Doug Greenberg

a **Spotted Sandpiper**, **Willetts**, **Black-bellied Plovers**, and **Killdeers**.

Along a spit of land a **Long-billed Curlew** and a **Whimbrel** were foraging for food.



Spotted Sandpiper

Photo: Len Blumin

There were also a **Marbled Godwit** and a **Snowy Egret** in the same area.

I learned that it's not a good idea to point at a bird, as this may frighten it. It is better to describe its position using the clock metaphor. Also, angled scopes are better for a large group to use as the height doesn't need to be changed for every user.

I enjoyed seeing a female **Kestrel** at the end, a sort of bonus. The females are reddish while the males are slate blue. It was a great day at Heron's Head.



American Kestrel

Photo: Bryan Matthew/Jessica Lee



Marbled Godwit

Photo: Rick Leche

Volunteers Needed for 2011- 2012 School Program!

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

Injured Hawk Rescued and Released in San Francisco

Judy Harter, Editor and Contributor

In the SF Botanical Garden on October 22nd, volunteers from **WildRescue**, of Moss Landing, trapped a juvenile Red-tailed Hawk that had been shot in the face with a nail gun. The bird was transported by WildRescue's Rebecca Dmytryk and her team to the **Wildlife Center of Silicon Valley** in San Jose.

For about two weeks before it was captured in a mesh trap the wounded hawk had been observed and photographed in the Botanical Garden, with the nail clearly protruding from its cheek.

The nail fell out during the trip to the wildlife center—during which the crated female hawk was very active. She was found to be underweight but was expected to make a good recovery without surgery. It was determined that the nail had just missed the bird's nasal cavities, and she had no other injuries.

After a week of feeding and monitoring, the hawk was transferred to an outdoor enclosure where she continued to recover and put on weight. On November 2nd, she was released back into the SF Botanical Garden by Rebecca Dmytryk and Wildlife Center staff. So this wildlife rescue story has a happy ending.

There is a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of the person who shot this hawk with a nail gun.



Longtime SF Nature supporter Katherine Ulrich, who earlier had photographed the wounded hawk in the Botanical Garden, was on hand with her camera during its rescue.

Photo: © Katherine Ulrich

Heron's Head Park: The Season's First Look

Eddy Z., Intern



October 8th was the start of the 2011–2012 Heron's Head Park/Bayview Birder season, and as expected we saw a great variety of birds. Starting my second year at the park as an SF Nature Education intern, I was first greeted by Ms. DeStefanis, Mr. Len Blumin, and a few new faces. Mr. Blumin served as our instructor for the day.

He entertained us with stories of his birding experiences as we made our way across Heron's Head Park. Shortly after we began our walk we noticed a **Great Blue Heron** resting near the wetlands, but that was only the first of our surprises.

Immediately after, we spotted a **Snowy Egret** just past the pond at the entrance, and we began setting up our scopes for a closer look. Mr. Blumin took the opportunity to give us a few examples of birdcalls commonly heard in the park.

Using our spotting scopes, we observed nearly 50 **Dunlins** and **Sandpipers** moving around the wetland. Our adventure didn't stop there, however; we also had front-row seats



Snowy Egret

Photo: Just Chaos

for seeing nature at work. We spied on a few **Gulls** flying slightly above the water and snatching raw fish! After observing that spectacle we returned to the entrance to review the birds we had spotted with Mr. Blumin.

Some of the shorebirds we particularly enjoyed viewing included **Black-necked Stilts**, **Killdeers**, **Black Oystercatchers**, and **Black-bellied Plovers**. The Black-necked Stilts were casually standing on one leg, and as Mr. Blumin explained, they did it to keep warm. The Killdeers numbered near 50, and they moved in flocks across the wetlands.

We found 35 species in one morning, most of which were shorebirds. Soon after we noted the species from our morning trip we took some pictures. Then, as we were about to bid farewell until our next session, Mr. Blumin pointed out different types of plants, such as the pickleweed, that grow within this ecosystem. Thus concluded our first session. On to the next!



Killdeer

Photo: Matt Kroth



Dunlin

Photo: Rick Leche

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.

Chain of Lakes Birding Walk: With Angie Geiger. Saturday, Nov. 12, 10 am-12 noon. Meet at Middle Lake parking lot in Golden Gate Park. Adults \$10, children free, no one turned away due to lack of funds.

Heron's Head Park Public Tours: Jan. 14, Feb. 11, Mar. 10, 10 am-12 noon. Free. More details to come in future newsletters.

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Birding for Everyone Report

Angie Geiger, Naturalist



October 1st, the day of the *Birding for Everyone* walk at the SF Botanical Garden, started out overcast. But that did not deter the group of twelve adults and one child from gathering at the bookstore with binoculars in hand.

I explained that we could expect to see three categories of birds: year-round residents; summering birds that had not yet left; and wintering birds that had already arrived. In addition, there was the possibility of vagrants: birds that were not expected but had strayed into the area during migration.

We did not have to wait long to see some of the wintering birds in the Demonstration Garden. The sparrows that were foraging in the shrubs included resident **Song Sparrows** and the first-of season **Golden-crowned Sparrows** and **Fox Sparrows**. It was here that we saw the first of many **Anna's Hummingbirds**. We then noticed a group of fairly



Anna's Hummingbird

Photo: Sandy Wong

large birds in the sky and were able to identify them as **American Crows**.

Our next stop was the Fragrance Garden. We were delighted to see several **Pygmy Nuthatches** maneuvering for a turn to bathe in a palm of the statue of St. Francis that doubles as a fountain. Suddenly a flock of bright yellow birds flew in to



Lesser Goldfinch

Photo: Sandy Wong

forage directly in front of us. They were **Lesser Goldfinches**, and were easily observed as they surrounded us on all sides. We noticed another yellow bird that was quite different in appearance and behavior. A **Townsend's Warbler** was gleaning insects in the tree above us.



Red-tailed Hawk with squirrel

Photo: Sandy Wong

Just then it started to drizzle, so we continued on, through the park, passing the empty Moon Viewing Pond and up the steps toward the Succulent Garden. Someone called out "hawk!" From the path at the top of the steps we were almost at eye level with a large, probably female, **Red-tailed Hawk** on a branch about 20 feet away. In its talons it had a squirrel. The entire group had excellent views of this magnificent bird for several minutes, as the hawk was unperturbed by our presence. Eventually it flew away with its prey in tow.



White-crowned Sparrow

Photo: Sandy Wong



California Towhee

Photo: Sandy Wong

shrubs alerted us to the presence of a **Winter Wren**, which only a few of us were lucky enough to catch a glimpse of. At the Children's Garden not only did the sun finally come out, but we also hit the jackpot, as birds were everywhere. On the ground we had wintering **White-crowned Sparrows** and a pair of **California Towhees**, and in the shrubs was a flock

We moved on to the Wildfowl Pond, which was empty except for a single Mallard drake. To our surprise he swam right up, hopped out of the water, and waddled over to stand at our feet, looking up at us expectantly. Perhaps he was people-watching, but more likely he was hoping for food.



American Goldfinch

Photo: Sandy Wong

of **American Goldfinches**, buff-colored in their winter plumage. It was interesting to compare them to the bright yellow Lesser Goldfinches we had seen earlier.

A **Black Phoebe** sallied out in pursuit of an insect and **Chestnut-backed Chickadees** were hanging upside down from a tree as a **Downy Woodpecker** called. A flash of blue turned out to be a **Western Scrub Jay**, quite bold and unafraid. **Common Ravens** flew in to land in a Monterey Pine. We also had the opportunity to compare **House Finches** to **Purple Finches**.



Western Scrub Jay

Photo: Sandy Wong

On our way out, a flock of **Bushtits** flew in to charm us with their antics. Our last stop was the California Garden, where we stopped just above the reservoir. A bright **Western Tanager** was the first of several yellow birds we found here. Next was a **Yellow Warbler**, foraging for insects, followed by a first-of-season **Yellow-rumped Warbler**.

But then, too soon, it was time to head back to the front gate. To see us off, a flock of **Canada Geese** flew in to land on the Great Meadow.



Bushtit

Photo: Sandy Wong

After the group left, I couldn't resist going back to the California Garden, where I was rewarded by sightings of **Black-throated Grey Warbler**, **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** and **Warbling** and **Hutton's Vireos**. I love fall!