



A Successful Heron Watch

Blue Heron Newsletter • August 2012

Dear Friends:

Many thanks to all of you who visited Heron Watch during the spring season and those of you who have attended our *Birding for Everyone* and *Birding for Kids and their Families* walks at the SF Botanical Garden.

Our volunteer naturalists gave their all to the School Program: Linda Grant, Connie Armitage, Missi Hirt, Taji Allen, Kris Kifer, Jeanne Crawford, and Tony Iwane. Special thanks to Chris Giorni at Tree Frog Treks for his support and for joining us on our winter field trip to the SF Botanical Garden.

I would also like to thank our interns Cedric, Logan, Mina, and Ingrid for their hard work at Heron Watch. They led the public tours and shared their knowledge with hundreds of folks who showed up each week.

We couldn't do it without our volunteers from ERM Corporation: Mike Smylie, Peter Dillon, Courtenay Pinder, Victoria and Alexa Evans. Special thanks to Anne Galjour for staffing the information table and Megan Prelinger, board member, for pitching in on all sorts of assignments.

Birding for Kids and their Families has been a huge success. Fifty adults and children have participated during June and July! We have two months left—August and September—so please help us get the word out.

We now turn our eyes to recruiting high school students to intern at Heron's Head Park, a restored wetlands located near Pier 94 in SF. Please see page 5 for more information.

Please support our programs by giving generously. Membership starts at \$30. 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

The Last Day of Heron Watch

Logan K., Intern

On May 19th, we were graced by fantastic sunny weather. On this last day of the Heron Watch program there was quite a lot of heron activity near the nests. There were many twig presentations, disputes between adults and interlopers, and feedings of hungry chicks. Four interns and four adult volunteers from ERM Corporation were on hand to interpret the spectacle to a grand audience.

We started with great views of a **Black Phoebe**, and observed its nest and chicks. This elegant flycatcher is one of the most representative birds of San Francisco.



Interns Ingrid, Logan, Mina, and Cedric, with Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director of SF Nature Education.

Despite a relatively limited range confined to the Rio Grande area and coastal California, this species is abundant here. We continued and were impressed by a bold **Song Sparrow** on Strawberry Island, while **Dark-eyed Juncos** lined the path up the hill.

When we reached the top, we looked into a **Brown Creeper** nest. This species is widespread throughout North America but is very cryptic. They can typically be heard uttering their extremely high call, which cannot

be heard by those without acute hearing. It is hard to find the birds themselves and extremely hard to find the nest.

Luckily, we knew the exact location of the nest, and were rewarded with up-close views of the birds. We also found some **Red-tailed Hawks**. This species is San Francisco's largest raptor, and is the most common as well.

While walking down the mountain we were joined by a few **Tree Swallows**. This species, which is naturally attracted to water, has been able to use Stow Lake as a place of refuge. Nest boxes have been set up for them, which they were occupying at the top of Strawberry Hill. We finished our tour with more views of the **Great Blue Herons**. The oldest chicks were starting to branch-hop. This year there were two successful nests that hatched two chicks each. Stow Lake, over the past 19 years, has been home to 153 fledged chicks!



Great Blue Heron chick stretches its wings with a parent nearby.

On the pages ahead:

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ERM volunteers Victoria Evans, Mike Smylie, Alexa Evans, and Courtenay Pinder.

Uncredited photos: © 2012 SFNE



Watercolor of Heron Watch 2012 by Johnny Mayne.



Artist Johnny Mayne paints on the last day of Heron Watch.



Courtenay and a child watching a heron.

Thanks to All Our Heron Watch Volunteers!

Our six-week program was a great success this year. Each Saturday hundreds of adults and children visited Stow Lake to observe the Great Blue Herons. Our four interns—Ingrid, Mina, Cedric, and Logan—brought energy, enthusiasm, knowledge, and expertise to their role as Heron Watch interns, leading tours and helping folks at the spotting scopes.

Our volunteers from ERM Corporation: Peter Dillon, Courtenay Pinder, Victoria Evans and daughter Alexa, plus Mike Smylie, the excellent volunteer recruiter, aced their tasks.

This was the fifth year that ERM employees staffed Heron Watch. We appreciate their enthusiasm, and are grateful for their devotion to this program.

We thank our terrific information table managers, Anne Galjour and Anastasia Marin, who welcomed visitors, answered questions, and made sure all had turns at the scopes.

As we go to press two chicks, who are flying, are still calling Strawberry Island home. Chicks typically leave for good at about twelve weeks—however, these chicks are already 15 weeks old. We'll keep you posted.

We look forward to next year's Heron Watch!

Nancy DeStefanis
SFNE Executive Director



Brown Creeper chick leaves its nest.

Photo: Sandi Wong © 2012



Tree Swallow feeds a chick in its nest box.

Photo: Sandi Wong © 2012



Volunteers Anne Galjour, left, and Alexa Evans with Nancy DeStefanis.



Tree swallow chick waits for parent to arrive.

Photo: Sandi Wong © 2012



ERM volunteer Victoria with a fourth-grader at the spotting scope.



Interns Ingrid and Logan, with spotting scopes, lead a walking tour up Strawberry Hill.

Birding for Everyone June Report

Alan Hopkins, Naturalist

The June 2nd *Birding for Everyone* walk in the San Francisco Botanical Garden met under typical summer-pattern gray skies. The birds were typical as well; most of the wintering sparrows, warblers, and waterfowl had migrated to their nesting grounds. With the winter birds away it is a great time to get to know our resident species better.

We concentrated on learning our local bird songs: **American Robin**, **Dark-eyed Junco**, and **Song Sparrow**. We had a few opportunities to contrast the rolling **Purple Finch's** song to that of the nasal jumble of notes of a **House Finch**. We also noted nesting behaviors—birds carrying material and food to the nest. We noted the differences between adult plumages on **Black Phoebes** and **Juncos**. Among the highlights were a **Red-shouldered Hawk** perched in the redwoods and one of the city's last **California Quail** that came into view.

Birding for Everyone July Report

Cedric D., Intern



On July 7th, interns Logan, Mina, and I led the July *Birding for Everyone* walk in the San Francisco Botanical Garden. The walk began at 10 AM in front of the bookstore near the 9th Ave. entrance. The group included several adults and a fourth grader who is an avid birder and intern in training. We had started walking towards the Fragrance Garden when we heard a loud screech above us. We looked up to find two **Red-tailed Hawks** chasing each other. Not far away we heard a couple of **Steller's Jays'** hoarse and raspy calls.

In the Fragrance Garden we found two species of hummingbird: **Anna's & Allen's**. Both species were hovering and using their proboscis-like bill to extract nectar from blooming, colorful flowers. Then a bird started singing atop a bush three feet away from us. It was a charismatic **Song Sparrow** that was very noticeable (unlike other birds we'd see along our walk). On our way back onto the trail we heard and saw **Chestnut-backed Chickadees** feeding upside down on a tree, and a **Black Phoebe** on the lawn.



Alan Hopkins, at right, with some June birders in the garden.

Our next stop was at the Wildfowl Pond near Friend Gate. There we found a single female **Mallard** preening. **American Robins** hopped on the grass in search of subterranean quarry. As we walked on the bridge we heard a call from behind us. We turned to see a **Downy Woodpecker** flying in our direction and landing at the top of a nearby tree. Another **Black Phoebe** flew from under the bridge (where it nests) to a perch five feet from us.

As we continued down the trail we heard a faint and nasal call from far away that sounded like "HAAA". We told the group that this was a **California Quail** call. These quail used to be abundant in the city but are now found only in the Botanical Garden. This was a treat for the group, as most of them hadn't heard a quail before. We searched for the quail but to no avail. However, we did find **Lesser Goldfinches** and **Pygmy Nuthatches** flying from tree to tree.



Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

Pygmy Nuthatch

During a brief hiatus to drink water and answer questions we saw a **Western Scrub Jay** atop a dead and barren tree. Behind us, **Bushtits** were feeding in a group of ten and making sounds: very faint and high-pitched "cheeps."

For twenty minutes we didn't make any stops. We just looked at birds very briefly, as most species we had seen earlier. The only new ones were **Tree Swallows**, a fledgling **Brown-headed Cowbird**, **California**

Towhee, and a flying **Great Blue Heron**. Then we arrived at the Redwood Grove where we were looking for a **Pacific Wren**. Fortunately it immediately started singing its complex and varied song. It was extremely difficult to get a good view of it, as it was hiding beneath the large ferns. Most of us saw only a flash of brown underneath the foliage.



Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

Pacific Wren

We then walked to the reservoir, where myriad **Tree Swallows** grazed the water's surface to snatch unsuspecting gnats. A juvenile **Black Phoebe** was fly-catching on the fence, and didn't seem afraid of us, since we were only two feet from it.

We arrived at the California Garden. There we saw singing **Purple Finches**, **American** and **Lesser Goldfinches**.

We concluded the tour where we had begun. Before bidding the group *adieu*, we made a quick stop at the **Nuttall's Woodpecker** tree. Earlier, Logan and I had found this woodpecker in the tree, perched on a nesting box.



Photo: Matt Knoth

Purple Finch



Photo: Len Blumin

Nuttall's Woodpecker

We weren't sure if it was nesting or not, as it never fully entered the box. It was a wonderful sight nonetheless. But the woodpecker was M.I.A. when we went back.

The group was a joy to lead; they asked questions about the local avifauna and were genuinely interested in the birds. To top it off, we couldn't have asked for more beautiful weather. Overall, this was a splendid walk!



Photo: Margo Bors

Naturalist Anastasia Marin, in sunglasses, and her group relax at the fountain, June 2.

First Birding for Kids Walk of the Summer

Anastasia Marin, Naturalist

On June 2nd, San Francisco Nature Education kicked off its *Birding for Kids* program, the first in a series of monthly nature walks that will continue through September. So many adults and children showed up that Executive Director Nancy DeStefanis led a second group. The day started as a typical San Francisco day should, in fog. The participants in my group were eight students and three adults who had traveled to Golden Gate Park all the way from the Bayview District. I handed each student a pair of binoculars and explained how to best spot the birds through them. Our group was off.

The first bird spotted was an **American Robin**. With great interest the students observed it pulling worms from the ground. The next birds spotted were a gaggle of **Canada Geese** on the grass. The students walked quietly around the birds, surprised at how big they were.

The next stop was the Waterfowl Pond, where students spotted a **Mallard** pair. The real surprise was just a few steps away. A **Great Blue Heron** was hunting for fish on the other side of the pond. Mesmerized, the students patiently observed the majestic bird and were rewarded with a great show when it caught and swallowed a fish!

The hike continued through the Redwood grove, where students saw several **Cooper's Hawks** rush through the trees. I pointed out a **Red-shouldered Hawk** resting on a nearby branch. To see such a big bird so close was a real treat for everyone!

At the Succulent Garden the students observed two **Anna's Hummingbirds** sipping nectar out of big red flowers, then took a break and wrote in the bird journals provided for them.

On the way back everyone stopped to listen to a **Song Sparrow** high up in a tree. The tour ended with a big group hug and everyone making loud duck calls!



Photo: Susan Sweil

Nancy DeStefanis, in dark blue vest, leads a family walk on June 2.



Photo: Susan Sweil

Great Blue Heron in the Wildfowl Pond.



Enchanted by the Great Blue Heron on June 2.



Photo: Margo Bors

Families rest at the Redwood Grove in the Botanical Garden on July 7.

Photo: © SFNE 2012

My Internship at Heron's Head Park

Eddy Z., Intern

Glancing at the wall of my AP environmental science class, I noticed an alluring blue flyer with a picture of a bird. After skimming a few details I quickly asked my teacher what the program was about. She simply replied, "it's something you would like." After a few weeks with the program, I instantly fell in love with the cool mornings I spent spotting birds such as Buffleheads (a personal favorite) and the iconic Great Blue Heron. Now I am two years deep into the Bayview Birders internship, and the scenery has only blossomed.

Throughout the program, I realized that I am not the only one experiencing the joys that Heron's Head Park has to offer. My first year was spent working together with Lowell and Lincoln seniors who all graduated last year leaving me, the sole junior. However, my tours with them have left a lasting impression on me. We learned to use the scopes together, led tours together, and even sang together. Though I might never see them again I know we will stay connected as avid birders (or through Facebook).

Out with the old and in with the new. Coming into my second year I met new wonderful interns such as Mina and Logan. Though they are superior in terms of birding experience and knowledge, we still manage to find simple joy in birding together. Over the past few months I was able to watch Logan and Mina at work, and it has also loosened up my awkwardness during tours.

Working with Logan during a stewardship allowed me to get hands-on experience clearing out invasive plant species in wetlands. Working with Mina I learned to add more than simple explanations and bring out the curiosity of fellow birders on our tours.

The program uses the buddy system for interns. We learn from each other while conducting tours and answering questions. Our instructors Allan Ridley, Len Blumin, Anthony Khalil from Literacy for Environmental Justice, and Executive Director Nancy DeStefanis, taught anatomy, field identification of birds and plants, natural history, and interpersonal communication.

The birds that migrate in our scenic park continue to amaze me. We were fortunate to have observed two juvenile Clapper Rails!

This program is a great asset to San Francisco high school students who want to learn about and teach

natural history, birds and plants, and to the people who attend the public tours.

Finally, as my own time in the program draws to a close, I realize I will miss the Bufflehead ducks, the adults and children who enliven our tours with their questions and comments, and the 14 interns I met along the way. I will even miss the cold mornings and the reports I had to prepare for the monthly newsletters. The experiences I gained here will carry me through college. I plan to major in environmental science in college, and the greatest influence on my decision has been the Heron's Head Park program.



Eddy Z., center, and Logan K., in cap, lead the last Heron's Head public tour on March 10.

Upcoming Events*

Birding for Everyone: No walk in August. Next walk: September 1 with naturalist Megan Prelinger, 10 am–noon. Meet in front of San Francisco Botanical Garden bookstore. SF Nature fees: Adults \$10.

SF Botanical Garden Admission Fees: FREE for children ages 4 and under; FREE for all San Francisco residents with proof of residency \$7 for adults; \$5 for youth 12-17, seniors 65 & over, and college students with ID \$2 for children 5-11; \$15 for families (2 adults and one or more children)

Birding for Kids ages 6-12: Aug. 4 and Sep. 1, 10-11:30 am. All students must be accompanied by an adult. \$10 per family. All walks led by San Francisco Nature Education naturalists.

Leave from SF Botanical Garden bookstore. Take a leisurely walk through the microhabitats of the Botanical Garden. Free field journal provided to children. Please bring binoculars, if you have them, and a pencil for recording bird sightings.

*Please see our new online [events calendar](#).

Applying for Internships at Heron's Head Park

High school students may apply for internships at Heron's Head Park by completing our online application: http://www.sfnature.org/get_involved/intern.html

Applications are due by Friday, September 21, 2012.

Applicants will be interviewed by September 28, and notified by Monday, October 1.

Training will begin October 13, and end December 15. Interns will lead public tours at Heron's Head Park on the following Saturdays:

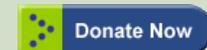
January 12, February 9, and March 9, 2013. Credit given for community service.

For more information please contact San Francisco Nature Education at info@sfnature.org, or telephone 415-387-9160.



Michael M., a participant in our SFNE programs, with the birdhouse he built and painted at a Contemporary Jewish Museum workshop in June.

SF Nature Education
3450 Geary, Ste. 208
San Francisco, CA 94118
e-mail: info@sfnature.org
telephone: 415-387-9160
www.sfnature.org





Northern Mockingbird on a neighbor's garage



Fox Sparrow



Western Scrub Jay trying to hang onto a finch-sized perch



Chestnut-backed Chickadee

All photos: Judy Harter



House Finch, yellow variant

Fledgling and male Dark-eyed Juncos



American Crow

My Backyard Birds

Much of the birdwatching I've done during the past few years has been from home in SF. Some backyard birds were drawn by a feeder, some were nesting nearby, a few were hardly welcome. The feeder is down—common casualty of squirrels and pigeons—but birds still come for the finch mix tossed out every morning. *Judy Harter, newsletter editor and designer*

Lesser Goldfinch fledgling on a wet day



Young Red-shouldered Hawk



White-crowned Sparrow



Lesser Goldfinch



House Sparrows



Anna's Hummingbird on a Calla Lily



Mourning Dove