



# Exploring Garden and Bay

Blue Heron Newsletter • December 2012

Dear Friends,

During the month of December, I hope you will support our local programs for underserved youth and the public for 2013. Below is a summary of what you can expect in the coming year.

Our special winter program—**Birding Heron's Head Park**—starts in January. High school interns who have completed extensive training at the park will lead hour-long tours of this incredible wetlands situated near Pier 94. All interns are equipped with spotting scopes and special birding guides to the park. Last year we saw Clapper Rails, Harlequin and Goldeneye ducks, to name just a few species.

For six Saturdays in the spring we will conduct **Heron Watch** at Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park. Next year marks the 20th year that San Francisco Nature Education has been showing these magnificent birds to visitors. We will celebrate this anniversary with lectures and slide shows throughout the Bay Area, and with special gifts at our Saturday walks to observe the herons and their chicks at Stow Lake.

In addition to our monthly **Birding for Everyone** walks at the SF Botanical Garden (except in July and August), we will feature walks at some new spots: Glen Canyon Park and Lake Merced.

Our **Birding for Kids and their Families** nature walks continue on first Saturdays in June, July, August, and September.

San Francisco Nature Education offers our award-winning environmental **School Program** to 1,200 students every year at participating elementary schools. Students receive two classroom visits from naturalists and two guided field trips to local parks. Fifty high-school students have participated in our **internship programs** since 2002.

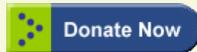
We rely on your support to fund these exciting programs. I wish you a very happy holiday and a wonderful New Year.

Best regards,

*Nancy DeStefanis*

Executive Director

Please donate now, or mail a check to:  
SF Nature Education, 3450 Geary, Ste. 208  
San Francisco, CA 94118



## Third-graders Hit the Trail

Missi Hirt, Naturalist



It was a beautiful crisp morning when we met with Mr. Campana's class from New Traditions School to explore the Botanical Garden and to see birds that his third-graders had learned about. This group was prepared, motivated, and excited.

We began by reviewing some of the guidelines for being guests in the park. Then we handed out binoculars and reviewed and practiced how to use them. We talked about how to use the "clock system" to let others know where a bird is located. We split up into three groups, with Bill Milestone and Nancy DeStefanis each leading a group. My group with eight young naturalists then began our eco-adventure.

The first birds to reveal themselves were two **White-crowned Sparrows**. We crossed a bridge and came to an open area surrounded by trees. Here we stood quietly for a while—looking and listening. This naturalist technique never fails, and it allowed us to spot a **Red-shouldered Hawk** perched in a tree. How exciting! Hawks like to eat gophers, moles, and mice, but smaller birds can be on their menu too. We talked about their beaks and talons, and their role in the food chain. We all got a good look through our binoculars.

A brilliant **Anna's Hummingbird** had been attracted to some flowers near us. In the sunlight, we were able to see its bright crimson-red head and green body, and to identify its unique chirping. On our trail, we passed a mortar and pestle of the type used by Native Americans to crush and grind acorns and other nuts, and a receptacle used by scientists to collect insects for research. At last, in a clearing with some tree stumps, we took a snack break and drew in our field journals some of the birds we had seen so far.

With our binoculars at the ready, we were in for more surprises. We spotted a **Red-breasted Sapsucker** in a tree hanging over the path. What an incredible-looking bird! While we watched it hop along the underside of a branch a student noticed a black and white bird flying

into a nearby tree: a **Black Phoebe**. With vision like hawks we continued to the Moon Viewing Garden, where we saw a few **Eastern Gray Squirrels**. Here we also spotted a **Chesnut-backed Chickadee** with its distinctive white cheeks and brown head. A candy wrapper in the pond prompted a

discussion about leaving no trace in the outdoors for the safety of the animals and so that others may enjoy an uncluttered garden.

A birdcall led us to a tree, where two **Townsend's Warblers** were easy to spot with their bright yellow coloring and their black "bandit" stripe across the head. Next, we arrived at the Wildfowl Pond, where we saw a few **American Coots** dabbling in the water. We saw a female **Mallard** and a **Pied-billed Grebe** in the water, and on some rocks a couple of **Red-eared Sliders**. A large **Western Gull** made an appearance.

Our field trip ended in the Exhibition Garden, where two astute students identified the last bird of the day, one that we had been searching for: a red-breasted **American Robin**. He was rooting around in the grass, possibly looking for a worm. What a fantastic field trip!

### On the pages ahead:

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- 3 Report from a Birding Walk in Crissy Field
- 4 *Birding for Everyone* report; Upcoming Events; Call for Volunteers
- 5 *Around the Bay*: A Photo Essay



Preparing to sketch birds during a break.

Photo: SFNE



Eastern Gray Squirrel



Red-shouldered Hawk in a tree.

All photos: SFNE



Naturalist Bill Milestone and his group relax after their walk.



Students enjoy a break at the Botanical Garden's Fountain Plaza.



Students spot a bird on the trail.

## Third-graders discover flora and fauna of the San Francisco Botanical Garden.



In the Redwood Grove.



Mr. Campana, teacher, and his group of third-graders.

## A November Walk in Crissy Field

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist



Warm, clear weather delighted us on our November 10th walk in Crissy Field, where we gathered to look for seasonal aquatic birds. Our group of eight adults and an avid third-grader started out from the Warming Hut by looking west towards the Golden

Gate. There, beneath the bridge, visible through the spotting scope carried by Nancy DeStefanis, was a large flock of mixed **Western** and **Clark's Grebes**. The Grebes congregate at the Golden Gate in fall and winter to take advantage of the herring and smelt runs through the narrow strait. Several **Double-crested Cormorants**, with an adult **Brown Pelican**, were perched on the foundation of the southern bridge tower. We took note of the bright white neck feathers of the winter plumage of the Brown Pelican.



Sanderling

Photo: Len Blumin

Another adult of that species buzzed the group, flying quite low over our heads.

Walking east, we stopped where we had a good view of the

fence that reaches into the bay. We had a brief glimpse of **Sanderlings** running in the surf with four **Snowy Plovers** nearby on the sand. These birds were quickly flushed by human activity. Beyond them, on the fence, was a row of **Royal Terns**, distinguishable by their combination of white crown with a black tuft at the nape. **Western Gulls** and Brown Pelicans were with the terns on the fence. Offshore, intermittently visible between

long dives, was a **Common Loon** sporting the white throat and breast of its winter plumage.

As we walked we noted the abundant year-round park residents, such as **Brewer's Blackbirds**, **American Crows**, and



Killdeer

Photo: Matt Kroth

**European Starlings**. Immature **Western Gulls** in charcoal gray plumage were abundant near the picnic area and fishing pier. At our first marsh stop we had good views of male and female **Buffleheads** swimming in the water, while a number of **American Coots** foraged around the edge. A **Great Blue Heron** flew in to the marsh. We trained the spotting scope on a small island at the western side of the marsh, first at a **Killdeer**, and then, in front of the Killdeer, at a pair of

**Least Sandpipers** pecking along the waterline. These Sandpipers are so small (4-4½") that at first they were hard to distinguish from the small stones that cover the island.



Least Sandpiper

Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

The eastern edge of the marsh was our last stop, and we had a field day with the number of species visible in the flat sands exposed by a receding tide. A **Black-necked Stilt** was first to get our attention, then a **Long-billed Curlew** appeared nearby. Both birds, along with a **Snowy Egret**, were mixed in with a group of quite varied gulls. As the gulls had mostly retracted their heads under their



Black-necked Stilt

Photo: Doug Greenberg

wings, it was a challenge to identify them. One by one we verified the distinctive features—bill color and shape, feather pattern, and leg color—of four species of Gulls: **Western, California, Ring-billed**, and **Mew**.



Snowy Egret

Photo: Len Blumin



Aleta, a third-grader, looks through the spotting scope.

Photo: SFNE

Swimming in the water nearby was a seasonal flock of **Ruddy Ducks** accompanied by one **Greater Scaup**. In the bushes on the opposite side of the path were **White-crowned** and **Golden-crowned Sparrows**. We had a terrific day!



Helen Wood, Deborah Mayer, and Chris Malfatti observe birds in the lagoon.

Photo: SFNE

## November's *Birding for Everyone* Walk

Nancy DeStefanis, Director, SF Nature Education

On November 3rd, I was joined by a group of eight birders at the San Francisco Botanical Garden. It was a lovely sunny day and we began with a walk through the Exhibition Garden, where we spotted **California Towhees** and **White-crowned Sparrows** right in front of us.

Soon we heard the distinctive call of the **Red-shouldered Hawk** overhead. When we arrived at the Wildfowl Pond we spotted numerous **American Coots**, with their red eyes and the red spot between their eyes. A **Mallard** and a **Pied-billed Grebe** joined the coots. We also found a **Black Phoebe** catching flies nearby.

As we made our way through the Chilean Cloud Forest we looked for the **Red-breasted Sapsucker** but we couldn't find him in any of the trees that he frequents. Nearby we spotted an **Eastern Gray Squirrel** that did not look like one, and a beautiful **Monarch** butterfly.

We were thrilled to spot a **Yellow-rumped Warbler** and a **Chestnut-backed Chickadee**. Then a **Western Scrub Jay** made his presence known with a loud squawk.

As we passed the Redwood Grove we got a good view of an **Anna's Hummingbird** and a **Song Sparrow**.

But the grand finale was yet to come. Just as we passed the Bamboo Grove in the Temperate Asia Garden we saw a **Red-tailed Hawk** standing on the edge of an Asian stone bird bath. As we watched he proceeded to jump in and take a bath! We could not have chosen a better ending to a perfect day.



Photos: Bill Hunnewell

Red-tailed Hawk in the Temperate Asia Garden.



Photo: SFNE

An enthusiastic group of birders rests under a redwood tree.

## Upcoming Events\*

**Birding for Everyone:** Led by Alan Hopkins, Sat., Dec. 1; also Sat., Jan. 5, 2013, led by Megan Prelinger, 10 am–noon. Meet in front of San Francisco Botanical Garden bookstore. SF Nature fees: Adults \$10, children free. See additional SF Botanical Garden fees below.

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.

**SF Botanical Garden Admission Fees:** FREE for children ages 4 and under; FREE for all San Francisco residents with proof of residency; nonresidents pay varying fees. See the [Garden's Web site](#) for details.

**Birding at Heron's Head Park:** Sat., Jan. 12, Feb. 9, and Mar. 9. High school interns lead four one-hour tours: at 10 am, 10:30, 11, and 11:30. Adults \$10, children free. Details [here](#).

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

## Volunteer Webmaster Needed for SFNE!

We are looking for a volunteer with HTML and CSS coding skills to upload our monthly pdf newsletter to our web site, and to make site updates as needed, typically requiring one to two hours per month.

We will be happy to provide a recommendation letter for any volunteer who works with us for at least one academic year. Please call or e-mail us for information (see contact information below).

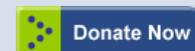
**School Volunteers Needed!** Please visit [www.sfnature.org/get\\_involved](http://www.sfnature.org/get_involved) for information.

## Wish List:

One good microscope for our classroom visits.

SF Nature Education  
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San Francisco, CA 94118

e-mail: [info@sfnature.org](mailto:info@sfnature.org)  
telephone: 415-387-9160  
[www.sfnature.org](http://www.sfnature.org)



## Around the Bay

These spots are great places to observe seasonal birds and other local fauna.

Photographs by Sandi Wong  
except Bullock's Oriole by  
Trevor Lee



Green-winged Teals, Radio Road, Redwood City



Northern Shoveler, Radio Road, Redwood City



Northern Pintail, Radio Road, Redwood City



Bullock's Oriole, Palo Alto Baylands



White-tailed Kite, Palace of Fine Arts



Cinnamon Teal, Radio Road, Redwood City



American Crow harasses Red-tailed Hawk, Sunset Reservoir, SF



River Otter, ruins of Sutro Baths