



Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

Wishing you a new year filled with peace and joy.

Thank you for supporting our programs through our end-of-year appeal. We appreciate your donations small and large to help us continue and expand our school and public programs. Your donations help make it possible for us to provide underserved students with outdoor environmental education. Your contributions also support our internship programs at Heron's Head Park and Stow Lake, and all our public Saturday programs.

I want to thank our corps of volunteers, who deliver classroom enrichment visits and field trips on weekdays; our Saturday program leaders; and our invaluable webmaster and newsletter editor.

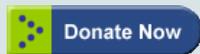
Because of the dedication of our volunteers, SF Nature Education is able to deliver high-quality programs at a reduced cost to our schools.

If you were not able to donate before Dec. 31st, please consider a donation now. Our staff salaries, insurance policies, and expenses continue to climb.

I look forward to seeing you at Birding for Everyone or a Heron's Head Park public tour; both programs resume in January.

Best regards,

Nancy DeStefanis



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Bret Harte Third Graders Learn About Local Birds

Anastasia Marin, Naturalist

Three naturalists from SFNE visited Ms. Hackett's third-grade classroom on December 8th. At the bird-beak station, Meg Spicer explained adaptation. The wing station used the real wings of a Barn Owl and a Red-tailed Hawk to show students how birds fly. Students compared the weight of a pelican bone with that of a deer bone.

Nancy DeStefanis volunteered at the draw-a-bird station, which featured a mounted California Quail and a female Mallard in flying position.

Students were very excited to touch genuine beaks, bones, wings, and feathers. Ms. Hackett's class looks forward to visiting the SF Botanical Garden in January to search for local birds.



Photos: SFNE

Demonstrating flight with Barn Owl wings.



Naturalist Anastasia Marin discusses a hawk feather with students and Ms. Hackett.



Ms. Paulette of Bret Harte assists at the draw-a-bird table.



Ms. Hackett shows student a Pelican beak.



Left: Student holds Mallard in flight.
Above: Student sketches California Quail.

Kindergartners Visit SF Botanical Garden

Taji Allen, Naturalist

Bret Harte students from Ms. Fergin-Mavaega's class visited the SF Botanical Garden on November 8th. Led by naturalists Taji Allen and Executive Director, Nancy DeStefanis, the kindergartners hiked on hidden trails throughout the garden.

The children were thrilled to walk through the Bamboo Forest and the Redwood Grove. American Coots abounded at the Wildfowl Pond, and hummingbirds entertained the students with dramatic dives in the Succulent Garden. Lunch followed in the Demonstration Garden. A good time was had by all.



Students practice listening for birds.



Walking single-file through the Native California Garden.



Left: Ms. Fergin with chaperones and students at a dawn redwood. Above: Ms. Kara, a chaperone, and kindergartners.

Photos: SFVE

Homing Pigeons at Heron's Head

Mina C., Intern



The morning of November 19th was quite cold and overcast. The chilly weather, however, did not deter the dedicated members of our San Francisco Nature Education intern field training team. At precisely ten, we witnessed the release of homing pigeons. These were bred and owned by Bill Milestone,

a local pigeon flyer. He is part of the San Francisco Racing Pigeon Club and has a coop in his garden with a little trap door allowing the birds easy access into their home. He brought a dozen pigeons for us to observe and showed us one, a tan male, up close. We were shown the bird's primary and secondary flight feathers, oil gland, nose wattle, and pearl-colored eyes. Though the pigeons were released in Heron's Head Park, their fast flight allowed them to quickly return home to the Richmond District.

Homing pigeons are actually **Rock Pigeons** that have been domesticated. Over the years they have been selectively bred to find their way home over long distances. Some have been recorded flying at rapid speeds as far as 1,100 miles during racing competitions. They are similar in appearance to wild rock pigeons. However, they have a larger nose wattle and their hearts are larger. The eyes of the homing pigeon are considered to be quite important. Breeders often look at the eyes to judge the quality of the bird. As they fly, the pigeons stay close together, wheeling upward first to gain height and get their bearings before winging off into the distance. If predators such as raptors are present, the birds will stay in an even tighter flock, turning and flying as one.

Sometimes known as carrier pigeons, these birds were first used by the Egyptians and Persians 3,000 years ago. As carrier pigeons the birds were used to deliver messages, but could go only to the one place they identify as home. Therefore, the sender must have possession of the receiver's pigeon to send a message. In both World War I and World War II, pigeons were used to convey important messages that couldn't be transmitted by radio for fear of interception. Many of these pigeons were awarded special honors for their heroic service. Bird banding was conceived by pigeon breeders, as it allowed them to identify their birds. Later, however, ornithologists took up the practice, too.

After the dramatic homing pigeon release, we quickly moved on to the rest of our walk with Instructor Len Blumin. We soon observed a female **American Kestrel** perched on a lamppost eating a mouse. After watching for a while, we started down the Heron's Head trail. Next we saw several shorebirds, including Willets, a **Black-necked Stilt**, **Black-bellied Plovers**, **Spotted Sandpipers**, and **Whimbrels**. We watched some male **Buffleheads** diving with a lone female. Depending on the light, these ducks can have an iridescent head. Perched on the pier were two **Black Oystercatchers**, a **Common Raven**, and several **Double-crested Cormorants**.

We were just heading back when a **Horned Grebe** swam into view, the third species of grebe we had seen that day, the others being **Western** and **Pied-billed Grebes**. Next, some **American Wigeons** and **American Coots** presented themselves, swimming near the shore. We also had a nice view of the **Clapper Rail** among the rushes, which was very exciting. The Clapper Rail is an endangered species and has only recently taken up residence at the restored salt marsh habitat of Heron's Head Park. It was a good way to wrap up the day.

Right: Bufflehead

Far right, from top: Bill Milestone shows one of his homing pigeons to intern Mina and instructor Len Blumin; wing of the pigeon; wattle is prominent on pigeon's beak.

Below: In the field, spotting migratory birds.



Photo: Doug Greenberg



Heron's Head photos: SFNE

Heron's Head Habitat Restoration

Logan K., Intern



On November 12th, volunteers gathered at Heron's Head Park for habitat restoration. With Eddy, about twenty other people and I participated in this exciting day. We used pickaxes to uproot invasive, harmful plant species. We planted

some native species. This helps regenerate the original, native ecosystem in place of the invasive European ecosystem that is plaguing America to this day.

We were able to replace hundreds of plants, covering a large section of the open areas with native, healthy plants. As the ecosystem gets restored, more birds will likely come to this new and improved habitat. We hope that native habitat will soon cover the open spaces of Heron's Head Park, a crucial step towards its improvement.

We had another great, informative day on December 10th. Angie Geiger, our fantastic leader, showed us how to better communicate our knowledge. She explained the roles of clarity and precision when addressing the public, and described some common questions.

As she talked we observed a grand array of shorebirds. Among them were many **Black-necked Stilts** and **American Avocets**. In San Francisco these black and white shorebirds are restricted to the southern bayside, where they thrive in Heron's Head Park's dense pickleweed. Also among them was the buoyant **Spotted Sandpiper**. This bizarre shorebird can be readily identified by the fact that it constantly pumps its tail up and down.

We encountered a large complex of ducks. Among the species present were **Common Goldeneye** and **American Wigeon**. Goldeneyes are a scarce and localized species in San Francisco, regularly inhabiting only the southeast section. Wigeons are slightly more common here, though still found only in a few areas.

Lastly, we found a gorgeous **Belted Kingfisher** perched on a wire. This handsome cerulean bird is found in only a few places in San Francisco. Fewer

than ten can be found in San Francisco in winter, but Heron's Head Park is quite possibly the easiest place to find them. They are most easily located by their harsh rattling sound, similar to that of a woodpecker (which they are closely related to). An interesting fact about Kingfishers is that the females are more colorful than the males (a trait shared with few other birds).



Left: Angie Geiger explains the art of leading tours.

Below left: Common Goldeneye
Below: Logan and Eddy serve as stewards at Heron's Head Park.



Photo: Len Blumin



Heron's Head photos: SFNE



Google Maps

For directions to Heron's Head Park search for Jennings St & Cargo Way, SF, at maps.google.com.

Upcoming Events

Birding for Everyone: First Saturdays: Jan. 7, Feb. 4, Mar. 3, 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, children free, no one turned away due to lack of funds.

Heron's Head Park: Saturdays Jan. 14, Feb. 11, March 10. Tours start at 10 am, 10:30, 11:00, final tour at 11:30. Guided tours last about one hour. Free!

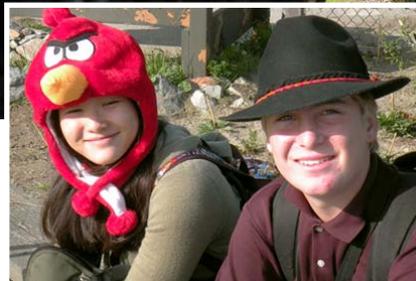
Birding the Presidio: Saturday, Feb. 25, 10 am–noon. Meeting place to be announced in next newsletter.

Volunteers Needed for 2012 School Program!

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



Above: Instructor Angie Geiger; interns Logan and Mina, naturalist Kris Kiefer.



Left: Mina and Logan relax after training.

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Chain of Lakes Walk

Angie Geiger, Naturalist



On November 12th, San Francisco Nature Education organized a bird walk at a new location, the Chain of Lakes in western Golden Gate Park. Although rain was in the forecast it turned out to be a beautiful morning. We were excited that executive director Nancy DeStefanis would join us.

Our first stop was Middle Lake, and there we saw our first bird of the day: an **Anna's Hummingbird** in the midst of a display flight. As we rounded a bend, someone called out, "Look up!" We were under a large eucalyptus tree filled with birds. As we focused our binoculars we saw that the flock was mostly **Yellow-rumped Warblers**. We could easily have missed these birds, since they were uncharacteristically quiet, emitting not a single "chip" note.

As we zeroed in on one bird after another, we found a beautiful **Townsend's Warbler** in the mix. We were suddenly surrounded by two dogs. A few moments later, a group of four people, holding the leashes that should have been attached to the dogs, approached. One of our group pointed out that SF has a leash law. A middle-aged man took great offense and reacted with an angry tirade, but the scofflaws soon moved on. Sadly, many dog owners do not realize, or possibly do not care, that their dogs have a negative impact on our avian wildlife.

Luckily for us, a couple of birds soon flew out of the bushes to alight on the path directly in front of us. It was a pair of very cooperative **California Towhees**. I managed to get them both into view in the spotting scope. Several folks remarked that they had never before noticed the attractive rufous coloring under the throat and tails of towhees. As we moved along the path, several other birds popped up in the bushes, among them a **Fox Sparrow** and a **Steller's Jay**.

In a clearing above the lake we had excellent views of a **Black Phoebe** flicking his tail, as flycatchers do. From Middle Lake, we crossed the street to continue around North Lake. We went in a counter-clockwise direction so we could reach the little sandy beach for the best view

of the birds on the water. And the lake was filled with birds! The first birds we focused on were a pair of **Ring-necked Ducks** that were preening on a floating log. The fact that they were out of the water allowed

great views of the light breast and undersides. The male and female look quite different from each other, with the male mostly black and white and the female mostly brown. Most puzzling about these ducks is their

name. They have a prominent white ring around their bill, but the namesake ring around the neck is barely visible, and then only in perfect light. This pair was joined by about forty Ring-necks on the lake.

Right next to the floating log was a sleeping pair of Northern Shovelers. We had the birds in the scope and were able to observe great close-up views. Along with the many ducks on the lake were a large number of **American Coots**, often chasing one another and emitting their curious vocalizations. Another bird with an odd call is the **Pied-billed Grebe**, and we saw at least six on the lake. I noticed one that resembled a female Ring-necked Duck, but with a bluish-grey bill. On closer inspection it turned out to be a **Scaup**. I did not examine it closely enough to determine whether it was a Greater or Lesser Scaup, but it was a nice addition to our list for the day.

Someone noticed some sparrows perched behind us. They were **Golden-crowned Sparrows**, a species that winters in the Bay Area. We also noted a couple of year-round **Song Sparrows**. Overhead a **Red-tailed Hawk** sailed on the air currents, and as we watched a kettle of four **Common**



Female (left) and male Ring-necked Ducks

Photo: Len Blumin

Ravens joined the aerial display. We continued to make our way around the lake, carefully searching the reeds along the water's edge for signs of Herons or Egrets. We had to settle for **Mallards**.

Soon we reached the wooden bridge, and as we scanned the water for more ducks, the bushes moved, and some little masked faces peered up at us. Along the edge of the lake a family of five raccoons appeared one by one. They looked at us expectantly and it was obvious that someone had been feeding them. Ironically, it was in the area of two signs that clearly stated "Do not feed the wild animals." By then it was time to make our way back, but as we left a **Steller's Jay** flew in to see us on our way.

We crossed the street and continued to go around Middle Lake. When we were almost back to the parking lot Deborah, our reliable hawk-spotter, called out "Hawk!" At the top of a Monterey pine was a huge **Red-tailed Hawk**. We were able to see it in the scope, and everyone got close-up views of this magnificent bird. As we watched, two more Red-tails flew in high overhead.

Before getting back in our cars we could not resist having a quick look at South Lake. That decision was quickly rewarded by a sighting of a **Belted Kingfisher** perched over the water, trying to swallow a three-inch fish. With the scope we could clearly see the rufous band that indicates a female bird. She dove into the water again and again, catching and devouring a total of four fish as we watched in amazement. Our final two birds of the day were a single **Western Gull** and a flock of **Rock Pigeons** that landed on the lawn across the lake.



Angie Geiger, fifth from left, and her intrepid group braving the cold at the Chain of Lakes.

Photo: SFNE

Birding for Everyone Report

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist



It was a crisp sunny autumn day in the SF Botanical Garden for our group of six birders and fearless co-leader Nancy DeStefanis. While we were gathering at the entrance a **Red-tailed Hawk** landed high in the large pine that anchors the near end of the lawn. We all got good

views of it before we proceeded to the Exhibition Garden for the start of our walk. Inside the garden we were greeted by **Western Scrub Jays**, and got our first glimpses of the **Anna's Hummingbirds** that would be the most abundant species of the day. **Ravens** were high up in the pines. We also got close looks at **White-crowned** and **Golden-crowned Sparrows** as they foraged in the grass.

At the Waterfowl Pond a **Yellow-rumped Warbler** displayed at the top of a small tree, and a **Black Phoebe** swooped around us and perched on fronds.

In the water were abundant **American Coots**, one **Pied-billed Grebe**, and one small **Mew Gull**. We were able to closely compare the Mew Gull with the much larger **Western Gull** that was perched on a rock nearby. We saw how the Mew Gull's bill, which in winter is gray with black spots, was extremely different from the vivid yellow-orange bill of the Western.



Pied-billed Grebe

Photo: Judy Harter



Mew Gull

Photo: Just Chaos

The Andean Cloud Forest offered a generous opportunity for viewing Anna's Hummingbirds. Several were busy at the agave blossoms, and we took a



Anna's Hummingbird

Photo: Judy Harter



Western Gull

Photo: Len Blumin

stopped by the sound of high-pitched chipping in a nearby tree. As we watched, it came to life with a flock of **Bushtits**. We were able to get glimpses of these tiny and gregarious birds, one of the smallest in North America.

The California Native Plant garden was a rewarding stop for us. We could hear **Song Sparrows** singing as we walked through. Around a low pine tree at the far end of the garden were a pair of **California Towhees**. We got a brief glimpse of a **Pygmy Nuthatch**. Then we noticed subtle movement on the trunk of the tree which turned out to be two



California Towhee

Photo: Sandi Wong



Brown Creeper

Photo: Rick Leche

break there. While we were watching, a **Downy Woodpecker** came into view at a century tree.

In front of the Moon Viewing Garden, facing the Conifer Lawn, we were

Brown Creepers working the bark. The Creepers were in view for quite a while and all of us got good looks at them and of their practice of climbing only upward on the trunk, then flying down before climbing up again.



Chestnut-backed Chickadee

Photo: Rick Leche

arrived and put on a good display for us. As we walked up the path toward the exit we thought our walk was winding down, but two of us jumped at the same time at the sight of a **Red-shouldered Hawk**. This hawk was calmly perched unusually close to the path, almost at eye level. After we all backed a few feet from it we took quiet but privileged looks at this magnificent bird.



Red-shouldered Hawk

Photo: Judy Harter

We then turned back and made our way toward the exit along a different path. In the Library Garden we reviewed the walk while a **Black Phoebe** and an **Anna's Hummingbird** buzzed one another. It was a delightful and rewarding walk.



The group on the December 3rd *Birding for Everyone* walk. Author Megan Prelinger is in the red jacket.

Photo: SFNE