



Heron Chicks Are Hatched!

Blue Heron Newsletter • May 2012

Dear Friends,



Welcome to spring! In the past month trees and flowers have bloomed across the city. Our foundational Heron Watch program is up and running at full steam at Stow Lake. On the inaugural Saturday event on April 14, dozens of people—including many families—stopped by the telescopes to take in the sight of adult birds attending to their nests. As we go to publication there are a total four chicks in two nests, with two additional nests still incubating.

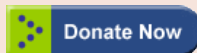
Chicks are just part of the spring news; the period for the challenge grant mentioned last month has been extended until the end of May. Our generous matching donors are doubling all donations up to a total of \$10,000. During the first half of the matching grant period we raised half the possible funds! We are grateful to all who have donated. Now there is more time for us to fulfill the promise of the entire grant to support our award-winning school and internship programs.

I'm extremely pleased to join a growing pool of naturalists who are contributing to SFNE's regular programs. We are sorry to be losing the talents of the amazing Angie Geiger as a result of her retirement. Starting this spring, *Birding for Everyone* in the SF Botanical Garden will be led by a rotating team of naturalists. I will be leading on May 5, and Alan Hopkins will lead on June 2.

Thank you for your support and engagement!

Megan Prelinger

Board of Directors, Naturalist



Opening Day at Heron Watch

Cedric D., Intern



April 14th marked the beginning of the 2012 Heron Watch Program and my first day as an intern for SFNE. We were fortunate enough to have the sun out, making this first day that much more enjoyable!

At 9 o'clock, the interns met at the observation site (not far from the boathouse) at Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park. The four interns included Ingrid, Mina, Logan & myself. Two volunteers from ERM Corporation, Mike and Courtney, joined us. We began setting up the information table, chairs, scopes, and tripods. We observed some common birds, such as **American Coots, Mallards, Western Gulls, Red-winged Blackbirds, Canada Geese**, and the focus of this program, **Great Blue Herons** and their chicks.

It didn't take long for eager individuals to start waiting in line to get a view through the scopes, which were pointed at the heron nests in the treetops on Heron Island. We were lucky to see much activity at the most visible nest. The male kept leaving and returning to the nest with twigs and branches that he gave to the female for nest material. This was exciting for the



Intern Mina steadies the scope for a very young watcher.



Photo: © 2012 SFNE by Jesse Krider

At approximately three weeks, the heron chick in nest number 2 is the oldest.

public. All the visitors were in awe when they watched the male heron fly over.

At 10:30, we began our walks around Stow Lake. Nancy DeStefanis, Director of SFNE, loaned binoculars to all who needed them. We led a large group. We walked to Strawberry Hill, to a point where there is a perfect view of the heron nests. We set up four scopes, each aimed at a different nest. Fortunately for me, my scope was pointed at the nest where two chicks have hatched.

As we continued up the hill we saw **Pygmy Nuthatches**, a **Hairy Woodpecker**, and **Steller's Jays**. We arrived at the reservoir, where our target bird usually nests. We

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- 5 Kindergartners tour Stow Lake
- 6 *Birding for Everyone*; Upcoming Events

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spent quite some time looking for this bird, and finally found it sitting at the foot of the branch. The **Great Horned Owl** was taking a nap, completely unaware that a group of ten people was staring at it. The owl was very close to the ground, providing us with exceptional views through our scopes.

On our way down the trail, Logan and I noticed some fuzz in the branches. We determined that it was an **owlet** in its nest. We stared at the nest for about ten minutes and our group was quite delighted.

After seeing the Great Horned Owls we returned to the observation site, where enthusiastic participants returned the binoculars and shared their excitement.



Most people don't know that Great Blues feed on gophers as well as fish.



Photo: © 2012 SFNE by Jesse Krider

Heron with two young chicks in Heron Island nest.



Other photos this page: Paul J. Chamberlain © 2012

Great Horned Owllet not yet fledged at Stow Lake.



Great Blue Heron uses the stab and grab method to remove gopher from hole.



Pygmy Nuthatch



Heron flying with a visible gopher bulge in its neck.

OUR MATCHING GRANT DONATION PERIOD HAS BEEN EXTENDED!

The matching grant for San Francisco Nature Education has been extended until **May 31, 2012**. Please donate now so we can meet our goal!

Donors who send **\$30** or more will receive a membership in San Francisco Nature Education.

Donors of **\$250** or more will receive five Great Blue Heron greeting cards.

Donors of **\$500** or more will receive a signed Great Blue Heron photo (5x7 or 8x10, donor's choice).

Donors of **\$1,000** or more will receive **either** a guided tour of the Great Blue Herons and chicks at Stow Lake, for up to ten people, **or** two photos of Great Blue Herons at Stow Lake signed by the photographer.



Or send a check to:

SF Nature Education
3450 Geary, Ste. 208
San Francisco, CA 94118

e-mail: info@sfnature.org
telephone: 415-387-9160
www.sfnature.org



Photo: © 2012 Nancy DeStefanis

Nest number 3 has two chicks; at right is the oldest, about two weeks.



Other photos this page: SFNE © 2012

Interns (from left) Mina, Cedric, and Logan join participants and Nancy DeStefanis (far right) at the Stow Lake boathouse to lead an opening day nature walk.



Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

Hairy Woodpecker

At Stow Lake for Opening Day of Heron Watch 2012



Intern Logan helps with the spotting scope.



Photo: © 2012 SFNE by Jesse Krider

Two heron chicks with parent in treetop nest.



Heron Watch intern Ingrid shows her nature journal to a visitor.



ERM volunteer Courtney, left, enjoys the sunny weather.



ERM Corp. volunteer Mike Smylie, in cap, makes sure this child gets a great view.



Intern Cedric helps a participant focus on the heron chicks.

First Graders Explore Stow Lake

Connie Armitage, Naturalist

Miss Rha's first-grade class from Bret Harte Elementary was eager to see birds on Tuesday, April 17. In groups of six, students began to hike around Stow Lake and Strawberry Hill. The first birds they noticed were **Western Gulls**. They identified a couple of big swimmers as **Canada Geese** by their white chin straps. Rounding the edge of the lake the children noticed Mr. and Mrs. **Mallard**, and then an **American Coot** on a rock grooming itself.

We looked toward Heron Island and spotted nests with **Great Blue Herons** in the tops of trees. Then we crossed the road to where Nancy D. had a spotting scope, and taking turns we got good looks at three herons in nests.

Along the way to the Roman Bridge there was a **Song Sparrow**; a male **Brewer's Blackbird** with glistening black feathers and yellow eyes; a female **Brewer's Blackbird**, grayer with dark eyes; and then a treat: a **Red-winged Blackbird** hopping from branch to branch, singing a song, and flashing red epaulets.

Once on Strawberry Hill Island we found a great place to watch the **Great Blue Herons** in their nests. We spied squirrels and a dragonfly. One student noticed a little bird in a bush—a **Dark-eyed Junco**. We drew in our journals some birds we had seen.

Walking down steps along the waterfall we paused for pictures. At the bottom we found some **Red-eared Slider Turtles** on a log, and an **American Robin** hop-hop-hoppin' along under the trees. We walked across the Rustic Bridge, and enjoyed touching the rocks (90 million years old!) used to construct it.

Arriving back to the boathouse area for lunch we saw one more animal, a **Spiny Softshell Turtle** with its pointy nose.



Canada Geese with their eight goslings.

Photo: Sandi Wong © 2012



Naturalist Missi Hirt (far right) and her group at the waterfall.

Photo: © 2012 SFNE



Teacher Ms. Rha, left, and Connie Armitage, right, with first graders.

Photo: © 2012 SFNE



Hugging a redwood.

Photo: © 2012 SFNE



Spiny Softshell Turtle

Photo: J. Oldenettel



Kris Kifer and her group.

Photo: © 2012 SFNE

An Awesome Outing at the Lake

Missi Hirt, Naturalist

Soon after students arrived at the meeting site we observed some water wildlife: **Mallards**, **Canada Geese**, and **American Coots**. We could hear a **Red-winged Blackbird** calling from the shrubs. He flew into view, where we could see the bright red plumage in his wings. The group was excited, as this was a bird that they had been hoping to see.

We came to a park bench where I had the students sit, and I asked them to be silent; just listen and look. A new world of outdoor sounds, sights, and smells were experienced. We carried on to Huntington Falls, hugged some redwoods, and came to the beautiful pagoda for a snack break. Here the students got out their field journals, circled birds seen, and drew pictures of them.

A **skunk** was spotted at a distance on the hillside, so we were able to observe him until he disappeared. How lucky to see this nocturnal critter during the daytime! A **Red-shouldered Hawk** soared as we went across the Rustic Bridge and its ancient stones.



Nancy DeStefanis and a student view a heron nest.

Photo: Connie Armitage

Next came two **Canada Geese** and their eight goslings on the side of the path. We gave them some distance so we could watch. We also saw **Red-eared Sliders** on a log in the lake.

We were then treated to the sight of a **Double-crested Cormorant** popping up from the lake with a fish in his beak, and two **Pied-billed Grebes**.

Coming full circle, we arrived at the boathouse, where we reunited with other groups, had lunch, and reviewed our awesome day!



Skunk!

Photo: Sandi Wong © 2012



Photo: Sandi Wong

Kindergartners' Field Trip

Linda Grant, Naturalist

On April 17th, Ms. Vega's kindergarten class from Bret Harte Elementary arrived at Stow Lake. Accompanying the class was teacher Ms. Tanya and chaperones Ms. Portia and Mr. Pasha. We began our walk along the boat dock, where students had close views of **Mallards**, **American Coots**, and **Western Gulls**.

We noticed a feather lying on the ground that provided a lesson about the two types of birds' feathers—down, which is closest to the bird's body and keeps it warm, and contour, or flight feathers, which keep it dry.

As we walked toward the Roman Bridge we encountered both **Brewer's Blackbirds** and **Red-winged Blackbirds**. The students got excited when they glimpsed the **Red-winged Blackbirds'** bright red shoulder patches. The male uses these patches to define his status in breeding territory. After crossing the bridge the class stopped to listen to the distinctive call of a **Song Sparrow**: "hip, hip, hooray, spring is here."

At Huntington Falls Reservoir the class enjoyed a snack before checking off names in their field journals of the



Photo: © 2012 SFNE

Smelling plants on Strawberry Hill.



Photo: © 2012 SFNE by Jesse Krider

Twig presentation.



Photo: Sandi Wong

birds they had seen earlier. From the reservoir we descended wooden steps and continued our walk toward the Rustic Bridge. On our way we spotted **Steller's Jays** and an **American Robin**. We were lucky to spot several **Canada Geese** goslings swimming close to their parents.

The highlight of the field trip was looking through a spotting scope at nesting **Great Blue Herons** high in their stick nests. Class arrived back at the boathouse picnic tables hungry for lunch. The walk around Stow Lake was quite an exciting event!



Photo: © 2012 SFNE

Above: Students loved their stop at the Golden Gate Pavillion.



Photo: © 2012 SFNE

Linda Grant (in cap), chaperones, and lively kindergartners.

Far left: A flotilla of ten Mallard ducklings. Left: Canada Goslings. Right: Ms. Vega, kindergarten teacher (glasses), with students using home-made binoculars.



Photo: © 2012 SFNE

Watching Big and Small Birds with Kindergartners at Stow Lake

Anastasia Marin, SFNE School Program Coordinator

On April 17th, SF Nature Education welcomed Ms. Vega's kindergarten class from Bret Harte Elementary School to Stow Lake for their spring field trip. The lake was filled with birds. Spring is the perfect time for the students to see a variety of birds, some of which they already knew from the SF Nature class visit in March.

The first birds seen were a pair of **Mallard Ducks**, and the children had no problem telling the naturalists which was male and which was female! The **American Coot** was the next bird spotted—surprising the students with its red eyes and a red spot between the eyes.

A big surprise was just around the corner. Spring is the time when majestic **Great Blue Herons** nest at Stow Lake. This year four nests are occupied, and SF Nature Executive Director Nancy DeStefanis set up a scope pointing at the nests. The students were amazed and excited as they observed three birds sitting on nests!

But the trip was far from over. As naturalists led the students around the lake, they saw an **Anna's Hummingbird** sitting on top of a tree. They observed a **Red-tailed Hawk** eating a gopher. Then the students found a **Rock Pigeon's** nest in the Chinese Pagoda. Later, they spotted a **Black Phoebe's** nest under the Rustic Bridge. But the biggest thrill was at the very end, when students saw a pair of **Canada Geese** with their eight cute fuzzy goslings gliding on the lake!

Birding for Everyone Highlights

Missi Hirt, Naturalist



It was a brisk morning with the sun shining brightly as we walked the beautiful SF Botanical Garden in search of birds. The group comprised birding enthusiasts, regulars, and a young family of new birders.

Some of our common sightings included **Mallard** pairs, **Brewer's Blackbirds**, **Rock Doves**, **American Coots**, **Canada Geese**, and **American Crows**.

We were quick to spot a **Black Phoebe**, some **House Finches**, **White-crowned Sparrows**, and a **Chestnut-backed Chickadee** or two. A **Bushtit** was identified, and a **Townsend's Warbler** made a surprise appearance. **Song Sparrows** provided a sound track to our walk, while **Western Scrub Jays** and **American Robins** were also very busy in the garden.

Our day was highlighted with a fantastic view of a **Downy Woodpecker** who was probing into a large hole in the side of an asparagus tree, possibly in search of insects in the dead bark. He was spotted in the Succulent Garden, a few feet from the top of the tree, with the light hitting him perfectly, so we were able to see clearly his black and white plumage and bright red crest.



Downy Woodpecker

Photo: Len Blurmin

Vibrantly colored **Anna's** and **Allen's Hummingbirds** were seen buzzing from flower to flower. The family with us were delighted to learn that hummingbirds are the only bird in the world that can fly backwards. We may have seen a few doing just that!



Red-tailed Hawk

Photo: Len Blurmin

As for raptors, we spotted three kinds of hawks soaring and perching above us: **Red-tailed Hawks**, **Red-shouldered Hawks**, and **Cooper's Hawks**.

Interestingly, we had seen a **Steller's Jay**

imitating almost perfectly the call of a **Red-tailed Hawk**. It was one of the most incredible bird behaviors that I have ever observed—a wonderful imitation.

A conversation began as to why a Steller's Jay would do this. What adaptive advantage could this provide? It is widely believed that the purpose is to deceive other birds into thinking that a hawk is nearby, which scares birds away from food and territory that the jay would like for itself. Often these bold and noisy birds get a bad rap, but you can't deny they are quite clever and very resourceful.



Steller's Jay

Photo: Rick Leche

Calendar

See sidebar at right for details.

- May 5 **Heron Watch and Stow Lake Nature Walks**
- May 5 **Birding for Everyone**
- May 12 **Nesting Birds of Lake Merritt**
- May 12 **Heron Watch and Stow Lake Nature Walks**
- May 19 **Heron Watch and Stow Lake Nature Walks**
- May 26 **Nesting Birds of Lake Merritt**
- Jun 2 **Birding for Everyone; Birding for Kids & Families**
- Jun 9 **Nesting Birds of Lake Merritt**



Our deepest thanks to Angie Geiger, the *Birding for Everyone* naturalist and guide, who has recently retired after many years of public service. Not only did she lead most of the monthly first-Saturday birding walks in the SF Botanical Garden, she

taught communication skills to our interns at Heron's Head Park during their December training. We have benefited from her expertise and generosity, and we wish her well in all future endeavors.

Starting in May, we will rotate naturalists/birders in leading the monthly *Birding for Everyone* walk. The program now operates twelve months a year, and offers beginning and experienced birders an enjoyable and informative walk through one of the beautiful public gardens in the Bay Area.

Upcoming Events

Heron Watch: Saturdays May 5, 12, and 19, 10 am–1 pm. Come and see Great Blue Herons and their chicks! Follow sign at Stow Lake boathouse to program site. Observation using spotting scopes: free. Interns and volunteers will be there to answer questions and explain heron behavior. Donations welcome. For more information visit www.sfnature.org or call 415 387-9160.

SF Nature Education Nature Walks from Heron Watch site: Saturdays, May 5, 12, and 19. Adult Walk: \$10, between 10:30 and noon. Family Walk: 10:30–11:30, \$10 per family. For more information see [Heron Watch](http://Heron Watch online) online.

Birding for Everyone: First Saturdays: May 5, Jun. 2, Jul. 7, 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). Trips will have rotating guides. May 5: Megan Prelinger; Jun. 2: Alan Hopkins. Adults \$10, children free, no one turned away.

Birding for Kids and Families: Jun. 2, Jul. 7, Aug. 4, and September 1, 10–11:30 am. Meet us near the bookstore inside the main gate for a leisurely walk through the SF Botanical Garden to learn about local birds. Free field journal for kids. \$10 per family.

Nesting Birds of Lake Merritt, Oakland: Saturdays, May 12, 26, and June 9, from 10 am until noon. Stationed near the Rotary Nature Center and bird sanctuary, volunteers will have scopes for sharing close-up looks at birds such as nesting Double-crested Cormorants. The docent program is a project of Golden Gate Audubon Society and San Francisco Nature Education. Free.

Heron Watch Site: Getting There



Follow signs from the Stow Lake boathouse to Heron Watch site.