



Twenty Years of Heron Watch

Blue Heron Newsletter • April 2013

A Matching Grant for SF Nature Education

Dear Friends,

We have a \$10,000 matching grant that expires May 30th. Two generous donors have offered the matching grant to support our 27 Saturday programs for the public: *Heron Watch*, *Birding for Everyone*, *Birding for Kids and their Families*, Heron's Head Park birding tours and internships for middle and high school students.

Please help us reach our goal by donating now online or sending a check.

Donors of \$50 or more will receive a set of Great Blue Heron postcards that show their courtship behaviors, and a parent and newly hatched chick photographed by Jim Sullivan for San Francisco Nature Education.

Donors of \$250 or more will receive five different Great Blue Heron greeting cards suitable for framing.

Donors of \$500 or more will receive a framed 8x10 Great Blue Heron photograph.

Donors of \$1,000 or more may choose a private guided tour of the Great Blue Heron colony at Stow Lake for six people, complete with picnic lunch: sandwiches, cheese, and drinks OR two framed photos of a Great Blue Heron.

Thanks for your support.

Best regards,

Nancy DeStefanis



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Celebrating a Big Anniversary of the Stow Lake Heron Colony

Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director

This year we celebrate our 20th year of monitoring the Great Blue Heron colony at Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park. During this time we have educated school children and adults about the wonders of these magnificent birds right in the middle of San Francisco.

As we go to press, herons at three nests are incubating eggs; a fourth nest has an adult standing continuously—which may mean that its eggs have hatched.



Heron greets a partner.

When we begin *Heron Watch* on April 13th, we expect to see heron chicks in all four nests! Volunteers will be stationed at spotting scopes to show the public these charismatic birds, and to explain their behaviors and activities. This program is free, though we welcome donations.

Our observation site will be open from 10 am until 1 pm each Saturday between April 13 and May 18.

We will also conduct a guided walk to observe other nesting birds at Stow Lake and Strawberry Island. Walks begin each Saturday at 10:30 am and end at noon. Fees for adults are \$10; children are always free. Children will be given a free nature guide to the birds of Stow Lake (while supplies last).

A few facts about these remarkable birds: Great Blue Herons generally live about 15 years in the wild and can reproduce during the entire period. Their height ranges from 48 inches to 52 inches—hard to miss if you're on the lookout. Despite their size they weigh only five pounds. They eat primarily fish. Often we hear people comment on the loss of pond koi to herons. Herons are carnivores, which also explains their taste for gophers and other small mammals.

The population of Great Blue Herons is stable, and in some places in the U.S. it is increasing. Because herons nest in wetlands for feeding, and in relatively undisturbed sites for breeding (Stow Lake, Lake Merced, Audubon Canyon Ranch/Martin Griffin Preserve/Stinson Beach), they are vulnerable to habitat loss and damage such as logging. Napa State Hospital cut down nesting trees at the end of a breeding season because of guano deposits on

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Photos: Jesse Krider

Changing places at the nest for incubation.



Taking off for a feeding.



Celebrating a Big Anniversary

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staff cars. Development, motorboats, and other human intrusions all can disrupt nesting colonies. And according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, newer types of industrial chemicals continue to affect heron habitats.

Our mission at San Francisco Nature Education is to preserve and protect the colony at Stow Lake, to educate the public about these incredible birds, and to raise a new generation of conservationists through our school programs.

Please support our matching grant with a donation so we may continue our programs for children and our Saturday walks throughout the city. I look forward to seeing you at Stow Lake.

Hérons by the Numbers

During the past 20 years, 153 chicks have fledged at Stow Lake. In past seasons we have seen up to 6 nests occupied; Stow Lake is a thriving colony. The herons generally lay 2 to 6 eggs in each nest. Several times we have observed 4 chicks in 1 nest and all have fledged!

Upcoming Events*

Heron Watch at Stow Lake: Opening Day Saturday, April 13, and then every Saturday through May 18, 10 am to 1 pm. 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.

Naturalist-led walk every Saturday at 10:30 am for adults and children to observe the nesting birds that arrive every spring at Stow Lake. Adults \$10, children free.

Birding for Everyone: first Saturday of every month. Led by Logan Kahle Apr. 6, by Megan Prelinger May 4: 10 am–noon. Meet in front of San Francisco Botanical Garden bookstore. SF Nature fees: Adults \$10, children free. See additional Botanical Garden fees below. Please bring binoculars if you have them, and a pencil for recording bird sightings.

Birding for Kids—Save the Dates: first Saturday of every month from June through September, 10–11:30 am. Adults \$10 each, children free.

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.

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

Upcoming Lectures/Slideshows by Nancy DeStefanis, SFNE Executive Director

**Oakland Museum: A Tale of Two Lakes—
Lake Merritt Egrets and Stow Lake Great Blue Herons**
Thursday, April 18, 12:30 pm. Museum admission:
\$12 general; \$9 seniors & students with valid ID;
\$6 youth, 9–17.

**Randall Museum in San Francisco:
Great Blue Herons of San Francisco—
Celebrating Twenty Years**
With most recent and exciting photos of Stow Lake's
Heron Colony. Thursday, April 18, 7:30 pm. Free
program.



Heron's Head Park: Last Tours of 2013 Mina, Intern



Saturday morning, March 9th, was pleasantly warm. The sun was out and a slight breeze wafted around Heron's Head Park.

After a brief history of the park we headed down the path. Our first sighting was male **Red-winged Blackbirds** atop several bushes in the upland section of the park. We continued on and spotted **American Avocets**. At this time of year the Avocets had the rusty coloring on their upper bodies that is their breeding plumage.

We were lucky to sight a few **Killdeers** and some **Black-bellied Plovers**. That was great



Snowy Egret

Photo: Doug Greenberg



Mina, at center with name tag, leads her first group of the day.

Photo: SFNE

because it gave us the opportunity to show our group the similarities and differences between the two types of plovers.

As we were watching the plovers a **Snowy Egret** flew overhead and landed close enough for us to get a good view. The bird displayed the long white plumes typical of Snowy Egrets, and had striking golden slippers. In the nineteenth century, these birds were hunted

to a dangerously low level for their plumes, which decorated women's hats. Fortunately their population has recovered.

We saw several ducks: male and female **Buffleheads**, a raft of **Ruddy Ducks**, several male and female **Greater Scaups**, and some **American Wigeons**. Some of the male Ruddy Ducks were in rust-red breeding plumage. We saw several shorebirds, including a **Black Oystercatcher** whose bright orange bill was a delight to our group.

During Alan Hopkins' first tour one of our regulars, Trace Cannell, spotted an unusual bird. Alan identified it as a **Clapper Rail**—a rare sighting at Heron's Head Park.

On our second tour at eleven we spotted a group of birds: **American Avocets** and some **Black-necked Stilts** in front and a dozen **Mew Gulls** in back. There was also a **Western Gull**. This gave us the opportunity

to contrast it with the Mew Gulls. In comparison to Mew Gulls—the smallest commonly-occurring gull at Heron's Head Park—it was much larger and distinctive. We saw some **Black-bellied Plovers** nearby.

Moving on we saw a **Long-billed Curlew** some distance from us. Fortunately we were able to get quick views through the scope to observe its long bill. Long-billed Curlews are the largest shorebirds typically seen at Heron's Head Park, and are similar to the Whimbrel, though the Curlew's beak is longer, and it lacks the Whimbrel's eye and crown stripe.

As we headed back we observed a **Clark's Grebe**. It was a great finale to our winter field trips—43 species seen!



Emily, a former birding student, with SFNE director Nancy DeStefanis, right.

Photo: SFNE



Clapper Rail

Photo: Len Blumin



Long-billed Curlew

Photo: Jerry Oldenettel



Naturalist Alan Hopkins, left, with park visitors.

Photo: SFNE

Birding for Everyone March Report

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist



March 2nd was a warm bright day with spring in the air. The Botanical Garden was quite fragrant, as aromatic blossoms were beginning to bloom. It turned out to be the most abundant birding day of the year so far.

We started at the Great Meadow. At the large Monterey cypress near the entrance a **Red-tailed Hawk** perched above us. In the smaller lawn trees we saw a **Ruby-crowned Kinglet**, while behind us in the



Photo: Megan Prelinger

SF Botanical Garden, March 2nd

flowers was a **Lesser Goldfinch**. We saw a **Steller's Jay** below it on the ground. A female Yellow Warbler visited the branches above us. On the lawn were abundant **American Robins** and **Black Phoebes**. Our first **Anna's Hummingbird** of the day perched on a treetop until it was displaced by an arriving Phoebe.



Photo: Tom Leach

Steller's Jay

As we made our way toward the Waterfowl Pond two **Yellow-rumped Warblers** flitted around the fountain. At the pond we found a pair of **Hooded Mergansers**. First they were swimming, then they hauled out and were preening and dozing.



Photo: Tom Leach

Hooded Mergansers, male and female.

Hawk circling overhead; the first sighting of this bird but not the last. In the pond the regular **American**



Photo: Judy Harter

Cooper's Hawk

Gondwana Circle a **Fox Sparrow** called and was clearly visible. Along the walk to the Succulent Garden a **Chestnut-backed Chickadee** and a **Scrub Jay** were seen. Overhead were a group of **Common Ravens** and a **Red-shouldered Hawk**.

A pair of **California Gulls** flew over from Stow Lake, coming close enough that we could identify them.

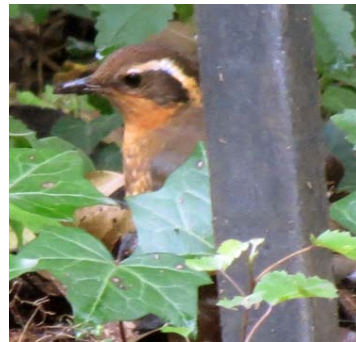


Photo: Tom Leach

Varied Thrush

We had a long look at these spectacular birds. But there was much to see from our position besides the Mergansers.

Our rear guard spotted a **Cooper's**

Coots were in residence, as were **Mallards**. A **Mew Gull** swam and a **Western Gull** and **Canada Geese** arrived nearby.

On the walk through the Chilean forest another highlight appeared: a female **Varied Thrush**. This winter migrant was foraging on the cool and shady ground below the great trees.

At the site of the future

At the Succulent Garden we saw a flock of **Bushtits** feeding in a cluster of plants and low trees.

Dark-eyed Juncos were abundant and foraging on the ground. Our next pair of exciting highlights: a flock of **Cedar Waxwings** around the eucalyptus above our heads, and then a pair of **Pygmy Nuthatches** on one of the century plants.



Photo: Judy Harter

Bushtit

Our last unique sighting of the day was a **Great Blue Heron** flying low across the California Natives Garden. At 29 confirmed species sighted, this was an extremely delightful day!



Photo: Judy Harter

Fox Sparrow



Photo: Megan Prelinger

Some of the *Birding for Everyone* group in the Botanical Garden.

Ride of the Mergansers, a short documentary about Hooded Merganser chicks hatching and leaving the nest in dramatic fashion, can be viewed online at www.vimeo.com/29858386.



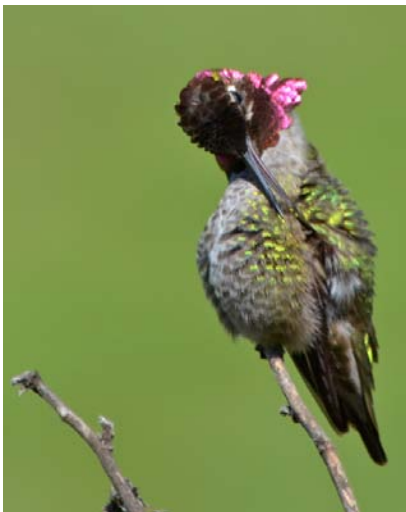
1 Tree Swallow resting near its nest.



2 Tree Swallow attacks a Western Bluebird that gets too close to its nesting territory.



3 Swallow gets the better of Bluebird.



Anna's Hummingbirds perch and preen.

Hummingbirds: Trevor Lee

Spring Birds of Golden Gate Park

Photos by Sandi Wong and Trevor Lee



Western Bluebirds in calmer moments.



4 Swallow defends its turf as Bluebird tries to regain equilibrium.

Swallow and Bluebirds: Sandi Wong



Family Album: Owlets Grow Up in San Francisco

All photos by Sandi Wong

Parent owl and two owlets in their nest
in western Golden Gate Park.