



Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

Thank you to all who donated to our goal of \$10,000—your generous support put us over the top!

We are gearing up for the fall school season. Soon children will be out on the trails at Heron's Head Park or the San Francisco Botanical Garden to spot arriving migrant birds.

Birding for Kids and their Families, on first Saturdays this summer, has been a huge success. The program continues for two more Saturdays: August 3rd and September 7th.

Birding for Everyone resumes on Saturday, September 7th, and continues once a month with a naturalist leading the way.

Heron Watch concluded on May 18th. Although the public tours had ended, we continued to survey the colony and discovered two new chicks in another nest!

On Tuesday evening, October 8th, we will celebrate twenty years of monitoring the Great Blue Heron colony and teaching the public about these charismatic birds. Invitations will be sent out after Labor Day. In the meantime, please save the date.

Thanks again for your support. I hope to see you on the trails.

Best regards,

Nancy

Nancy DeStefanis



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Heron Watch: May Walks & Sightings

Mina, Intern

Bright and early on a Saturday morning Logan and I set up the observation site at Stow Lake and proceeded to observe the **Great Blue Herons**. There were three nests occupied: two of them had two chicks each. Because these chicks were older than four weeks, the adults had left them alone and gone to forage for food. Interestingly, there was also a **Great Egret** perched in a tree on Heron Island. We opened the program to the public at ten and began showing visitors the herons.

Soon Logan and I began to lead our walking tour.

Our first stop was a point where views of the opposite side of the heron nests could be seen. We had an excellent view of nest no. 2 with two chicks.

We proceeded to Strawberry Island (named for the berries that once grew there). Our first stop was another place to watch the herons; being on the high ground of the island we were nearly at eye level with the nests. Through our spotting scopes we could clearly see the two large chicks in nest no. 4. As we were viewing the herons a flock of **Cedar Waxwings** flew into the trees above us.

We talked about a heron's life cycle and its less well-known characteristics. Great Blue Herons are North America's largest wading bird and grow four feet high with a wingspan of six feet, they weigh only five

pounds! They are able to strike their prey at speeds of up to ninety miles per hour.

We continued up Strawberry Island looking for owls and other species. We observed some **Dark-eyed Juncos** and **Brown Creepers** close to the path. We also saw a **Pipevine Swallowtail**, a butterfly with an overall black tone. However, our really spectacular sighting came at the top of the island. As we walked, a member of our group observed a dark mass in one of the trees. Upon closer inspection it turned out to be an adult **Great Horned Owl!** We were delighted with the sighting especially because many had never

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L to R: volunteer Diane Piagneri, intern Mina, Marty Hackett, intern Logan, Mike Smylie (back row), junior intern Michael, and greeter and scope volunteer Christine Malfatti.

Photo: SFNE

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All uncredited photos: Mike Smylie



Anne Galjour, information officer, center, and visitors at the Heron Watch observation site at Stow Lake.

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seen the species before. We were just heading down the path when we saw three Great Horned Owls chicks sitting on a snag. Well pleased with our sightings, we began to walk back.

Near the part of the path where we had seen the juncos we discovered something exciting: their nest! Built into the earth on the side of the path, it was nearly hidden from sight. Once found, it was easy to observe. There were two chicks inside and also a small white egg. As we were watching the nest we noticed the adult birds perching close by and watching. We quickly moved away.

One last treat awaited us on our walk down. We came across four **Canada Geese** and their 17 goslings. As the goslings were of two different sizes, we concluded that two broods had joined together. The goslings would benefit from the safety in increased numbers. After this final spotting we concluded the tour. It was a great day!



Kids love to touch our plastic heron!

Photo: Courtenay Pinder



A toddler enjoys her view of the Great Blues.

Photo: Courtenay Pinder



Four Canada Geese and their goslings form a convoy in Stow Lake. Right: Great Horned Owl.





1

Above: Parent arrives to feed two chicks. The parent feeds the nearer chick a vole or gopher.



2

Right: A chick works hard at swallowing the rodent—see the bulge in the neck.



3

Below: Parent is finished feeding the chicks.



5

The seven-week old chicks are ready for their next meal!



4

Photos: Jesse Krider

Great Blue Heron Feeding Frenzy

On May 16, 2013, Jesse Krider, a nature photographer, captured this sequence of a feeding at nest no. 4 of the Stow Lake heron colony.



Visitors watch the Heron Island nests.



Nancy with Michael, a junior intern.



Taking in the view through a scope.

All photos: Mike Smylie

2013 Heron Watch: Summing Up the Season

Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director

Our 2013 *Heron Watch* program at Stow Lake has now ended. Though at first we had observed four occupied nests on Heron Island, nest number 3 was quickly abandoned. Nest 1 was partly hidden, but we spotted one chick on May 18th. But in mid-June, while carrying out a survey for the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory, I spotted two chicks in the supposedly empty nest 3. The chicks were about five weeks old.

As we go to press, three heron chicks have fledged. One chick, about twelve weeks old, remains in a nest. The two chicks in nest 3 are now about eight weeks old. Their nest is well hidden—I was able to clearly observe them only from a rowboat!

Besides the herons, we were able to observe Great Horned Owlets, Canada Geese with 17 goslings, Tree Swallows, Brown Creepers, Black-crowned Night Herons, and many species described in other reports in this issue.



Top: Nancy with Mike Smylie. Above, center: a chick stands up in the nest.



Red-eared Slider turtles lazing on a sunny day.



Nancy DeStefanis, left, and Bill Milestone (far right) supervise the use of spotting scopes.

Thanks to all who visited *Heron Watch*, took the walking tours, and shared your enthusiasm. Our dedicated interns and volunteers served at least 1,500 people during six weeks.

Many thanks to: our interns Mina and Logan; junior intern Michael; volunteers from ERM Corporation led by Mike Smylie, Ariane Burwell, and Courtney Pinder.

Thanks to our SF Nature Education volunteers: Trace Cannell, Anne Galjour, Marty Hackett, Christine Malfatti, Bill Milestone, Barbara O'Hearn, Diane Pignoli, Sharon Pretti, and Candace Xantopoulos.

153 Heron chicks fledged between 1993 and 2012. If all six chicks from 2013 successfully fledge, the new total will be 159. Not bad for twenty years of nesting at Stow Lake! Stay tuned for final results.

Birding for Everyone in May & June

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist



May 4th and June 1 were lovely bright days in the SF Botanical Garden (Strybing Arboretum). Both days offered good chances for spotting resident regulars and some special migratory species as well. In the two walks we had many regular participants and some new birders who had learned about *Birding for Everyone* through this year's *Heron Watch* program at Stow Lake.

The May walk started off with a notable sighting: a **California Quail** called loudly and then showed itself in the Exhibition

Garden. This was the first member of this species seen on a *Birding for Everyone* walk in about a year. As the quail was missing from the Christmas Bird Count in the Arboretum in December, it was



California Quail

Photo: Judy Harter

exciting to see this individual, one of three adults known to be living in the area of Golden Gate Park between the California Academy of Sciences and the Arboretum.

Next we got a good look at a **Common Raven** perched on a cypress tree, and were able to study how its head, beak, and nares (nostrils) were shaped differently from those of a nearby **American Crow**.



Black Phoebe

Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

At the Waterfowl Pond in May we had seen adult **Black Phoebes** coming and going from a nest under the bridge. By June 1, the result of the Phoebes' labors was visible: four fledglings perched on a bench at the pond's edge, and both parents perched

with them for a moment, allowing us a rare glimpse of a whole family. We compared the paler juvenile plumage with the brighter adult plumage.

Both May and June walks allowed for sightings of **Great Blue Herons** ranging from their colony at Stow Lake. We saw high-flying **Red-shouldered** and **Red-tailed Hawks**, and **Western Gulls**. Another fly-over species was the **Double-crested Cormorant**.

In the Succulent Garden the resident breeding pairs of **Tree Swallows** and **Pygmy Nuthatches** were seen nesting in a dead century plant. We saw **Cedar Waxwings** in the trees above the Succulent Garden; we got an earful of **Olive-sided Flycatcher** song in the same location.



Tree Swallow

Photo: Doug Greenberg

Both walks gave us good opportunities for hearing and seeing **Pacific Wrens** in the Redwood Grove. On the June walk we heard two of them calling back and forth, and saw them flitting between the Redwood trees.



Cooper's Hawk

Photo: Judy Harter

We got a good view of a **Cooper's Hawk**, perched and flying. While it was perched we had ample opportunity to study its rounded tail and compare it to the shorter, blunter tail of the Sharp-shinned Hawk. We spotted a **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** near the Native Plant Garden.

The spring walks gave us the opportunity to listen to a number of



Purple Finch

Photo: Rick Leche

singing **Purple Finches** and **House Finches**, and to hear to the differences between their songs.

Other common species spotted were **Mourning Doves**, **Steller's** and **Scrub Jays**, **Bushtits**, **California Towhees**, **Dark-eyed Juncos**, **Song** and **White-crowned Sparrows**, **Chestnut-backed Chickadees**, and the popular **Anna's** and **Allen's Hummingbirds**.



White-crowned Sparrow

Photo: Judy Harter



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Birding for Kids June Report

Missi Hirt, Naturalist



I had the privilege of co-leading the June 1st *Birding for Kids* walk with my father, Bob Hirt, a VP of Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society. He brought with him a wealth of knowledge from his 40 years of birding in the Bay Area. What a treat! Our group comprised four kids

(ages 6–10 years) and six adults. We began our tour by handing out field journals, and then we gave a lesson on binocular use.

I reminded everyone of some tips for sighting birds: 1. Look for movement, Listen; 2. Check the sky, trees, ground, and water; 3. Use a tree like a clock to identify a bird's location; 4. Keep your eyes on the bird and bring the binoculars up to your eyes.

After some practice, we began our walk in search of birds in Golden Gate Park's beautiful Botanical Garden. The sun was shining brightly, and our warm morning hinted at the hot afternoon that would follow. **Song Sparrows** frequently provided the sound track to our walk, while **American Robins** were busy in the gardens.

As for raptors, we spotted two kinds of hawks soaring and perching high above us, a **Red-tailed Hawk** and a **Cooper's Hawk**.

Hawks especially like to eat rodents—gophers, moles, mice, but even small birds can be on their menu. We talked about beaks and talons and about a hawk's part in the food chain.



Song Sparrow

Photo: Rick Leche

Our walk took us through the Redwood Grove for some welcome shade. A few of the more common birds we saw were **Brewers's Blackbirds**, **Rock Doves**, **Common Ravens**, and **Mourning Doves**.

Our day was highlighted with a fantastic view of a **Pygmy Nuthatch** that was hopping, headfirst, down the side of a tree while probing crevices in the bark for seeds or invertebrates. The whole group was able to see clearly his dark crown, gray-blue wings, white cheeks, and buff-colored underbody. When it flew we noted that it had almost no tail.

After a trip through the Succulent Garden we rounded a bend in the path and spotted a **Western Scrub Jay**.

Vibrantly colored **Anna's** and **Allen's Hummingbirds** were buzzing from flower to flower. Other species seen were **American Goldfinch**, **Lesser Goldfinch**, **House Finch**, **Dark-eyed Junco**, **House Sparrow**, **Violet-green Swallow**, **Chestnut-backed Chickadee**, **California Towhee**, and even a **Double-crested Cormorant** (flying over).



Red-tailed Hawk

Photo: Matt Knoth

Our walk ended at the Wildfowl Pond, where we saw several **Canada Geese**. We also saw **Mallards**, who have bills that allow them to do filter-feeding. Here we saw several **Red-eared Slider** turtles sunning on the rocks or swimming among many large fish that appeared to be carp. **American Coots** were

there, and a **California Gull**. This was a great location to more closely observe at least four different **Black Phoebes** nesting in foliage next to the pond.

Both kids and adults were excited by the walk. Several were quite the bird enthusiasts and very knowledgeable. A great time was had by all.



Allen's Hummingbird

Photo: Len Blumin

Upcoming Events*

Birding for Everyone: first Saturday of every month. No walk in August. Upcoming walks: September 7 and October 5, from 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 and their Families: first Saturdays Aug. 3 and Sept. 7, from 10 to 11:30 am. Meet at the garden bookstore, 9th Ave. near Lincoln. 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.

Save the Date: Tuesday, October 8, 5:30 pm. **San Francisco Nature Education's 20th Anniversary Celebration of Heron Watch.** Details to come in our September newsletter.

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



Pygmy Nuthatch

Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

Birding for Kids, July Sightings

Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director

The July 6th walk brought a great turnout. Twelve kids and eleven adults arrived for the walk at the SF Botanical Garden at 10 am. Near the monastery stones of the library garden we talked about walking quietly so as not to scare the birds. Then we practiced listening to two bird calls: the American Robin and Song Sparrow. We hadn't walked very far when we heard the song of the **Song Sparrow**.

We stopped by the Red-breasted Sapsucker tree, where everyone inspected the even rows of holes drilled by sapsuckers. From there we headed to the Bamboo Forest for an "alone walk," in which students walk by themselves or with a partner.



Black-crowned Night Heron

Photo: Nancy DeStefanis

Parents who entered the forest spotted a **Black-crowned Night Heron** in a shrub next to the trail. Most kids got a clear view of this beautiful bird with its bright red eyes and white plumes.

As we walked on, we saw an **American Robin** and a **Fox Sparrow**. The robin's breast is more orange than red, as everyone observed. The Fox Sparrow's body is chocolate-colored with a speckled white breast.

Near the Redwood Grove we heard the chatter of a flock



Fox Sparrow

Photo: Judy Harter

of hummingbirds. We were pretty sure they were **Anna's Hummingbirds** (with red throats).

We stopped nearby for an opportunity for the kids to check off birds in their field journals. Then, with colored pencils, they proceeded to color their favorite birds. Meanwhile, a parent spotted a nearby **Allen's Hummingbird** with its copper coloring.

Out in the open again we got a spectacular view of a **Red-tailed Hawk**. As we moved towards the Wildfowl



Female Mallard with her six ducklings in the pond.

Photo: Jeff Harter

Pond a student heard and then spotted a **Western Scrub Jay**.

We stopped on the bridge, and immediately the group spotted numerous turtles. One girl turned to the smaller western part of the pond and pointed to a **Mallard** and her brood of six ducklings. Great spotting! Then we saw a flock of **Canada Geese** on the Great Meadow.



John Kelly and his daughters spot a mushroom.

Photo: SFNE

This group was fantastic—the most enthusiastic kids and parents ever. We counted ten species seen, and took a lot of delight in the counting!



Children and their families dressed for summer and ready to go watch some birds in the SF Botanical Garden.

Photo: SFNE



Anna's Hummingbird

Photo: Len Blumin



All photos: Sandi Wong

Cygnets in the City

Each year, photographer Sandi Wong visits the lagoon at the Palace of Fine Arts to look for nesting swans and cygnets. Here is evidence of her success and that of the nesting pair.

