



Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

Happy New Year! Thanks to all our donors for your generous support. We have been planning an expanded field trip offering in 2015: 26 birding walks during the year, including new trips to Lake Merced in March and McLaren Park in April.

We already have quite a line-up planned: Heron's Head Park in January and February to see the abundant bay and shorebirds that pass through during winter migration; Crissy Field in January; and Heron Watch at Stow Lake in April and May to observe the Great Blue Herons and chicks.

We have added five special Birding for Families walks: three at Heron's Head Park, one at the San Francisco Botanical Garden, and one at Stow Lake's Heron Watch.

Volunteers at Heron Watch are always needed; please see page three.

We have made new additions to our newsletter—a list of birds spotted during each field trip at the end of each report, and reviews of bird-themed films.

If you would like to subscribe or renew your membership, you can do so through the *Donate Now* button below: regular membership, \$35; seniors: \$30.

We would greatly appreciate your support for our school and Saturday programs, as well as our new Heron Cam. If you weren't able to make an end-of-year donation, your support now would be most welcome.

Best regards,

Nancy DeStefanis



Birding for Everyone, December 6th Alan Hopkins, Naturalist



On our December SF Botanical Garden bird walk, an intimate group looking to find avian jewels after a week of rain joined me. With the skies still overcast we began the walk at a slow pace and for the first few minutes there wasn't much to be seen. That changed immediately when we arrived at the Fragrance Garden; there seemed to be birds everywhere.

In no time we spotted many **Townsend's** and **Yellow-rumped Warblers**, **Ruby-crowned Kinglets**, **American Robins**, **Lesser Goldfinches**, and **Dark-eyed Juncos**. The sparrows were well represented by **White-** and **Golden-crowned** and **Lincoln's Sparrows**.

The sun was beginning to break through the clouds and many of the birds were taking advantage of the nice weather by bathing in the small ponds and streams that flow from the hands of the statue of Saint Francis; some of the birds were bathing in the saint's outstretched hands.

A real crowd pleaser was a **Fox Sparrow** splashing around for all it was worth in a pond. It was hard to move our binoculars away from the bathing birds, but high above us there were **Pygmy Nuthatches** and **Cedar Waxwings** working the top of a cypress. This is the kind of spot I would be content to just sit and watch for hours—however, there was more of the garden to explore, more treasures to be found.

The next treasure came almost immediately as we walked past the rhododendrons on Heidelberg Hill. This is one of the best spots to look for wintering **Varied Thrushes**; we weren't disappointed. Superficially, being of about the same size and shape, a Varied Thrush looks like an **American Robin**.

A close look for comparison will show that the Varied is a bit smaller than a Robin with a shorter tail and pointier bill, giving it something of a Meadowlark shape. The coloration is different too; a Robin's head is blackish with a white eye-ring; Varied Thrushes have rust color extending from the belly up to the throat and onto the malar, setting off a black ear-patch and



Varied Thrush and American Robin



Left: Andy Purviance; Right: Rick Leche

rusty eyebrow. A Robin's wing is uniform gray, while the Varied Thrush has bold rust wing-bars and feather edging. Noting the wing bars makes the Varied easy to ID in flight. The female Varied has a faint gray bar

continued on next page

On the pages ahead:

- 2 More on *Birding for Everyone*
- 3 Great Blue Heron update; Save the Dates; Heron Cam
- 4 Chain of Lakes Walk with Alan Hopkins
- 5 More on Chain of Lakes; Upcoming Events
- 6 Happy New Year!, a photo essay
- 7 Fort Mason Community Garden and Lloyd Lake

continued from previous page



Photo: SFNE

The *Birding for Everyone* group with Alan Hopkins (tan cap) in the SF Botanical Garden.

running from shoulder to shoulder across the breast; on the adult male the bar is bold and black. The thrush's back is blue-gray slate and slate colored. With all these markings it would seem they would be easy to see, however the birds prefer the dark understory beneath trees, and what seems bold in the daylight becomes cryptic in the deep shade.

This has been an "invasion" year for Varied Thrushes. In most years, seeing one or two Varied Thrushes would be a good day. I believe that we probably saw or heard at least thirty birds on our walk. This fall, at places such as Battery Godfrey in the Presidio or Hawk Hill in the Marin Headlands, flights numbering well into the hundreds have been observed passing overhead during migration. It is unclear what causes invasions some years. It may have to do with a lack of food or abundance somewhere else.

We are also having an invasion of **Acorn Woodpeckers**. Most years we have none. Visit any part of eastern Golden Gate Park with oak trees and you'll see these clown-like woodpeckers chasing around the tree tops giving their raucous calls. I suspect that the invasion



Photo: Len Blumin

Pygmy Nuthatch

of thrushes and woodpeckers may be a result of all the fires in the mountains last summer. If you haven't seen these wonderful species now is the time to do it!

As we continued our walk towards the Wild-fowl Pond, a **Great Egret** came gracefully gliding in. Two high-flying **Double-crested Cormorants** did not have the decency to

stop. We worked our way through the Chilean Garden to the Moon Viewing pool.

Apparently the berries were ripe on the photinia tree on the hillside above the pool; the tree was alive with Robins while more Varied Thrushes fed on the fallen berries on the ground. The recent storm had blown down a tree, blocking the Succulent Garden Trail; we eventually found our way to the John Muir Trail and pond. The winter resident **Black-and-white Warbler** was a no-show, but we did see a **Hutton's Vireo** and an **Orange-crowned Warbler**.

While we were discussing the differences between Golden-crowned and White-crowned Sparrows, some of us spotted a **Hairy Woodpecker** hiding in a pine. Satiated, we headed back to the main gate but we had one more treat in store: a pair of **Hooded Mergansers** fished for crayfish in the Dwarf Conifer Pond. In all we saw 40 different species.

In a few weeks the days will become longer and the Varied Thrushes will start singing. I can't wait!



Photo: Rick Leche

Orange-crowned Warbler



Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

Hutton's Vireo



Photo: Rick Leche

Cedar Waxwing

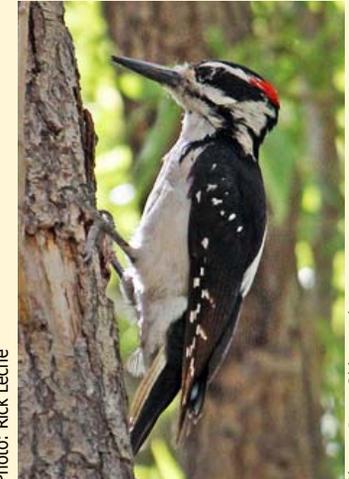


Photo: Jerry Oldenettel

Hairy Woodpecker

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Great Blues Should Arrive Any Day Now

Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director of SFNE



The first Great Blue Herons generally arrive at Stow Lake between Christmas Day and New Year's. The first to arrive select the sturdiest nests. Some latecomers may construct new nests in the Monterey cypress and pine trees on Heron Island opposite the Stow Lake Boathouse. In January, we usually see lots of activity in the trees as birds arrive and try to attract partners.

There are stretch displays in January and February until every heron has a partner. As soon as a pair has partnered up the male will gather sticks from nearby trees, and the female will add to or construct the nest. There are a great deal of stick presentations with ritualized displays by both birds.

In February we will see lots of branches delivered, followed by mating at the nest. The herons typically are preparing to settle down in early March and start incubation for about thirty days. In early April, we should see tiny chicks.

Last February three nests were constructed on Heron Island. While these failed to produce any young, we were thrilled in July to observe three new chicks in a late nest constructed after Heron Watch concluded in mid-May.

Those three chicks fledged at the end of August. Our new total for chicks fledging at Stow Lake between 1993 and 2014 is a whopping 163 chicks!

Save the Dates for Heron Watch

Heron Watch begins at Stow Lake on April 11, and runs for six Saturdays until May 16. The observation site near the Stow Lake Boathouse operates from 10 am until 12:30 pm each Saturday. Volunteers using high-powered spotting scopes will be available to show the herons and chicks to the public and answer questions. Observation is free.

At 10 am each Saturday we will offer a guided birding walk of Stow Lake and Strawberry Hill to observe local and migrant birds. The walk starts promptly at 10 am and ends at noon. Adults \$10, children and teenagers free.

Heron Watch Interns and Volunteers Needed

We welcome high school and college students as interns. We have openings for six interns. Training begins in March. Download an intern application at: http://sfnature.org/get_involved/intern.html.

Adult volunteers also are needed for Heron Watch Saturdays. Volunteers will be trained to use spotting scopes and provide



Photo by Jesse Krider: © 2012 SFNE



Photo by Jim Sullivan: © 2012 SFNE

information about herons and their chicks. We ask that volunteers sign up for two of six Saturdays of Heron Watch (4/11-5/16). New volunteers will be oriented at a Saturday morning session in March. SFNE provides refreshments for volunteers each week.

A volunteer application may be downloaded at http://sfnature.org/get_involved/volunteer.html. All applications must be received via e-mail by **March 14**. Send completed applications to: volunteer@sfnature.org.

February is a good time to visit Stow Lake and observe the courtship of the herons up close. We look forward to seeing you at Heron Watch in April.

Heron Cam Returns to Stow Lake

Mike Smylie, SFNE Board President



I am pleased to announce that the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department has approved our application to install the Heron Cam at Stow Lake for the next three years. We are very appreciative of the support of General Manager Phil Ginsburg as we move forward. We plan to install the webcam in mid-February.

Why is the webcam important? The Stow Lake Heron Cam is the only such camera in California, and gives us the opportunity to view the herons in a unique way. The webcam expands access to the Stow Lake nesting area by making available a continuous video feed at www.sfnature.org. It helps us to provide interactive environmental education programs for underserved youth and adults.

The Heron Cam lets us take the annual breeding season of the Great Blue Herons into every classroom in San Francisco and beyond, and allows children to monitor the heron colony, and learn about the heron and the history of the Stow Lake heron colony and Golden Gate Park.

Those of you who followed the webcam last year know that we lost our video feed midway through the nesting season when the video cable was damaged by squirrels. A casualty of nature! We have now purchased a stronger cable with a thicker case to prevent this from occurring again.

Installing and maintaining a webcam like this costs money, and while we do all we can to reduce overall costs, there are permit fees and lifting equipment costs. We ask your support to help us cover these costs. Those who viewed the herons by way of the webcam last year were unanimous that this was a valuable addition to the services offered by SFNE. Please help us to upgrade and make permanent the Stow Lake Heron Cam.

Through the newsletter and SFNE website we will keep you updated on our efforts to raise money for the webcam. We will give you a heads-up when the camera goes live.

We thank our supporters, in particular John Kelly at Audubon Canyon Ranch, and Cindy Margulis and Ilana DeBare at Golden Gate Audubon Society.

Chain of Lakes Walk, Dec. 13th

Alan Hopkins, Naturalist

The December bird walk to North Lake started with a bang, a boom, and a crash. While we'd hope to hear the twitter of wintering birds, we were instead greeted by a wannabe rock star drummer practicing in the parking lot. After our introductions we quickly moved to South Lake to see a pair of gorgeous **Hooded Mergansers**. We then headed across the street to get away from the racket and to Bercut Equitation Field.

Along the edge of the field we found a large flock of **Yellow-rumped Warblers**; they seemed to be everywhere: in the trees, on the ground, and in the shrubs. I suspect there may have been a termite hatch-out somewhere nearby, which is not uncommon on the first sunny day after rain, and which provides a feast for insect-eating birds.

Along with the yellow-rumps were a few **Townsend's Warblers**, **Anna's Hummingbirds**, and a **Black Phoebe**. We walked to the Bercut maintenance yard and brush pile. A fresh brush pile is always worth checking. Here we had a nice comparison between a few **Hermit Thrushes** and a **Fox Sparrow**. The two species look superficially alike; both have brownish backs and wings and rusty tails and spots on their breasts. However the thrush has an eye-ring and a slender bill, and a nervous, twitchy behavior; the Fox Sparrow has a plain face (our most common race, anyway), a heavy seed-eating bill, and behaves like a towhee scratching the soil.

We headed across JFK Drive to the small bridge at North Lake, and were met by the usual begging raccoons. There are signs that ask people not to feed the wildlife—however people ignore the signs and can't resist feeding the ducks, jays, and these furry bandits. There are good reasons for not feeding wildlife in the park.

The people who feed these animals may think they are "helping" the animals, but they fail to notice that while there are many pairs of mallards on the lake few are able to successfully raise offspring during the nesting season. Many animals being fed in this area—raccoons, squirrels, jays, ravens, and rats—are nest predators.

Mallards nest on the ground and don't stand a chance against the subsidized nest predators. It is hard to know what impact nest predation is having on the warblers,



Photo: Nancy DeStefanis

Birders gathered at Middle Lake in Golden Gate Park for the Chain of Lakes walk with Alan Hopkins (in gray).



Clockwise from top left: Pied-billed Grebe, American Bittern, Pygmy Nuthatch, House Finch, Ruddy Duck, Audubon's (Yellow-rumped) Warbler.

Photos: Bill Hummwell

vireos, and sparrows in the area; surely there must be a good deal.

Out on the glassy lake we found a small group of **Ruddy Ducks** and a pair of **Pied-billed Grebes**. Off in the distance, perched on a section of pipe, a **Double-crested Cormorant** dried its wings. I wanted to get a closer look at the cormorant but I was called back by the sharp-eyed birders who had spotted the bird of the day (how'd I miss it?) on the far shore: an **American Bittern!** Bitterns are always a treat to see. Their cryptic coloration of brown and white streaks on their throat and belly can make them hard to see among the tules. This is an especially hard species to find in San Francisco.

Spurred on by our luck with the Bittern we moved on to the east side of the Bison Paddock. This area is a good place to watch for sparrows, finches, woodpeckers, and phoebes. Both Red-tailed and Cooper's Hawks nest nearby.

At Spreckels Lake we had a brief course on gull identification, finding **Western, Glaucous-winged, and California Gulls**. Far across the pond a single **Eared Grebe** did its best to keep away from the model powerboat that screamed across the water.

Turning back towards the west we walked along the southern edge of the Bison Paddock. We had to look carefully through the grassy paddock to find the **Killdeer** that winter there. While Killdeer are shore-birds, short grassy fields and meadows like the Bison Paddock are their preferred habitat.

You would think that a bird with black and white bands across its breast, a white forehead and eyebrow, a red eye-ring and rusty tail would be easy to spot in an open field, but it can actually be hard to see. Once you've got the search pattern down you realize that they are everywhere! We saw about twenty at once.

Another highlight was when Trace pointed out the **Great Horned Owl** nest with the brown and white striped tail of the owl sticking out beyond the nest. This would have been a fitting end to a great walk,

From left: Hermit Thrush, Townsend's Warbler, Killdeer, Western Gulls, Double-crested Cormorant.



Photos: Bill Hunnewell

Chain of Lakes, 12/13/2014

Leader: Alan Hopkins

Birds: 41 species

Black Phoebe

Audubon's (Yellow-rumped) Warbler

Lesser Goldfinch

Northern Flicker

Ruby-crowned Kinglet

Common Raven

Downy Woodpecker

Varied Thrush

Hooded Merganser

Townsend's Warbler

American Coot

Mallard Duck

Western Gull

Glaucous-winged Gull

Eared Grebe

Pied-billed Grebe

Double-crested Cormorant

Song Sparrow

Great Horned Owl

Nuttall's Woodpecker

Say's Phoebe

Fox Sparrow

White-crowned Sparrow

Golden-crowned Sparrow

Dark-eyed Junco

California Towhee

Anna's Hummingbird

Pygmy Nuthatch

Bufflehead

Ruddy Duck

American Bittern

Brown Creeper

Killdeer

Rock Pigeon

Red-tailed Hawk

Red-shouldered Hawk

American Robin

House Finch

Western Scrub Jay

Steller's Jay

Black-crowned Night

Heron



but a **Brown Creeper** working its way up a cypress put an explanation mark to what was the end of a fine morning!

Upcoming Events in January

SF Nature Walks: Please bring binoculars if you can, and a pencil. Rain cancels. All walks are from 10 am to noon.

Birding for Everyone: first Saturday of every month. Walks are from 10 am to noon. Next: Jan. 3, with guest leader to be announced. Meet at SF Botanical Garden bookstore, 9th Ave. near Lincoln. Adults \$10, children free.

SF Botanical Garden Admission: FREE for all SF residents with proof of residency; non-residents pay varying fees. See the [garden's website](#) for details.

Heron's Head Park: Saturday, Jan. 10: free adult field trip led by Bob Hirt and Missi Hirt-Gavic.

Also on Jan. 10, free Heron's Head family walk with Nancy DeStefanis.

Crissy Field Walk: Saturday, Jan. 17, led by Megan Prelinger. Adults \$10, children free.

For directions please see our online events calendar.



Happy New Year!

Seen at Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge and Lloyd Lake in Golden Gate Park by Bill Hunnewell

Clockwise from above:

Snow Geese

Falcated Duck

Hooded Merganser

Bald Eagle

Red-tailed Hawk

Hooded Merganser (female)

Hooded Merganser (male)





**Seen at Fort Mason
Community Garden
and Lloyd Lake**

Photos by Sandi Wong



Clockwise from top left:
Fox Sparrow
American Goldfinch
Chestnut-backed Chickadee
Anna's Hummingbird
Yellow-rumped Warbler
American Wigeon
Greater Scaup