



The Blue Heron

News from San Francisco Nature Education ♦ March 2015

Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

I'm writing with some very exciting news: Our new Heron Cam is almost ready! You will soon be able to visit our website and watch a pair of Great Blue Herons fly in and out of their nest, taking turns sitting on their pale blue eggs.

This is the first Heron Cam in California. Students will be able to follow the activity live from their own classrooms! We have contacted schools in San Francisco to participate in our online activities while students watch the herons raise their young.

We expect the heron chicks to be at Stow Lake until the end of June, so there is plenty of time to observe them as they go about their daily routines of getting fed and practicing branch hopping before they fledge.

Heron Watch, our annual spring program to see the herons up close, begins April 11th, and runs for six Saturdays. We invite you to come to Stow Lake and witness the spectacular beauty of these birds through one of our spotting scopes.

We have started our campaign to raise funds to support the new Heron Cam, the Heron Cam in the Classroom activities, and our in-person Heron Watch program at Stow Lake.

We need your help to raise \$15,000 for these programs by April 30th. Please contribute online or send a check. Gifts of \$100, \$500, and \$1,000 go a long way towards helping us reach our goal. Membership is included in every gift.

Thank you so much.

Best regards,

Nancy

Nancy DeStefanis



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see our mailing address on p. 3
www.sfnature.org

Heron's Head Park Walk, Feb. 21

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist



We had a warm sunny Saturday morning for our bustling crowd at Heron's Head Park on the 21st. The wide range of shorebird species present that day was a highlight of the walk.

While some shorebirds nest in the vicinity of San Francisco Bay, such as **American Avocet**, **Killdeer**, **Spotted Sandpiper**, and **Black-necked Stilt**, others are boreal or inland prairie nesters that visit the bay only in their drab winter plumage.

Shorebird species in that group include **Black-bellied Plover**, **Least Sandpiper**, **Whimbrel**, **Long-billed Curlew**, **Marbled Godwit**, **Greater Yellowlegs**, and **Willet**. Local breeding birds such as **Black Oyster-catchers** often favor ocean-facing rocky habitats but are also here on the rocky shore at Heron's Head.



American Wigeon pair

Grebes tend to favor deeper water, and were numerous at the eastern tip of the park. We had four species: **Western**, **Clark's**, **Eared**, and **Horned Grebes**.

Long-legged waders were represented in the marsh by **Snowy Egret** and **Great Egret**. **American Wigeon**

were abundant, as were **Greater Scaup**, **Ruddy Duck**, and **Bufflehead**.

We had an on-the-wing sighting of a pair of **Common Goldeneyes** to round out the diving ducks.

Sky-diving **Brown Pelicans**

put in a show, while on the landward side **Lincoln's**, **White-crowned**, **Fox**, and **Song Sparrows** were in the bushes along the path. **Red-tailed** and **Red-shouldered Hawks** perched in the vicinity. In all, including species common to urban environments, we had 43 species that day.

We were fortunate to have had terrific volunteers with scopes: Mark Levin and Kevin Biggerstaff. A complete list of observed bird species follows.

On the pages ahead:

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Horned Grebe

Photo: Judy Harter

Photo: Judy Harter

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**Heron's Head Park
02/21/2015**

**Compiled by:
Megan Prelinger**

Birds: 43 species

American Avocet
American Wigeon
Greater Scaup
Bufflehead
Ruddy Duck
Mallard
American Coot
Western Grebe
Clark's Grebe
Eared Grebe
Horned Grebe

Brown Pelican
Double-crested Cormorant
Great Egret
Snowy Egret
Red-tailed Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk
Black-bellied Plover
Killdeer
Spotted Sandpiper
Willet
Greater Yellowlegs
Black-necked Stilt
Long-billed Curlew
Whimbrel
Marbled Godwit
Black Oystercatcher

Least Sandpiper
Western Gull
California Gull
Anna's Hummingbird
Rock Pigeon
Black Phoebe
Western Scrub Jay
American Crow
Common Raven
Lincoln's Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Fox Sparrow
Brewer's Blackbird
House Finch
European Starling



Photo: SFNE

Birding for Families guides with a family in front of the EcoCenter at Heron's Head Park.



Photo: SFNE

Above: Heron's Head group is ready to set out. Below: Working on bird journals.



Photos: left, SFNE; right, Grace Ruth

**Family Walk at
Heron's Head Park
Jaileez Campos, Intern**

At the February *Birding for Families* walk at Heron's Head Park, two new families joined Missy Hirt-Gavic, Collin Adam, and me. We had the privilege of explaining to these families the basics of birding and the various wintering species that can be found in and around the park.

We saw a **Great Egret** land gracefully in the middle of the wetland area. We set up the scope and a footstool. One by one the children stepped up and looked through the scope. Then they would smile and shout in excitement, "I saw the bird!"

We saw **American Avocets** in breeding plumage (rufous feathers on their heads). We saw a **Black Oystercatcher**, **Buffleheads**, **Anna's Hummingbirds**, **White-crowned Sparrows**, **Double-crested Cormorants**, **Whimbrels**, and **Least Sandpipers**.

One of the boys was carrying a field guide that he kept opening to different pages and showing me birds he would like to see.

At the end of the walk the children colored in their field journals some birds they had seen.



New Heron Cam Coming Soon!

Mike Smylie, SFNE Board President and Naturalist



If you follow this SF Nature newsletter or have been to Stow Lake lately, you'll know that the herons are back and are preparing for this year's nesting season. Equally exciting is the news that our Heron Cam will also be back soon.

Thanks to SF Recreation and Park Department we now have a three-year permit for the camera, which allows us to install a new and more powerful webcam. The new camera is lighter (about five ounces), with a better lens that will allow us to zoom in more closely and transmit in color.

The camera will be mounted using plastic ties to prevent any damage to the host tree. We have purchased a new cable for connecting the camera to the computer—this one has a wire casing that will prevent animals from damaging the cable, as happened last year. Installation of the camera and cable will be finished in a few weeks. Please plan to visit the SF Nature [Heron Cam page](#) when we go live.

The Heron Cam will be a great addition to the services that SF Nature brings to the community. It will be the only one of its type on the West Coast, and will allow viewers to observe this Great Blue Heron colony up-close.

Throughout the year we will have a chance to talk to students and show them the herons during incubation, hatching, chick feeding, and learning to fly, as part of our Science and Nature for Underserved Youth program.

This spring four new interns will join us at Heron Watch for the six-week program.

They are currently learning about herons, spotting scopes, and interacting with the public.

At least four adult volunteers will be present to educate the public and accompany our tour leaders on their Saturday nature walks on Strawberry Island.

To produce a world-class interpretive program takes money. We will be funding the new camera and its installation, spotting scopes and binoculars for interns and volunteers, and training new volunteers.

To cover our costs and support our programs we urge you to make a generous donation during March or April towards our goal of raising \$15,000. Donate online or by check.

We look forward to seeing you at our Heron Watch program at Stow Lake starting Saturday, April 11th, or visit us online.



Great Blue Heron in Golden Gate Park.

Photo: Judy Harter

Acorn Woodpeckers Drill Behind McLaren Lodge

Photos by Bill Hunnewell

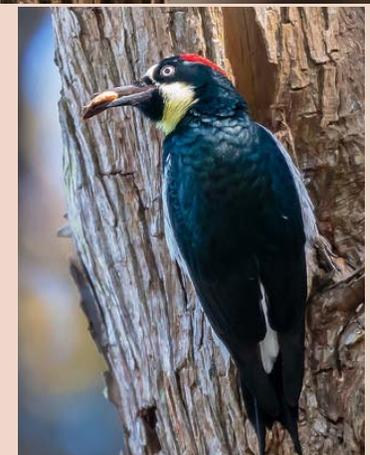
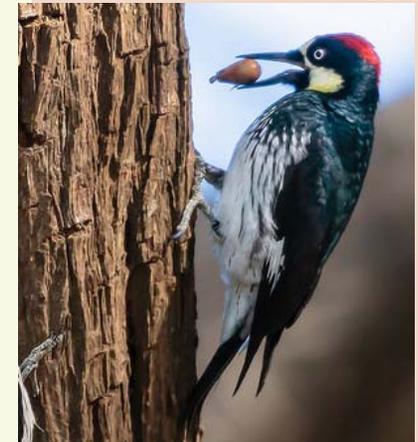


Photo: SFNE



Visitors and volunteers at our Stow Lake Heron Watch observation site during a past season.



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Birding for Everyone, February 7

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist



Our walk this month took place during a fortuitous break between two rainstorms. The day started at the fountain in the library courtyard, where a parade of birds took turns bathing in the bits of sunlight that

broke through the high cloud layer: **Lesser Goldfinches, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Pygmy Nuthatches, a Townsend's Warbler, a Yellow-rumped Warbler, and an Anna's Hummingbird.** We would continue to see these species throughout our walk. A **Downy Woodpecker** was



Ruby-crowned Kinglet

Photo: Rick Leche

a few minutes later another **Downy**, and were able to compare the differences in bill size and overall body size that are the clearest differentiators



Pine Siskin

Photo: Judy Harter

between these two species. Among four species of **sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos, Towhees, and thrushes** that populated the low bushes and open ground we were delighted to find a flock of foraging **Pine Siskins**. We noted the pale yellow wash on the outer primaries and secondaries that

is its most unique field

marking, and its forked tail and pale brown-and-white streaked breast.

Other sightings were a solo female Bufflehead in the reservoir, a solo female **Hooded Merganser** in the Waterfowl Pond, and a **Pacific**

Wren in the Redwood

Grove exhibiting nest-building behavior. We heard several others singing around the garden.

The walk was notable for its density of avian activity, likely an effect of the patch of clear weather following a storm.

Our sightings of **Yellow-rumped Warblers**, for example, numbered in the high dozens, while our total species count was similarly high at 40.



Pacific Wren

Photo: Jerry Oldenettel



Pygmy Nuthatch

Photo: Judy Harter

foraging in the nearby "Sapsucker Tree."

It was a day for pairs and comparisons: as we made our way downhill to the California Native Plant Garden we had several opportunities to compare male and female **Varied**

Thrushes, noting the gray breast band of the female next to the black band of the male.

A few minutes later, we had a male and female **Cooper's Hawk** together in a tree, offering a comparison in size between the two (the female is up to two inches longer-bodied than the male). High overhead, two **Red-tailed Hawks** whirled around each other with outstretched talons in a courtship flight pattern.

The Children's Garden was dense with species. We found a **Hairy Woodpecker** and



Downy Woodpecker

Photo: Peter Massas



Trace Kannel and trip leader Megan Prelinger in the SF Botanical Garden.

Photo: Sarah Barsness

SF Botanical Garden
02/07/2015

Compiled by:

Megan Prelinger

Birds: 40 species

Canada Goose

Mallard

Bufflehead

Hooded Merganser

Cooper's Hawk

Red-shouldered Hawk

Red-tailed Hawk

American Coot

California Gull

Western Gull

Rock Pigeon

Band-tailed Pigeon

Anna's Hummingbird

Downy Woodpecker

Hairy Woodpecker

Northern Flicker

Black Phoebe

Steller's Jay

Scrub Jay

American Crow

Common Raven

Chestnut-backed Chickadee

Pygmy Nuthatch

Pacific Wren

Ruby-crowned Kinglet

Hermit Thrush

American Robin

Varied Thrush

Orange-crowned Warbler

Yellow-rumped Warbler

(Audubon's)

Townsend's Warbler

California Towhee

Fox Sparrow

Song Sparrow

Golden-crowned Sparrow

White-crowned Sparrow

Dark-eyed Junco

House Finch

Pine Siskin

Lesser Goldfinch

Adventures in the Galápagos Islands

Jaileez Campos, Intern



Galápagos is a group of 19 islands located 563 miles west of mainland Ecuador. The islands are widely known for their unique biodiversity and their contributions to the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin.

Recently I had the privilege to spend 16 days there with my student peers from USF to study ecology and evolutionary biology.

We arrived in the Galápagos in early January. It took us three flights and 24 hours to get there from San Francisco. The first island we visited was Santa



Male Frigatebird

Cruz, the home of the Charles Darwin Research Station in Puerto Ayora, where we observed the famous Darwin's Finches and Giant Tortoises.

After Santa Cruz we visited Las Plazas, Floreana, and Bartolome.

My favorite island was Seymour, where I saw colonies of Magnificent Frigatebirds, the fastest sea birds in the world.

Our final stop was Isabela Island. Upon our arrival we hiked to the salt marshes and saw Marine Iguanas, Black-necked Stilts, White-cheeked Pintails, Fiddler Crabs, and Flamingos. We hiked the Sierra Negra volcano. Our guide told us that Isabela Island is home to more than 60% of the biodiversity found in the Galápagos Islands because it began as five separate islands. Isabela contains five of the ten species of tortoises endemic to the Galápagos.

The next day we went snorkeling at Los Tuneles, a series of underwater volcanic tunnels. I swam with White-tipped Reef Sharks, Blue-footed Boobies, Galápagos Sea Lions, Green Sea Turtles, and Galápagos Penguins!

The Galápagos Penguin is an endangered resident species. These are the only penguins found near the equator, and they are losing nesting sites. Nests of the past 40 years no longer exist, are used by marine iguanas, or have been flooded. Scientists are trying to

revive the population by constructing nests from natural materials and monitoring breeding.

The Galápagos Islands were named by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1978. From 2007 to 2010, it was named a Site in Danger due to threats from increased tourism, local population growth, illegal fishing, and invasive species.

One of the biggest environmental priorities in the Galápagos is controlling invasive fauna and flora, such as dogs, cats, pigs, goats, rats, guava plants, and cinchona trees, and preserving the islands' endemic species.



Tortoise eggs and a tiny newly-hatched Giant Tortoise from the hatchery on Isabela Island.

In 1975, the Ecuadorian government set a quota of 25,000 tourists per year on the islands. But this quota was never strictly enforced. The number of tourists is estimated to be about 170,000 per year. Tourism is the reason these islands have been conserved. But tourists

transport seeds, insects, and other organisms from one island to the next.

Each island has its own distinct environment and species, and is sensitive to changes. The introduction of alien species is the biggest environmental cause of the decline of many species populations. The top priority in the Galápagos is to control alien species, which costs millions of dollars.

On January 24, 2014, a state of emergency was declared in the Galápagos because of an oil spill. That was the third such incident in the past year.

My experience in the Galápagos has inspired me to pursue a career in environmental conservation and public outreach. I aspire to change people's perceptions about nature in order to preserve it.



Jaileez admires the long view from Bartolome Island in the Galápagos.

Photos courtesy of Jaileez Campos

Upcoming Events

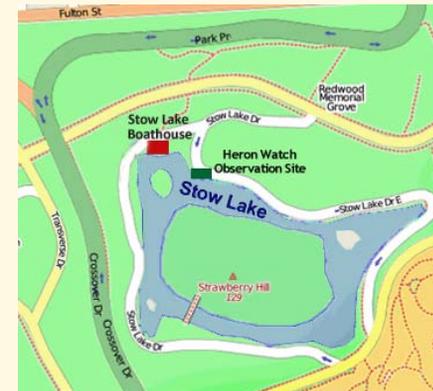
SF Nature Walks: All walks are from 10 am to noon. Please bring binoculars if you can, and a pencil. For directions please see our online [events calendar](#).

Birding for Everyone: first Saturday of every month, 10 am to noon. Next: Mar. 7, with Megan Prelinger; also Apr. 4. Meet at SF Botanical Garden bookstore, 9th Ave. near Lincoln. SFNE members FREE. \$10 per nonmember adult, children welcome (free).

Birding for Families: Saturday, Mar. 7, from 10 to 11:30, with Nancy DeStefanis. Meet at SF Botanical Garden bookstore, 9th Ave. near Lincoln. For children and parents or guardians. SFNE members FREE. \$10 per nonmember adult, children free.

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

Heron Watch Opening—April 11: We will be there Saturdays, April 11, 18, and 25, from 10 to 12:30. Free information and observation guidance. Follow signs from Stow Lake Boathouse.



Walk Lake Merced: Postponed until a later date.

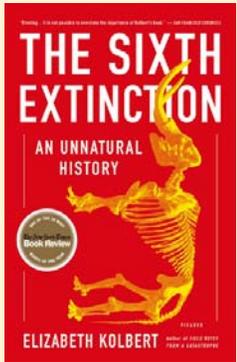
Volunteers Needed

Adult volunteers are needed for Heron Watch Saturdays. Volunteers will be trained. We ask volunteers to 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.

A volunteer application may be downloaded at http://sfnature.org/get_involved/volunteer.html. Return to: volunteer@sfnature.org by **Mar. 14**.

Book Reviews

The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History



By Elizabeth Kolbert; Picador reprint edition, 2015. 336 pages/paper.

Reviewed by Megan Prelinger

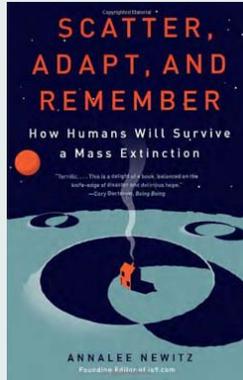
Elizabeth Kolbert's best-selling *The Sixth Extinction* is a highly readable and essential book that explains the grim trends of our epoch in stories that are as entertaining as they are ultimately disheartening.

For readers who pay attention to science and natural history in general, Kolbert's thesis will not be breaking news: the collective impact of human behavior has inaugurated the sixth of Earth's known mass extinctions. Also referred to as the anthropocene epoch, this process is well underway today. According to Kolbert's evidence, it will continue until we, humanity, can come up with the conviction, inspiration, and regulations to mitigate it.

The chapters are built on scenic and adventurous excursions to laboratories and into the field to document the monumental work of mapping and mitigating extinctions. We travel with Kolbert to Italy to explore the geologic evidence of the K-T extinction and to Australia to explore the universe of coral reefs and efforts to preserve them. We go to Brazil to study the rain forest, and to the Neander Valley in Germany to visit the discovery site of the Neanderthals, our extinct close cousins.

The book focuses on animal stories, making it very engaging to read, but does not shy away from the tough science questions of where the anthropocene fits in the Earth's geologic history. What I most wanted from Kolbert's book is not yet in hand: evidence that it will act as an accelerant to change the human over-consumption of life on Earth and over-production of environmentally harmful forces.

Scatter, Adapt, and Remember: How Humans Will Survive a Mass Extinction



By Annalee Newitz; Anchor Edition, 2014: 320 pages/paper.

Reviewed by Megan Prelinger

Annalee Newitz's book was first published in 2010, four years before Kolbert's, yet it reads as a sequel of sorts, or a counterpoint. Sidestepping the mechanics of extinction, as though she had read Kolbert's book, Newitz focuses instead on the mechanics of how life survives episodes of extinction.

Her book's title has the word "humans," but much of her research covers the entire spectrum of life, and charts the strategies that have enabled animals from microbes to gray whales to survive the mass extinctions that preceded the current epoch.

The title, *Scatter, Adapt, and Remember*, summarizes the message of this life-affirming book. Like Kolbert, Newitz had some research funding that enabled her to travel the globe and talk to scientists and explorers in the field who are charting survival stories. The case studies of genetic dispersion, adaptation, and evolutionary conservation ("remembering") that she shares are as readable and adventurous as Kolbert's.

One-third of the book focuses on how human civilization, especially cities, can adapt to a rapidly changing planet and help the rest of the sphere of life along with it. Newitz's philosophy of pragmatic optimism is a satisfying and useful complement to the vaguer, if far more ambitious, hopes that Kolbert articulates in her conclusion. —*Reviewer's note: the author is a friend.*

Film Review

A Birder's Guide to Everything

Directed by Rob Meyer. Dreamfly Productions, 2013. 88 min. Rated PG-13.



Reviewed by Michele Hunnewell

A Birder's Guide to Everything is set in the lush, green small towns of upstate New York. It is the poignant story of a teenager, David Portnoy (Kodi Smit-McKee), his love of birds, and the deep sadness he feels after the death of his mother.

The story begins as David's father is about to wed again, which has caused David to distance himself from his father and the upcoming event. His only solace is found in birding with his like-minded friends, and in happy memories of birding with his mother, who taught him her skills and love of birds.

After a particularly difficult discussion with his father on the day before the wedding, David, while riding his bike to school, sees and photographs what he believes to be an extinct bird, a Labrador Duck, the first (real) species among endemic North American birds to go extinct.

David shares the sighting with the two other members of his high school's Young Birder's Society, and decides to consult an expert birder, Lawrence Konrad (a very funny Ben Kingsley), for verification.

The teens decide to pursue a re-sighting. They light out on a road trip, and the story takes on youthful angst, a hint of romance, a few hilarious situations, and a step into maturity for David.

Available on DVD from Netflix and from Amazon Instant Video.



Great Blue Herons of Stow Lake

On Valentine's Day, a male heron delivered lots of branches to his partner at the nest. This male is known to us because of an old injury that causes his tongue to protrude from his throat like a pencil. He has been mating at Stow Lake for at least five years.

Photos by Sandi Wong

