



The Blue Heron

News from San Francisco Nature Education • May 2015

Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

Thank you to all who have contributed to our spring fundraising campaign, which ends May 30th. If you haven't donated yet, please take the time to donate now so that we meet our goal of \$15,000.

Our Heron Cam is the only one in California, and now that the chicks are almost four weeks old they are clearly visible. They are in nest number one, in the center of the camera's view. The remaining three nests, occupied later, are still incubating. You can see nests one, two, and three via the Heron Cam.

Our Heron Cam is one of seven in North America. To visit the other Cams, go to <http://www.viewbirds.com/#greatblueheron>. The Trevor Zoo in Millbrook, NY, offers a wonderful view of a nesting heron and its pale blue eggs. The famous Cornell Cam in Ithaca, NY, was damaged in a recent electrical storm, and the heron nest it was focused on fell down last year.

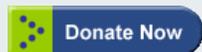
Vancouver recently installed a Heron Cam on their Great Blue Heron colony in Stanley Park. The city pays for permits, equipment, and installation. The other cameras are funded by government agencies, and Cornell sponsors its own.

Our camera is operated with the support of gifts and donation; if you are interested in supporting it please contact me: nancyd@sfnature.org. In the meantime, please help us meet our goal for our Heron Cam and Heron Watch programs. The chicks are putting on a show at Stow Lake—please join us. Our Saturday program continues through May 16th.

Best regards,

Nancy

Nancy DeStefanis



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Opening Day at Heron Watch 2015

Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director



The public turned out in force on April 11th at Stow Lake. Crowds observed the herons flying overhead and looked through the spotting scopes staffed by many volunteers and interns. The herons did not disappoint—there were flyovers by adults to and from four nests.

A dozen people joined the tour and observed the three chicks in nest number 1. The chicks were tiny and skinny, but visible through the spotting scopes from atop Strawberry Hill. Interns Ben and Fiona answered questions and assisted on the tour. Zed and Chiara, also interns, staffed the scopes at the Observation Site and showed folks the three nests from the other side of Heron Island.

Each Saturday, six adult volunteers and four interns team up to deliver an exciting time for adults and children. Starting at 10 am, you can observe the herons through our high-powered spotting scopes and join a tour led by one of our experienced naturalists. At 12:30, volunteers and interns pack up for the day.

Please join us for our naturalist-led walks every Saturday through May 16th. We will be leading a special family walk adapted for children on May 16th led by naturalist Missi Hirt-Gavic. Each Saturday we provide field journals, while they last, for children. We hope to see you at Stow Lake!



Photo: Bill Hummwell



Photo: Jairo Albert Lopez

On the pages ahead:

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Photo: Mike Smylie



Photo: SFNE



Photo: © 2015 Grace Ruth



Photo: Mike Smylie



Heron Cam screenshot: April 23, 2015; SFNE

Visitors, Volunteers, and Interns Watch Nesting Herons at Stow Lake

Clockwise from top left: intern Ben and Nancy DeStefanis assist a visitor with the scope; volunteer Jailee, right, shows off chicks; Mike Smylie, SFNE board president, leads volunteers to set up scopes; Heron Cam screenshot of nests nos. 1 (right) and 2; to right, volunteers relax at end of day: from left, Taylor Garcia, Stephen Ferez, Greg Greenman, ED Nancy DeStefanis, Isabelle Chow, and Michael, a junior intern; above, Greg Greenman shows off the heron chicks; center: volunteer Taylor Garcia shows a family the herons through the spotting scope.



Photo: SFNE



Photos: © 2015 Grace Ruth



Nesting Behavior on Display in Nest no. 1 at Stow Lake

Photos by Grace Ruth



Clockwise from top left: Great Blue Heron flies with branch into nest no. 3 on April 11, 2015; parent and chicks welcome "Dad," aka Tongue Guy, at nest no. 1; "Dad" leans into nest to regurgitate; "Dad" watches two chicks bill duel; three newly-hatched chicks in nest.

Family Walk at Heron Watch

Ben, Intern



Missi Hirt-Gavic, a longtime naturalist with San Francisco Nature Education, led the family walk today. My fellow intern Fiona, volunteer Jaileez, and I assisted in identifying birds and showing the heron nests through spotting scopes. Five families accompanied us on the walk.

We started near the boathouse at Stow Lake. Our first stop was at a spot on the path where the herons in three nests were visible. It was delightful to see the young children get so excited about the chicks. We walked around the lake while Missi identified birds. The children were excited to see all the birds, even if they were rock doves (pigeons!). About halfway through the tour we stopped in the Golden Gate Pavillion so the kids could record in their journals what they had seen. They eagerly colored in the birds. After the kids finished coloring came the final part of the tour. The kids now used their knowledge to identify the birds they saw. It made my day to see such little kids get so excited about birding.

Fiona, Intern



The April 18th Heron Watch Family Walk was fun because I had never gone before. Naturalist Missi Hirt-Gavic taught us many things about the birds we sighted. In particular I liked three birds I had seen before but never learned about: **Pied-billed Grebe**, **American Coot**, and **Black-crowned Night Heron**.

Before the walk started, Missi, Ben, and I spotted a bird in the lake that we didn't recognize. We looked in the field guide and found that it was a **Pied-billed Grebe**. We saw many on the lake throughout the rest of the tour.

The **Black-crowned Night Heron** looked very different from the Great Blue Heron; it didn't have a long neck. Its head blended into its body. It didn't have as long and sharp a beak. One feature that stood out was its red eyes.

The **American Coot** is all black with a white beak. It too has red eyes. I plan to study our local and migrating birds so I will be able to identify them on future tours. The next Family Birding Walk is Saturday, May 16th.

Fifteen birds spotted on 04/18/15 at Stow Lake:

Great Blue Heron	Black Phoebe	Rock Dove (Pigeon)
Canada Goose	Steller's Jay	Pied-billed Grebe
Mallard	Double-crested	Ring-necked Duck
Red-winged Blackbird	Cormorant	Black-crowned Night Heron
American Coot	Anna's Hummingbird	Heron
California Gull	American Robin	



Left to right above: Birding for Families group, with naturalist Missi Hirt-Gavic, center, holding mascot; Jaileez helps a young birder use the spotting scope.



Photos to left: SFNE



Photos: Rick Leche (left), Doug Greenberg

Black-crowned Night Heron, left; American Coot, above.



Photos: SFNE

Visitors with heron mascot; Jaileez, Ben, and Fiona at the Stow Lake Pavilion.

Great Blue Heron Courtship Displays

Chiara, Intern



Great Blue Herons engage in courtship displays at the beginning of the breeding season in early February. These displays generally cease when they have started incubating their eggs. There are exceptions—some will continue courtship rituals through the incubation period.

The most common courtship display is known as the stretch. A courting or mated Great Blue Heron points its beak towards the sky and stretches its neck to the fullest extent while swaying slightly back and forth. There are many variations, including flexing the legs; each heron has its own variation. For an unmated male, this ritual is used to inform females that he is available. For a pair, the stretch is used when greeting each other to signal that they mean no harm. This makes the stretch ritual especially useful when a pair bond is still in formation.

Another courtship display is the snap. The snap is used by unmated males to establish nesting sites and attract a mate. Both male and the female in a pair use it before the incubation period. A Great Blue Heron stretches its neck downwards, flexes its legs, and puffs up the plumage on its back, neck, breast, and head. The heron then opens its bill and snaps it shut, creating a loud clacking noise.

When a male displays on his nesting site, females perch on branches close by to watch. While watching, they occasionally perform the circle flight. A female takes off



Photo: © 2015 Grace Ruth

Great Blue Heron performing the stretch with a mate.

from her perch to fly in a slow circle around the male she is watching, and finishes by landing closer to him. Eventually, a female will try to join the male on his nesting site. The first few times she does this he will chase her away, but after a while he allows her to stay and they become a pair.



Like many of the courtship rituals, the wing preen is done by the male more than the female. The heron lifts a wing away from its body and lowers its bill to run it along the lifted wing. The intent is to show that he has no intention to attack. It is usually done by a pair in formation.

Courtship displays are for a male Great Blue Heron to communicate to other males that he has chosen his nesting site, to attract a female, and for the new couple to strengthen their bond.

Reference: D. W. Mock, *Wilson Bulletin of Ornithology*, 1976

Parental Care of Heron Chicks

Zed, Intern



The Great Blue Heron usually lays three to four eggs, and each egg is laid two to three days from the previous one. This is called asynchronous hatching. For example, if the first egg is laid on a Wednesday, the next egg would be laid on the next Friday or Saturday.

The heron starts incubating shortly after the second egg of the clutch is laid. Unlike other species, both the male and female herons incubate the eggs. Since only a single heron will incubate the eggs at any given time, the partner is free to get food. While incubating, the heron will generally not leave the nest unless there is an unusual circumstance.

On one hot day at Audubon Canyon Ranch, the heron left its nest to get water, and it was back within five minutes. Every half hour the heron in the nest will stand up and roll the eggs to stop embryonic membranes from sticking to the shell. This helps keep an even temperature among all

the eggs in the clutch. After many hours the partner will return to exchange roles.

After about a month has passed the first egg will hatch. Out comes a small, damp, chick. At first it is not able to stand on its wobbly legs. Its neck cannot hold its head up! But in the next couple of hours it gains enough strength to peck at food in the nest. Since incubation starts after the second egg is laid, the first two chicks should hatch within 24 hours from each other.

As the heron chicks grow, competition for food is intense. As long as there is plentiful food, all chicks will survive. If food is scarce, the older chicks peck at the younger chicks' heads. The younger chicks ultimately die. This practice is called siblicide. For the first four weeks of the chicks' lives one parent broods while the other goes to get food. When the parent returns, it leans over and regurgitates into the nest; the chicks then attack the food.

At four weeks, the chicks have grown enough feathers to stay warm on their own. Both parents are needed to keep the food supply coming. While the parents are away the chicks are flapping their undeveloped wings in preparation for flight. For the next eight weeks the parents continue to supply food. At seven weeks the chicks will add jumping to wing-flapping. After they gain skill and confidence they will start to flap-jump to nearby branches. Soon after, they are flying short distances around the nest.

Eventually, a chick will fly out into open space and land on a nearby tree. First landings are tough, and there is often a lot of wing-flapping for balance. The young herons are soon flying around the nesting grounds, and often take short trips away. Once they are about twelve weeks old they will leave their parents, each one going its own way.

Reference: *Hérons and Egrets of Audubon Canyon Ranch* by Helen Pratt



Intern photos: SFNE

Chiara, at top, and Zed, above, assist visitors at Heron Watch.

Birding for Everyone, April 4th

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist



Our April walk took place on a bright, cool, breezy day in the Botanical Garden. As we gathered, avian activity in the large spreading oak tree in the Great Meadow captured our attention.

First a handful of male and female **House Finches** perched and called from the highest branches. We could differentiate them by the orange-red faces of the males contrasting with the pale buffy females. A pair of **Pygmy Nuthatches** circled lower branches. Then a half-dozen **Pine Siskins** breezed in and perched. The Siskins were much smaller, darker, brighter, and more energetic than the finches.

Soft, high-pitched trills announced the arrival of a flock of eight **Cedar Waxwings**. In this enormous tree, still largely bare of leaves, they had plenty of room to perch. Then a female **Downy Woodpecker** emerged—identifiable by her lack of a red patch on her head—and foraged on the tree's main trunk. A **Black Phoebe** perched on the lowest branch between bug-chasing flights over the lawn.

On our way to the Waterfowl Pond we saw **Anna's Hummingbirds** and our commonly-seen **American Robins**, **Western Scrub Jays**, **Song Sparrows**, and **Dark-eyed Juncos**. At the pond we observed a pair of



Cooper's Hawk



Black Phoebe



Violet-Green Swallow



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Photo: Judy Harter

Photo: Len Blumin

Photo: Sarah Barsness

Canada Geese that were small in stature. We concluded that these were individuals of the subspecies *Branta canadensis moffitti*. Around them on the grass omnivorous **American Coots** foraged for small leafy plants and invertebrates.

In the Chilean forest we had good views of circling **Violet-green Swallows** over Stow Lake, south of where we stood, and **Western Gulls**. High above them a **Turkey Vulture** flew, and a juvenile **Red-tailed Hawk** called loudly.

In the western quarter of the garden we saw **Townsend's Warblers** and a local **Cooper's Hawk** soaring high. Seasonal **Allen's Hummingbirds** were abundant throughout the garden, and we heard the calls of **California Towhee** and **Pacific Wren**.



Cedar Waxwings

Photo: Sarah Barsness

SF Botanical Garden

04/04/2015

Compiled by:

Megan Prelinger

Birds: 27 species

- Turkey Vulture
- Canada Goose
- Mallard
- Cooper's Hawk
- Red-tailed Hawk
- American Coot
- Western Gull
- Rock Dove
- Anna's Hummingbird
- Allen's Hummingbird
- Downy Woodpecker

- Black Phoebe
- Steller's Jay
- Western Scrub Jay
- Common Raven
- Violet-green Swallow
- Pygmy Nuthatch
- Pacific Wren
- American Robin
- Cedar Waxwing
- Yellow-rumped Warbler
- Townsend's Warbler
- California Towhee
- Song Sparrow
- Dark-eyed Junco
- Purple Finch
- House Finch

Upcoming Events

SF Nature Walks: From 10 am to noon, except at **Heron Watch, 10:15 to noon**. Please bring binoculars if you can, and a pencil. For directions see our [online events calendar](#).

Birding for Everyone: first Saturday of every month, 10 am to noon in the SF Botanical Garden. Next: May 2, with Alan Hopkins; Jun. 6 and 27, with Megan Prelinger. **No walk on Jul. 4**. Meet at SF Botanical Garden bookstore, 9th Ave. near Lincoln. SFNE members FREE. \$10 per nonmember adult, children welcome (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: We will be there Saturdays, May 2, 9 & 16, from 10 to 12:30. Free information and use of spotting scopes staffed by volunteers. Donations welcome. Follow signs from Stow Lake Boathouse. Watch the herons anytime via our live Heron Cam feed: <http://www.sfnature.org/LiveEx/stream.html>.

Join us for a naturalist-led walk for adults and children every Saturday during Heron Watch, 10:15-noon. Adults \$10; teens and children free.



Special Birding Walk for Families at Heron Watch: Saturday, May 16, from 10:15-noon. Free field journals while they last. Meet at Heron Watch observation site near Stow Lake Boathouse. For children and parents or guardians. Adults \$10; teens and children free.

FAQ: [All About Birds/Nesting Great Blue Herons](#)

SF Nature Ed. membership: Adults, \$35; Seniors 65+, \$30; students 21 or under, \$20.



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A Story by Wioleta Kaminska



I enjoy walking. Crissy Field or Golden Gate Park are some of my favorite places to walk and observe Great Blue Herons and people interacting. I say “interacting,” but the truth is: many times people pass by the birds completely unaware of their presence.

Here is an interesting story from one of my own walks a few days ago that I would like to share with you today:

As I keep on navigating at a fast pace through the area so familiar to me, I cannot help but overhear international conversations taking place around me. A Russian couple trying to agree on their dinner plans, a German tourist patiently directing his family vacation picture, or a group of French cyclists joking about their getting lost in the city the other day.

A lot is going on here. And I am a part of it. I look to my left and see a Great Blue Heron standing still on a small hill with a palm tree in the background.

“Funny. It looks like a cartoon character,” I think as I am taking the next step. “Wait!” I scream in my head and take a step back. The scene is surreal. The tall, long-legged Great Blue Heron is standing still in its full glory. It seems to be looking down at the people passing by who are completely oblivious to its presence.

“I cannot miss this opportunity,” I tell myself as I am already setting up my tripod and a camera. The heron is still not moving. In the meantime, I am trying to figure out the best angle for my filming equipment. The heron is still not moving.

About five minutes later it finally moves . . . its head to the left. After some time the majestic bird slowly starts marching, only to stop a second later in front of the palm tree. The palm tree and the heron seem to have merged into one organic shape. What a surreal and breathtaking scene.

“Is that real?” I suddenly hear. I see a fit, lightly-clad jogger in his late thirties curiously watching the bird through his Ray-Bans. At that moment I realize that like the heron, I have been standing still for some time. I have found myself in that rare moment of stillness where time does not exist. Nothing else, but what is right in front of me, matters. I also realize I do not want to let go of this moment yet.

So I simply nod in my response to the jogger’s question. Now the two of us are standing in stunned silence, watching the heron and the palm tree. Soon there is a whole group of people sharing this moment and standing still captivated by the scene unfolding in front of their eyes.



“Sometimes, when one is moving silently through such an utterly desolate landscape, an overwhelming hallucination can make one feel that oneself, as an individual human being, is slowly being unraveled. The surrounding space is so vast that it becomes increasingly difficult to keep a balanced grip on one’s own being. The mind swells out to fill the entire landscape, becoming so diffuse in the process that one loses the ability to keep it fastened to the physical self.”

—Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*

To see a short film, *Symbiosis*, that was inspired by the story, follow the link: <https://vimeo.com/116732566>. For more information visit: www.wioletakaminska.com.

Film Reviews



Pelican Dreams

Pelican Media, 2014. Directed by Judy Irving; 79 min. + short movies and extras. Available from Pelican Media.

Reviewed by Michele Hunnewell

This film is the true story of a Brown Pelican rescued from San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge, in the midst of stopped traffic, during a foggy afternoon commute.

Brown Pelican P193 (or Gigi, as the filmmaker named her, after the Golden Gate) was taken dehydrated, emaciated, but uninjured to the Oiled Wildlife Hospital north of SF. She was three to four months old and in need of rehabilitative care. The film goes far beyond her story in exploring how Brown Pelicans breed, live, learn, feed, and survive the challenges of avian and human worlds.

Pelican Dreams explores beautiful Santa Barbara Island in the Channel Islands off the coast of southern California, the only place in California where Brown Pelicans breed. There is wonderful footage of the chicks tentatively testing their wings, learning to dive, and interacting with each other. The birds communicate through gestures rather than vocalizing—they don’t have “voices,” only short, breathy bursts.

Other concerns of the film involve humans’ responsibility for rehabilitation hospitals and education. Climate change, the BP oil spill, and overfishing beg the question: to what kind of life are we releasing rehabilitated animals in the wild?

P193 was released in Sausalito, with other surviving Brown Pelicans, on a small beach under the north tower of the Golden Gate Bridge. The birds took flight, turned, and were not seen again.

Judy Irving is also the director the successful 2003 documentary film, *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*.

Heron Island

Directed by Judy Irving, 1998. 11 min. Courtesy of the Oakland Museum of California. On the Web: <http://www.sfnature.org/media/video.html>

Reviewed by Michele Hunnewell

Narrated by Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director of San Francisco Nature Education, this film is about the Great Blue Herons of Stow Lake, and the monitoring of their nests, chicks, and flights. The opening theme is from an old horror movie, *It came from Outer Space*. The music immediately pulls you in.

As the film begins, we learn that the Great Blue Heron chicks spend a lot of time waiting for their parents to return to the nest to feed them. The parents regurgitate fresh fish into the nest—the film beautifully captures that. After the feedings are complete the waiting begins anew.

We see the first flight of the season’s chicks, preceded by hopping in the branches before fledging later in the spring. This film is a fascinating look at these lovely birds and their behavior during the breeding months.

Saving some music and unabashed love for the Great Blue Herons until the end, we hear Nancy sing *My Blue Herons* to the tune of the song *My Blue Heaven*. Nancy wrote the lyrics with her friend Sharon Walters in 1995; an enjoyable end to a lovely film.



Make Way for Ducklings!

Mother Mallard keeps a close eye on her many offspring at Stow Lake.

Photos by Sandi Wong

