



The Blue Heron

News from San Francisco Nature Education ♦ Summer 2016

A Four-Nest Heron Watch Season! Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director



About 1,500 adults and children came out to Stow Lake this spring to see four Great Blue Heron nests with **eleven chicks**. The parents and hungry chicks put on quite a show: squawking,

flapping, and even attacking their parents to stimulate regurgitation.

Our expert volunteers were up to the tasks of showing the chicks through spotting scopes and answering all kinds of questions. The sound of the squawking chicks reverberated around the lake. Jaws dropped when folks learned that the four-foot-three-inch-tall birds they had assumed to be adults were fully-grown chicks!

On the last day of Heron Watch, May 21st, the seven-week-old chicks were beginning to jump around the nest and practice sustained flapping. The three chicks in each one of nests #1, 2, and 3 appeared to be the same size. The two chicks that we spotted in hidden nest #4 seemed at least a week or two younger.

Chicks usually practice branch-hopping when they reach eight weeks. Flying begins soon after. At about twelve weeks the chicks will fledge, and the family will split up—chicks and adults all going their own ways.

We continued to observe one adult Great Blue Heron on the former nesting spot, Heron Island. One day last week I saw one sitting down, but it soon got up again. Hard to tell what's going on.

We received many questions about whether there was enough food for all the chicks.

Fortunately, Stow Lake has an abundant supply of fish, gophers, and small birds—enough to feed an army of heron chicks.

People asked if we had witnessed siblicide, i.e., when older chicks intimidate younger chicks into forgoing eating, with predictable results. In the 23 years that I have monitored Stow Lake colony siblicide has not been an issue.

Another frequent question was whether in the future we would collar the two trees on the new nesting island to prevent raccoons from climbing up and eating eggs and nestlings, as we did in 1996, on Heron Island. We are evaluating the potential problem and will make a decision soon.

There are several weeks left before the chicks fly off, so please come out to Stow Lake and witness their frequent attempts to learn to fly. I'll see you out there!



Photos: David Sullivan

Testing wing strength in preparation for flight in nest no. 3.



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Season's Last Nature Walk, May 21st

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist



We had a full house for the last nature walk of the Heron Watch season—lots of adults and eager young children. The weather was blustery and there was a real sense of changing seasons, with young birds now so mature.

Most of the heron chicks are now physically the same size as their parents (four feet tall). While their adult feathers will take time to molt in, their fledgling fluffiness makes clear which ones are still young.

Going around the lake, we found young **Canada Geese** already nearly the size of their parents, and several flocks of young **Mallards** ranging from several weeks old to a flock just a couple of days old.

On Strawberry Island we found a nest of **Black Phoebes** with five young. We observed the parents making loop-shaped flights to grab insects from the air and bring the food back. This is the second hatching this spring by this very productive adult pair of phoebes, a member of the flycatcher family, that previously raised three chicks to fledging in early April.

The Island was filled with singing **Song Sparrows**, and also with some fledgling Song Sparrows exploring the groves of grasses outside their nest sites for the first time. We reviewed how Song Sparrows continue singing while their young are growing to adulthood, unlike some species that stop singing when rearing their young. Young sparrows need to hear their song while their brains are younger than two months old in order to properly imprint on it and learn it for themselves.

A singing **Hermit Warbler** was the only true songbird that we heard. Other breeding birds on the island included **Tree Swallows** at their nest on the reservoir, and **Pygmy Nuthatches**. We found one fledgling nuthatch exploring the world on the rocks near the top of Huntington Falls, and an active nest site in a hollow branch near the Roman Bridge.

Other sightings of the day included **Western Scrub Jay**, **House Finch** (also known to nest on the Island), **Dark-eyed Junco**, **Double-crested Cormorant**, **Anna's** and **Allen's Hummingbirds**, **Western Gulls** (overhead), and one **American Crow**.

It was a very satisfying walk for the end of the season!



Special Thanks to our 23 Heron Watch 2016 Volunteers!

Ileana Betancourt, Kevin Biggerstaff, Anthony Castillo, Isabelle Chow, Nancy Elsner, Anne Galjour, Ashley Gallagher, Juan Garcia, Taylor Garcia, Jeff Harter, Judy Harter, Bob Hirt, Missi Hirt-Gavic, Michelle Hunnewell, Trace Kannell, Kevin Koenig, Megan Prelinger, Sharon Pretti, Janel Schulenberg, Mike Smylie, Angela Tremolada, Natasha Yankoffski, and Jacob Zollinger.





Feeding Frenzy!

An adult Great Blue Heron flew in to feed its five-week-old chicks at nest no. 3. The parent stayed just long enough to regurgitate into the nest twice, and then flew off to recover from the repeated jabs and pulls of the three chicks.

Photos by David Sullivan





**Our Many Terrific Volunteers
Made Heron Watch Possible!**



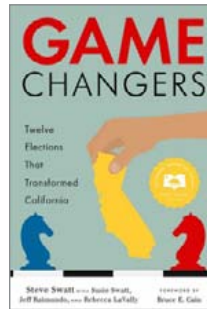
Photos: SFNE



Photos: SFNE



Book Review



Game Changers: *Twelve Elections That Transformed California*

Steve Swatt with Susie Swatt, Jeff Raimundo, and Rebecca LaVally; Foreword by Bruce E. Cain

Heyday Press, 2014; paperback, 6x9, 320 pp. \$20

Reviewed by Jeff Harter

Using the effective framing device of elections that transformed the state of California, Swatt and company have adroitly woven an engaging, episodic history. Each featured election provides a launch pad for a thumbnail biography of a critical individual—a politician, lobbyist, or tycoon—who shaped California’s political landscape.

Leland Stanford earns his own chapter, due to his bald use of political power as California’s eighth governor to further the interests of his business enterprise, the Central Pacific Railroad. After a mere two years in office he and his partners had cemented a transportation monopoly that would dominate virtually all aspects of life in California for the next 50 years.



photo: Vladimir Shapovalov

A bond election to fund the Los Angeles Aqueduct is grist for a colorful chapter on the rise of L.A. and the demise of the Owens Valley. Along the way, the reader gets an education on how land speculators, media moguls, and politicians have greased each others’ palms at the expense of blindsided residents in towns hundreds of miles from any urban center.

As a bonus, the events that inform the plot of the classic 1974 movie *Chinatown* get covered in illuminating detail.

This book is a good choice for anyone seeking a well-researched and thoroughly engaging source for understanding Sacramento’s continuing gridlock, the ballot initiative system, and (sadly) the negative political campaigns still with us.

Winner of the 2014 California Historical Society Book Award; regional nonfiction finalist, Next Generation Indie Book Awards.

UPCOMING EVENTS

SF Nature Walks: From 10 am to noon; rain cancels all walks. Please bring binoculars if you can, and a pencil. For directions see our [events calendar](#).

Birding for Everyone: First Saturdays from 10 am to noon in the SF Botanical Garden. Next: June 4, with Sarah Barsness & Megan Prelinger. Meet at SF Botanical Garden bookstore, 9th Ave. near Lincoln. SFNE members FREE. \$10 per nonmember adult, children welcome (free). **No walk on July 2.**

SF Botanical Garden: Free for SF residents with proof of residency; non-residents pay a fee.

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Adults, \$35; Seniors 65+, \$30;
students 21 or under, \$20.

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Photos: SNHE

A Family Nature Walk, April 30th

Missi Hirt-Gavic, Naturalist



What an enriching day for *Birding for Everyone!* We had the privilege and pleasure of having expert birder Bob Hirt, my father, co-leading the walk.

Our group on that warm morning consisted of several families and their school-age children. We held a brief practice session on using binoculars.

One of our first observations was an **American Crow** attacking a **Red-tailed Hawk**, quite an exciting mid-air spectacle. As we crossed the Roman Bridge to Strawberry Hill we observed **Song** and **House Sparrows**. We could hear the drumming of a **Downy Woodpecker**, and soon **Mallards** and **Rock Doves** became common.

Near the waterfall were **Western** and **California Gulls**, and **Red-Eared Slider** turtles sunning themselves. It was a treat to watch **Canada Geese** with their goslings.

After seeing a **Steller's Jay**, we learned that they often mimic the call of a hawk to scare away other birds from their food sources. **Anna's Hummingbirds**, **Tree Swallows**, and **Violet-green Swallows** all swooped in for appearances. We also spotted a lone **Pied-billed Grebe** and a **Black Phoebe**.

Later the children reviewed and circled observed birds in their field journals. Our adventure continued with sightings of a hybrid **Moscovy Duck** and a male **Ring-necked Duck**. We saw an **American Coot** and a **Double-crested Cormorant**. A highlight of the day was seeing a first-year male **Hooded Merganser**.

As we rounded the lake, a **Black-crowned Night-Heron** took flight to relocate. Also making appearances were a **Pygmy Nuthatch**, a **California Towhee** and a **Common Raven**. Finally we pointed our scopes at the nest of a **Great Horned Owl** and her two chicks.

What a rewarding, educational, and inspiring day for the people of all ages who joined and participated!

Volunteering for Heron Watch

Alexa, SF Nature Education Intern



On April 30th I experienced my first day as a Heron Watch intern. The morning began with spotting-scope duty and viewing the five-week-old heron chicks in nest number one. I was excited to inform the public about such an amazing phenomenon so nearby. Each face lit up with fascination, surprise, and astonishment at first sight through the scope. At 10 AM, I went on the family nature walk around Stow Lake with field trip leaders Missi and Bob, and volunteer Isabelle.

The parents and children were thrilled to see everything: from common **Mallards** to the **Hooded Merganser**, a migrating visitor. We also saw a tail-pumping **Black Phoebe**, a **Ring-necked Duck**, a pair of **Red-tailed Hawks**, a melodic **Song Sparrow**, **Pygmy Nuthatches**, and a **Pied-billed Grebe**.

The Great Horned Owl's nest was the highlight of the walk. The kids were curious about the **turtles**, **squirrels**, and the freaky-looking hybrid **Moscovy Duck** that one kid named "bloody face turkey." The kids made my day.

I think it is extremely important for kids, especially in this technological day and age, to experience local nature in action, and to realize how fun it is to take a walk outside with their families and see something amazing.





Photos at left and below left: Grace Ruth



Photo above: Nancy DeStefanis

Clockwise from top left: Allen's Hummingbird; Allen's Hummingbird in waterfall (above); Anna's Hummingbird (below); Wilson's Warbler; Mandarin Duck; Canada Geese with goslings; Canada Geese.

Around, About, and On Stow Lake



Photo above: Sarbjeet Kaur

Birding for Everyone, May 7th

Sarah Barsness, Naturalist



Where have all the warblers gone? This was the question we asked ourselves on our Birding for Everyone field trip on May 6th. We were surprised by how quiet the SF Botanical Garden seemed during the height of spring migration. Thankfully, before our trip a birder friend had clued me in to possible answers.

Winds out of the northwest the week before had likely pushed some birds to the east, and caused others to pause their migration in order to avoid flying against the wind. Migration is hard work, and birds need to conserve all their energy to manage their long trips.

This is nesting season for many local birds, and they don't sing as often while building nests and tending eggs and young birds. Nesting was the recurring theme for our May outing. Eight of us, including two enthusiastic new birders who had been to Heron Watch, explored a bird world that was quieter than usual but no less fascinating. The day was overcast as we headed to the California Native Garden.

We heard **Wilson's Warblers** and a **Pacific Wren** calling, but the only birds we spotted were a **Song Sparrow**, a **House Finch**, and **American Robins**. The robins were vocalizing, drawing from a repertoire that numbers up to 70! We heard the classic whinny and "cheer-up" call.

While we were at the reservoir an **Anna's Hummingbird** took a liking to Nancy, one of our members. The female

bird buzzed around her hair for what seemed like several minutes, finally changing her mind and pulling spider webs from the nearby fence before zipping back to her nest. We talked about the advantages of spider webs as nesting material: strong, soft, and flexible, Anna's typically use them to line their tiny nests. Although Nancy's hair might have been a close second!

We made our way through the Redwood Grove, stopping to listen to another **Pacific Wren**. We heard every note of his beautiful song — which contains up to 110 separate notes. He has far more lung power for his size than a rooster!

In the south end of the Succulent Garden, someone spotted an **Allen's Hummingbird** nest right next to the path. We watched in amazement as the female fluttered in and settled inside. And then we slipped away, careful not to dwell too long and draw the wrong attention to the area. It seemed like a vulnerable spot — low to the ground in a heavily trafficked area — and it may be that the mother is young and inexperienced. We crossed our fingers for her success.

In the higher elevation of the Succulent Garden there was more nesting activity. As always, the Century Plants are popular for a range of nesting birds. The **Downy Woodpeckers** get these spots started by pecking holes in the large, hollow, and woody stems. **Pygmy Nuthatches** have taken up residence in one of these spaces, and we watched them pop in and out. Then a **Tree Swallow** flew into another entry hole just 12 inches below! These birds are aware of the challenges of San Francisco housing and are happy to share. In a neigh-

boring Century Plant Downy Woodpeckers were setting up their own nest, making the Succulent Garden a truly diverse community.

We headed back to the Main Gate via the Ancient Plant Garden, where we had nice views of an active **Cooper's Hawk** nest, almost certainly the work of the pair we encountered in April. One of the pair was perched nearby. We look forward to seeing fledglings!

The rain was beginning to fall, so we gathered under a tree to summarize our day. But even the wet did not dissuade our new members from lingering to ask more questions — which I was happy to answer. Assuring me she would be back, one of them commented, "It is kind of addictive, isn't it?"

Indeed it is.

SF Botanical Garden

05/07/2016

Compiled by Sarah Barsness

Birds: 27 species

Canada Goose – 5
Mallard – 3
Cooper's Hawk – 1
Western Gull – 3
California Gull – 1
American Coot – 16
Rock Dove – 4
Anna's Hummingbird – 5
Allen's Hummingbird – 12
Downy Woodpecker – 2
Red-masked Parakeet – 4
Olive-sided Flycatcher – 1

Black Phoebe – 1
Steller's Jay – 1
Western Scrub Jay – 4
American Crow – 1
Common Raven – 1
Tree Swallow – 5
Bushtit – 3
Pygmy Nuthatch – 4
Pacific Wren – 3
American Robin – 10
Cedar Waxwing – 15
Wilson's Warbler – 6
Dark-eyed Junco – 1
Song Sparrow – 10
California Towhee – 2



From left: Pygmy Nuthatch in Century Plant; Cooper's Hawk, Allen's Hummingbird; Anna's Hummingbird nest. Photos by Sarah Barsness



Photo: Grace Ruth



Photo: Grace Ruth



Photo: Vladimir Shapovalov



Photo: Grace Ruth



Photo: Sarbjeet Kaur

Strawberry Island's Great Horned Owls

Photos by Sarbjeet Kaur, Grace Ruth, and Vladimir Shapovalov



Photo: Grace Ruth



Photo: Grace Ruth



**Hooded Orioles Build a Nest
on Potrero Hill** Photos by Sandi Wong

