



## Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

Our annual spring fundraising campaign has begun. Your contributions help us train 55 volunteers and interns for Heron Watch, and introduce students to the wonders of Stow Lake during the week. Please support our programs online or by sending in a donation. We have a \$5,000 matching grant, so every donation counts double towards our goal.

I am pleased to report that there are four heron nests occupied on the island by the Stow Lake waterfall. This is the second year that great blue herons have used this island for breeding. Two nests constructed last year are now occupied by herons that appear to be incubating. We've seen quite a few fights as herons chase away interlopers through the skies.

As we go to press, one great blue heron is back in the main nest on Heron Island. As soon as he finds a mate, we will have a reason to use the live feed and turn on the Heron Cam.

Heron Watch, our annual spring interpretive program, starts Saturday, April 16th, and will continue every Saturday through May 21st. Please see details on page 5. Join us at the observation site or for a nature walk!

Please give generously and support our matching grant.

Best regards,

Nancy DeStefanis



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## Heron's Head Park, February 13th Megan Prelinger, Naturalist



The morning started out cool and overcast for our group of 17 observers, but the fog burned off and most of the walk benefited from bright morning sun. As we were gathering near the EcoCenter we had the opportunity to notice several land bird species. A half-dozen **Bushtits** were in the shrubs a few feet from us; further away on the lawn and around the chain-link fence were two **Yellow-rumped Warblers**, four **White-crowned Sparrows**, and a **Black Phoebe**. Overhead on the wires and poles along Jennings Street were **American Crows** and abundant **Rock Doves**.

In the deep pond in the southwest corner of the park were our first diving ducks of the day: **Bufflehead** and **Lesser Scaup**, as well as four **Canada Geese**, and a flock of a dozen **American Coots**. Along the shore a single **Whimbrel** and a single **Spotted Sandpiper** foraged near one another, and a **Snowy Egret** searched the water's edge a few yards closer to us. Up on the grassy slope at the edge of the pond a pair of **Eurasian Collared Doves** scratched around.

As we walked east, a **Belted Kingfisher** called as it flew over the water. We stopped to take advantage of the low tide to look at the rocky beach on the peninsula's north side. There we found more **Lesser** and also **Greater Scaup**, and of greatest interest was a female **Common Goldeneye** which hauled out on the beach and preened in full view. At a further point, we were all arrested by the sight of four tightly flocked and noisy **Black Oystercatchers** zooming over the path at a fairly low altitude between the north and the south shores of the peninsula.

We proceeded to the tip of the peninsula in order to have the sunlight at our backs for the rest of our stops. We found perching **Brown Pelicans** with bright red breeding-season gular pouches on the ruined pier



Photo: Bill Hunnewell

Eurasian Wigeon

structure a dozen yards north of the peninsula. We were confounded for a few minutes by the apparent sight of a bluish "surf scoter" that a spotting scope revealed to be an abandoned decoy!

A livelier sighting was a bright **Eurasian Wigeon** among the flock of **American Wigeons** that floated nearby, closer to shore.

Birds of the north shore included a flock of **Least Sandpipers** that we compared to a single **Spotted Sandpiper**, and we contrasted size, plumage, and behavior patterns between these two very different species, noting how gregarious the Least Sandpipers were, while the Spotted Sandpiper is a solitary animal. Another solitary animal surprised us: A **Savannah Sparrow** foraging in the rocky, grassy, intermediate zone between the beach and the path.

Our last stop of the walk was at the marsh ponds on the south side of the path. There we found a loose

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flock of **American Avocets** that displayed three different plumage phases: most were in winter white, with one individual in bright russet breeding plumage, and another was in an intermediate phase between these two. Other birds of this heavily populated marsh included **Marbled Godwit, Long-billed Curlew, Willet, Whimbrel, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, and Killdeer.**



**Heron's Head Park**  
**02/13/2016**  
**Compiled by M. Prelinger**  
**Birds: 43 species**  
 Canada Goose - 6  
 Eurasian Wigeon - 2  
 American Wigeon - 20  
 Mallard - 2  
 Greater Scaup - 20  
 Lesser Scaup - 12  
 Bufflehead - 12  
 Common Goldeneye - 1  
 Ruddy Duck - 30  
 Western Grebe - 1  
 Clark's Grebe - 1  
 Double-crested Cormorant - 5

Brown Pelican - 5  
 Great Blue Heron - 2  
 Great Egret - 1  
 Snowy Egret - 3  
 American Avocet - 8  
 Black Oystercatcher - 4  
 Black-bellied Plover - 3  
 Killdeer - 2  
 Spotted Sandpiper - 2  
 Willet - 6  
 Whimbrel - 3  
 Long-billed Curlew - 1  
 Marbled Godwit - 1  
 Least Sandpiper - 12  
 Western Gull - 12

California Gull - 8  
 Rock Dove - 25  
 Eurasian Collared Dove - 2  
 Anna's Hummingbird - 3  
 Belted Kingfisher - 1  
 Black Phoebe - 2  
 American Crow - 6  
 Bushtit - 6  
 European Starling - 8  
 Yellow-rumped Warbler - 2  
 White-crowned Sparrow - 12  
 Savannah Sparrow - 1  
 Song Sparrow - 2  
 Western Meadowlark - 4  
 Brewer's Blackbird - 4

Clockwise from top left: Brown Pelicans; the group at Heron's Head Park; Black Oystercatchers; American Avocets; Willet.

## Birding for Everyone, February 6th

Sarah Barsness, Naturalist



The Birding for Everyone field trip in the SF Botanical Garden lived up to its name this past Saturday. Our group of 21 included experienced regulars, a number of people new to birding, and seven inquisitive, enthusiastic, and patient children from the SF Urban 4H group. Fortunately, the birds were cooperative. We spotted 35 species in the two-hour trip, thanks to our sharp-eyed young newbies!

We started our day with a clear view of a male **Downy Woodpecker** just inside the main gate. Then, close overhead, a pair of hawks circled several times in the clear blue sky, giving the children a good opportunity to practice using their binoculars and their field guides. One boy immediately identified them as **Red-tailed Hawks**. When I asked him to share how he figured that out I was surprised — and impressed — that he looked at the wing shape rather than the red tails!

We made our way to the Wildfowl Pond, with a brief stop at the Fragrance Garden, pausing to look at **White-crowned** and **Golden-crowned Sparrows**



foraging in the grass. We had brief glimpses of **Yellow-rumped Warblers** and **Dark-eyed Juncos**. The pond was quiet except for a few **American Coots**, a pair of **Mallards**, a **Snowy Egret**, and a single **Great Blue Heron**, which stood majestically and marvelously still on the center island,

allowing the group long views. **American Crows** flew overhead, and we reviewed how to distinguish them in flight from **Common Ravens** by the shape of the tail. Two of the boys then took responsibility for identifying all crows and ravens for the remainder of our outing.

We walked above the Succulent Garden, noting several **Anna's Hummingbirds**, and then stopped to admire a singing **Song Sparrow** on a nearby fence. We talked about how to distinguish this "little brown bird" from other sparrows and the surprising, and often overlooked, beauty of its streaked breast and striated back and head. We watched many sooty **Fox Sparrows** on the ground, distinguished by their solid, chocolate-colored backs and their two-footed kick.

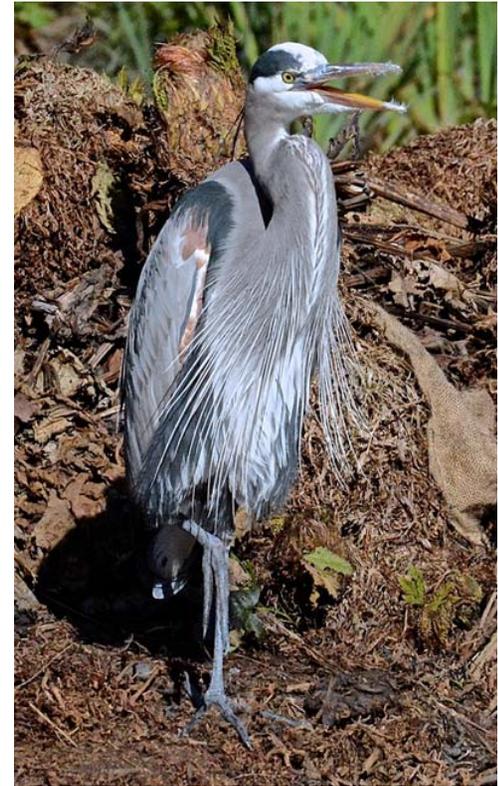
We kept our eyes open for **Varied Thrushes**, which love the same underbrush as Fox Sparrows, and a few people stayed behind for a longer

look. At the front of the group, we spotted a small **Townsend's Warbler** moving from tree to tree near the pond at the far end of the Children's Garden. The children especially loved how the bird resembled a small yellow and black bandit or an oversized bumblebee!

On our way to the California Native Garden one of our young spotters pointed out a **Hermit Thrush** on a bare branch. This very cooperative bird held his pose long enough for everyone to be able to compare his field marks to those of the Fox Sparrow. These two birds are often confused, but at close range, it is clear that the thrush has a more delicate, non-conical bill, and that its chest boasts clear spots, rather than streaks. We were surprised when we turned a corner in the California Native Garden to find four bright yellow **Lesser Goldfinches** preening in a bush just off the path.

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Clockwise from left: Mallard pair; Sarah with young visitors; Great Blue Heron; Snowy Egret.



Photos: Grace Ruth



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There were clear signs of the changing season. A few species of birds refused to be seen but were clearly heard. We heard the lovely and unmistakable melody of the tiny **Pacific Wren**, the fluty song of the **Purple Finch**, and the insistent shweet, shweet, shweet of a **Hutton's Vireo**. As we neared the Main Gate at the end of our outing, the two **Red-tailed Hawks** flew closely overhead again, circling and diving in a dramatic courtship display. Spring is most decidedly just around the corner!

**SF Botanical Garden**  
**02/06/2016**

**Compiled by**

**Sarah Barsness**

**Birds: 35 species**

Canada Goose

Mallard

Great Blue Heron

Snowy Egret

Turkey Vulture

Red-tailed Hawk

American Coot

Western Gull

California Gull

Rock Pigeon

Anna's Hummingbird

Downy Woodpecker

Black Phoebe

Hutton's Vireo

Steller's Jay

Western Scrub Jay

American Crow

Common Raven

Chestnut-backed Chickadee

Pygmy Nuthatch

Pacific Wren

Hermit Thrush

American Robin

Varied Thrush

Yellow-rumped Warbler

Townsend's Warbler

Fox Sparrow

Dark-eyed Junco

White-crowned Sparrow

Golden-crowned Sparrow

Song Sparrow

California Towhee

House Finch

Purple Finch

Lesser Goldfinch



Photo: Bill Hummewell



Photo: Sandi Wong



Photo: Grace Ruth



Photo: Bill Hummewell

Left: Fox Sparrow; Top: Anna's Hummingbird; Above: Sarah checking her species list.

Top right, spotted on a different day in the Botanical Garden by Sandi Wong: Anna's Hummingbirds; below: Northern Saw-whet Owl.



Photo: Sandi Wong



## 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: Mar. 5, with Sarah Barsness. 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 SF residents with proof of residency; non-residents pay a fee.

**Heron Watch:** At Stow Lake, Saturdays, April 16, 23, 30, and May 7, 14, 21, 2016. Observation at spotting scopes, 10 am-12:30 – free. Nature walk, 10:15-noon. Adults \$10, children free. Details to come in our April newsletter.



## Great Blue Herons Return to their Island near the Stow Lake Waterfall

At least eight great blues have been spotted courting at four nests on the island. This is the second year that herons have used this island for breeding.

Photos by Grace Ruth

### Volunteers Needed

Adult volunteers are needed for Heron Watch Saturdays from 9 am to 1 pm. Volunteers will be trained. We ask volunteers to sign up for two of the six Saturdays of Heron Watch (4/16–5/21). New volunteers will be oriented at a Saturday morning session in March or April.

A volunteer application may be downloaded at [http://sfnature.org/get\\_involved/volunteer.html](http://sfnature.org/get_involved/volunteer.html). Return to: [volunteer@sfnature.org](mailto:volunteer@sfnature.org) by **Mar. 19**.

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



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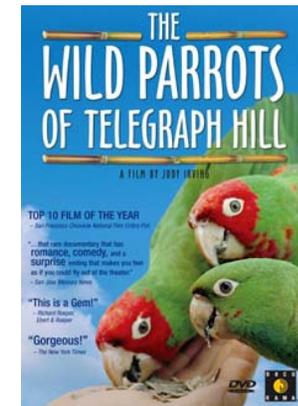
## Sea Lions by the Dozens at Año Nuevo State Park

Photos by Bill Hunnewell

A recent visit to this natural coastal preserve provided an opportunity to observe and photograph elephant seals and California sea lions, cormorants, terns and—a bobcat!



## Film Review



### *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*

A Film by Judy Irving.  
Pelican Media, 2003.  
83 minutes. On DVD.

**Reviewed by  
Michele Hunnewell**

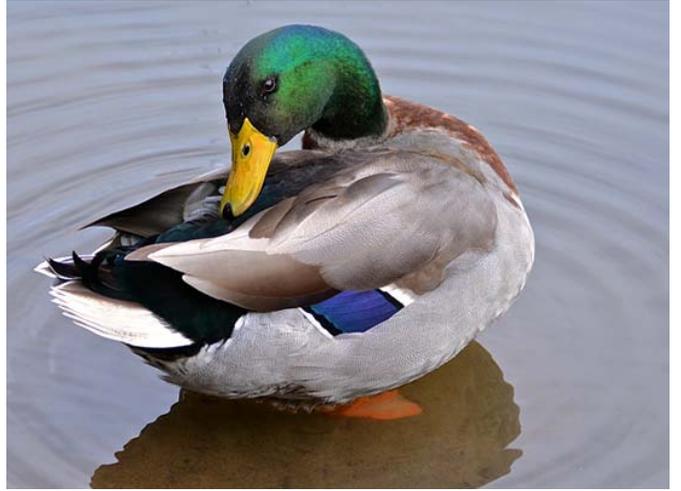
The story of the wild parrots of San Francisco's Telegraph Hill is as much about the personal journey of Mark Bittner, their advocate and caretaker, as it is about those birds.

Mr. Bittner's kindness and compassion are apparent here, but his respect for the wild Cherry-headed Conures means just as much to the viewer as the care he gives them. Mark says early in the movie that his was not a plan, it "just happened," spawning his relationship with the parrot flock and birds in San Francisco's other neighborhoods.

There are many stories about how parrots came to the city, some merely amusing and some seemingly based in fact, but they are here now: urban wild birds. Although some birds bond with Mr. Bittner, they remain very much of their own community, pairing up to mate, play, preen, and even mourn when a mate or flock member disappears.

Mr. Bittner, homeless for 15 years, a musician transplanted from Seattle to SF's North Beach, found little support from the local birding community when he started his efforts to feed and rehabilitate parrots from a small cottage on Telegraph Hill. The birds were viewed (not incorrectly) as non-native, and there were even calls to trap and exterminate them. The conures, beautiful and mostly gregarious, became a project for Mr. Bittner, as he eventually began to photograph and write about them, catching the eye and interest of filmmaker Judy Irving.

Over time things changed for Mr. Bittner and for the parrots, and there are some sad moments at the end of the movie. This really is a good story, a lovely, thoughtful and educational film. The wild parrots continue to thrive in San Francisco, without human interaction, and remain for many a valued part of the wildlife of the city.



**Elk Glen Lake in Golden Gate Park**  
Photos by Grace Ruth

A juvenile Great Blue Heron, California Towhee, Mallard, and American Bittern take advantage of the relative quiet of Elk Glen Lake in the park.



# Winter Birds of Morro Bay

Photos by Sandi Wong



Clockwise from top left:  
Surf Scoter; Heermann's Gull; Brown Pelican;  
Horned Grebe; Bushtit.