



The Blue Heron

News from San Francisco Nature Education • May 2016

Heron Chicks Are Everywhere! Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director



Stow Lake has exploded with Great Blue Heron chicks!

At the beginning of April, three nests hatched three chicks each. All four nests are in the Monterey Pine tree on an island near the

waterfall. A few days ago we spotted one chick in a fourth nest, which is quite hidden in the tree.

Meanwhile, on the morning of April 19th, I surveyed Heron Island, near the Boathouse, to see if there was any current nesting activity. Three herons were flying round and round after each other, and finally one landed at the nest site where I have observed it for the past two months. However, I have not yet observed this heron sitting, which would indicate incubation. Stay tuned for further activity there.

Great Blue Herons lay eggs asynchronously (every other day). Until chicks fledge, ages can be determined by size: the oldest is the tallest; the next oldest is a few inches shorter; the runt is much smaller.

At this stage the parents are too busy foraging for fish, gophers, and small birds for themselves

and the chicks to remain at the nest. Regular feedings are now occurring at all four nests, and it seems like herons are constantly coming and going from the single Monterey Pine that hosts all of them.

When a parent arrives, all the chicks squawk loudly and pull on the adult's beak to stimulate regurgitation. Soon after regurgitating food into the bottom of the nest the parent flies off.

Most chicks fledge at about twelve weeks. During May we can expect the chicks to exercise their wings and practice hopping. At the end of

May and during June we will see lots of branch-hopping and practice flights.

Please join us at our Observation Site at Stow Lake to observe these marvelous birds. Besides showing the herons through spotting scopes, our naturalists also lead adult and family walks each Saturday morning.

Our matching grant of \$5,000 ends May 31st. Please donate now online, or send a donation to support our programs and help us reach our goal.



3450 Geary, Ste. 208
San Francisco, CA 94118
e-mail: info@sfnature.org
telephone: 415-387-9160
www.sfnature.org



Photo: Nancy DeStefanis

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In the first heron nest, taken on April 3, 2016.



Great Blue Heron parents and three chicks were busy in their treetop nest at Stow Lake. There are now four nests in this Monterey Pine. These photos are of nest #1 in mid-April.

Photos by David Sullivan



People photos: SRNE



Opening Day of Heron Watch Was a Blast!

Heron and duckling photos: Jeff Harter



Volunteers, Great Blue Herons and chicks, Mallard ducklings, and the enthusiastic people watching them at our new Stow Lake observation site.

Stow Lake Nature Walk, April 16th

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist



On April 16th, a balmy and beautiful day, our nature walk revealed many engaging natural sights on Strawberry Island. There was plenty to see at Stow Lake between the Heron Watch site and the bridge to the Island, including the heron nest that's visible only from the south side of the lake, abundant **Mallards** and **Western Gulls**, and three interesting individuals in the water: a male **Ring-necked Duck**, a female **Hooded Merganser**, and a female vagrant **Mandarin Duck**.

On the Island we found **Great Blue Herons** foraging the shore, and our walk then led us up to the reservoir level of the island to see the nests of two charismatic species: the **Red-tailed Hawks** and the **Great Horned Owls**.

On the way up we saw an **Allen's Hummingbird** perched, an **Anna's Hummingbird** both flying and perched, and **Pygmy Nuthatches** in the crowns of the tall pines on the south slope. **Song Sparrows** were abundant, and we heard the spring songs also of both **House Finch** and **Purple Finch**, and **Dark-eyed Junco**.

The promise of the reservoir level did not disappoint. A **Red-tailed Hawk** was visible sitting on its nest with its vibrant red tail extending over the edge of the nest. The **Great Horned Owls** kept us watching their family for a quarter of an hour. The two owlets had hatched around the 22nd of March, so they

were now three weeks old. The female adult has not left the nest since she began sitting on her eggs in mid-February. She was there overseeing the activities of the two owlets, which are already beginning to show barred feather patterns and which are half her height when standing up in the nest.

Our three scope volunteers shared this experience with many passers-by, while we also had good looks at the **Tree Swallow** family that is building a nest in the nest box attached to the fence around the reservoir. Two **Tree Swallows** perched on the tip of a Monterey pine. Other species in the air during our walk included **Turkey Vulture**, **Common Raven**, **American Crow**, **Barn Swallow**, and **Violet-green Swallow**.



Photos: Sandi Wong



Top and above: Canada Goose and goslings.

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: May 7 and 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.

Heron Watch: Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park. Three more Saturdays: May 7, 14, and 21, 2016. Observation at spotting scopes, 10 am-12:30 – free. **Nature Walks** every Saturday, 10:15 to 12:15. Special **Family Walk** on May 21. All walks: Adults \$10, children free. *Walks meet at new site.* See map below.



e-mail: info@sfnature.org
 telephone: 415-387-9160
www.sfnature.org

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





Photo: Jeff Harter



Photo: Jeff Harter



Photo: SFNE

Volunteers and visitors watched herons (and goslings), and took a nature walk to Strawberry Hill on April 23rd.



Photo: Nancy DeStefanis



Photo: Jeff Harter



Photo: Jeff Harter



Photo: Jeff Harter



Photo: Jeff Harter



Photo: SFNE



Nest no. 1, by Jeff Harter



Nest no. 3, by Grace Ruth



Nest no. 3, by Nancy DeStefanis



Nest no. 1, by David Sullivan



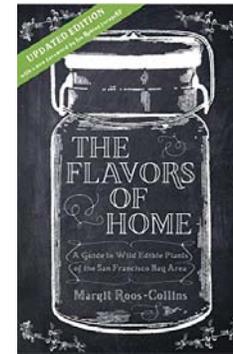
Clockwise from top left: heron chicks in nest number 1; in no. 3; parent and chick in no. 3; the herons' nesting tree seen from Stow Lake's north shore, with numbered nests; herons in nest no. 2.



A Female Mandarin Duck at Stow Lake Photos by Grace Ruth



Book Review



The Flavors of Home: A Guide to the Wild Edible Plants of the San Francisco Bay Area

by Margit Roos-Collins
Illustrations by Rose Craig
Heyday Press; paperback: 248 pp.
Publisher: Heyday, 2016;
6 x 9 inches; \$18. Second Edition.
Reviewed by Gabriel Sanders

Anyone who lives in the Bay Area and likes spending time outdoors, eating local food, or connecting with the environment will enjoy this book. Even if one doesn't collect wild food, *The Flavors of Home* will enrich one's experience of the outdoors.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Roos-Collins' ode to the wild radish. She tells a whimsical tale about its introduction to Northern California and goes on to describe the joy of a meadow of radish blossoms: "Try sitting in such a radish patch, head deep in flowers, on a warm April day If part of you is Ferdinand the bull, this is your chance to wallow in flowers until you are buzzy and lightheaded with contentment"

The entries on individual plants are clear, informative, and helpful. The illustrations are tasteful and useful for identification. This is not a cookbook, but the author gives advice on how to transform wild plants into food.

My only complaint stems from the structure. Plants are grouped into categories based on the part we consume: blossoms, berries, nuts, and leaves. Within these categories, plants are ordered alphabetically. This strikes me as a compromise between an alphabetical, reference-style guide and a book that groups plants together in ways that people experience them.

The clear prose, inflected by Roos-Collins' gentle sense of humor, sparkles. The author effectively conveys her enthusiasm, emotional connection, and deep knowledge of the region's plants.

I recommend *The Flavors of Home* as an encyclopedia for foragers, a guidebook for walkers, and an inspiration for everyone. Roos-Collins embodies the childlike joy of finding food growing wild. I wish I had known about this book years ago!

Birding for Everyone, April 2nd

Sarah Barsness, Naturalist



"It's the quality, not the quantity, that counts," says a regular participant in our monthly Birding for Everyone visits to the Arboretum. We kept that in mind on April 2nd, as we gathered after our outing. Instead of focusing on numbers, we focused on the quality of our birding encounters, which was very high!

The 14 participants included four cheerful visitors from Denmark, and Alexa, San Francisco Nature Education's enthusiastic new high school intern. The Danes were experienced birders but completely new to birds of California. Each one thrilled them, which helped all of us see the most common birds with new eyes: **Dark-eyed Juncos**, **Black Phoebes**, and **Western Scrub Jays** were as exciting to them as a Rustic Bunting might be to us! Alexa was brimming with thoughtful questions that reminded us that the world of birds is endlessly complex and marvelous.

After noting **Anna's Hummingbirds** and **Pygmy Nuthatches** in trees near the main gate, we headed to the California Garden, stopping along the way to listen to a **Fox Sparrow**. It took a few moments to identify this complex and beautiful song, as Fox Sparrows rarely sing here, away from their breeding ground — unlike White-crowned or Song Sparrows, who will nest here.

We also heard the distinctive song of the **Pacific Wren**, and headed to the Redwood Grove hoping to catch a glimpse. At the edge of the grove we found ourselves within a few feet of a small gray bird clinging to a

large leaf — a fledgling **Anna's Hummingbird**, trying to get the hang of its new wings. Mesmerized, it took a few minutes to note the scolding of his parents, who clearly felt we had overstayed our welcome.

We slipped quietly on, following the song of the **Pacific Wren**. This song is so clear and melodic that we would have been content just to listen, but as we reached the quiet center of the Redwood Grove he dropped down onto a bare branch just in front of us and gave us an extended, private concert, to the delight of our Danish friends.

We noted several **Selasphorus Hummingbirds** en route to the Children's Garden, and discussed the impossible challenge of distinguishing the **Allen's** from **Rufous Hummingbirds** of this genus in the field, especially at this time of year, when both species are in the neighborhood. This did not diminish our enjoyment of their beauty, and we were especially awestruck at one male's vivid orange gorget.

The Children's Garden was quiet, but just as we turned around we spotted first a male, then a female **Downy Woodpecker** visible in the top of a tall, bare eucalyptus. They seemed to be pairing up and preparing to nest (we hope). In the Succulent Garden we noted **Pygmy Nuthatches** nest-building in holes that **Downy Woodpeckers** had carved in Century Plants!

We wound towards the Gondwana Circle, passing a shrub full of sociable **Bushtits**. Just beyond, we startled a pair of courting **Cooper's Hawks**, and stood back to give them privacy. We spent the remainder of our outing locating a few more of the usual suspects for our friends from Denmark, including a pair of **California Towhees** and a **White-crowned Sparrow**.



Photo: Sarah Barsness

We were startled that our list barely topped 30, but it was impossible to be disappointed with the quality of the morning's adventures. A special thanks goes out to our new intern and our Danish visitors for reminding us that an encounter with any bird is a gift!

SF Botanical Garden

04/02/2016

Compiled by Megan Prelinger

Birds: 33 species

Canada Goose – 2

Mallard – 2

Cooper's Hawk – 3

Red-tailed Hawk – 3

Western Gull – 4

American Coot – 16

Rock Dove – 6

Anna's Hummingbird – 12

Rufous/Allen's Hummingbird – 8

Downy Woodpecker – 1

Black Phoebe – 4

Hutton's Vireo – 1

Steller's Jay – 4

Western Scrub Jay – 2

American Crow – 2

Common Raven – 3

Bushtit – 4

Pygmy Nuthatch – 6

Pacific Wren – 6

Hermit Thrush – 1

American Robin – 10

Varied Thrush – 1

European Starling – 2

Cedar Waxwing – 20

Yellow-rumped Warbler – 1

Wilson's Warbler – 1

Fox Sparrow – 4

Dark-eyed Junco – 2

White-crowned Sparrow – 1

Song Sparrow – 8

California Towhee – 3

House Finch – 2

Purple Finch – 3



Photo at left: Sarah Barsness



Photos near left and right: Grace Ruth



Far left: Anna's Hummingbird; Allen's Hummingbirds; Above: Steller's Jay.

Cool Facts about Great Horned Owls

Compiled by Nancy DeStefanis

*A wise old owl lived in an oak;
The more he saw, the less he spoke;
The less he spoke, the more he heard;
Why can't we all be like that wise old bird?*

Great Horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*) start nesting in January, in the dead of winter. The female will incubate eggs while her mate brings food. Within a month up to five eggs will hatch, and the owlets will be closely guarded by their parents. Six weeks after hatching, the owlets will leave the nest and walk around. In another three weeks, the young owls will have learned to fly.

The parents continue to feed and care for their offspring for several months, often as late as October. It is wise to stay away from young owls and their nests as Great Horned Owls are not afraid to attack if they feel their family is threatened.

With its long, earlike tufts, intimidating yellow-eyed stare, and deep hooting voice, the Great Horned Owl is the quintessential owl of storybooks.

Mortality: Once they reach adulthood survival rates are very good. Adults have no natural predators, so most owls at rehabilitation centers have human-caused problems. The oldest known wild Great Horned Owl was 28 years old.

Weight: Females are bigger and heavier than males, but size

varies greatly throughout their range. Some of the smallest are the *pacificus* subspecies birds in central and southern California, with weights up to 2.8 lbs.

Diet: Great Horned Owls eat almost anything that moves, and will even eat carrion. They are carnivores and don't eat seeds, bread, or anything other than meat.

Nesting: They use other available structures to nest in, which can include stick nests of hawks, herons, and crows.

Incubation: They most often lay two or three eggs, with incubation typically starting with the first egg. The female develops a brood patch and does the incubating, which lasts an average of 33 days.

Fledging: Owlets grow very fast. They are ready to start hopping onto adjacent branches or the side of the nest after six weeks, even though their head and bodies are still fuzzy. They can't fly well until 10-12 weeks of age. This is a very vulnerable time of their lives.

Mating: Great Horned Owls mate for life, but will stay with their mate only during breeding season. They need a territory of around 2.5 acres. The mating ritual begins in October with the pair hooting at each other.



Two photos at left: David Sullivan



Two photos at left: Sandi Wong



Photo: Bill Hunnewell

Top and above: a nest on Strawberry Hill. Left: near the Golden Gate Park Bison Paddock.

Photos by Bill Hunnewell, David Sullivan, and Sandi Wong