



## Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

Since I last wrote, our nest count has risen to five nests on the island by the Stow Lake waterfall, and two chicks have hatched in the first nest to start incubating!

The herons have also returned to their original nesting place, Heron Island, by the boathouse. It's been two years since the herons nested on the island. So far it appears that one of the old nests may be active.

I'm pleased to announce that we have three enthusiastic interns for Heron Watch this year: Oscar, Sabrina, and Nicolas. They have been studying the life cycle of the Great Blue Heron and reading a multitude of handouts on the heron's breeding behavior. They are learning to sketch birds, record data, and use spotting scopes. All are avid birders.

The deadline for our matching grant has been extended to April 30th. An anonymous donor is contributing up to \$5,000 dollars to match every dollar donated. Please donate online or send in your donation to help us reach our goal. My thanks to all who have donated so far.

Please join us at Heron Watch on Saturdays, April 15th through May 20th, at the new observation site!

Best regards,

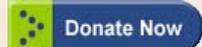
Nancy DeStefanis

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## First Chicks Hatch at Stow Lake! Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director



On St. Patrick's Day, our intrepid Heron Watch volunteer, Sharon Pretti, spotted the first two chicks of the season at the new nesting site of the Great Blue Herons. The chicks appear to be only a few days old.

The new nesting site already has five active nests in one Monterey pine tree! Great Blue Herons are constantly flying in and out of the island with sticks, and engaging in loud fights when one heron gets too close to another heron's nest.

We spotted a raccoon swimming nearby. Although raccoons do spend time on the island, so far there has been no sign of any disturbance of the nesting herons.

Meanwhile, the herons have returned to their nesting colony on Heron Island, near the boathouse. One has been spotted delivering sticks to another in an old nest. The last time the herons nested on this island was in 2015. We will be surveying all activity in the hope that herons successfully nest here again.

We have a Red-tailed Hawk nest near the new Heron Tree. When a heron flies over, the Red-tail flies after it! Although the Red-tailed Hawk is not a heron predator, they seem to enjoy annoying each other. We are also observing a Great Horned Owl nest on Strawberry Island. So far no owlets have been seen.

Our Heron Watch program starts April 15th. Volunteers equipped with spotting scopes will explain the various behaviors. Please join us at the Observation Site and also for a nature walk!



Photos: Frank Marino



Great Blue Heron with a new chick, March 18, 2017.

### On the pages ahead:

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## Heron Nest-building Is Underway at Stow Lake

Photos by David Sullivan



There are five active nests on the island near the waterfall. Three of the nests from last year are being used again this year. However, two nests are newly constructed. Male herons gather sticks for the female at the nest; she builds the nest. Twig presentations reinforce the pair bond. Once the female lays eggs in the nest, twig gathering generally stops because both sexes start taking turns sitting on the nest.



**Red-tailed Hawks and Great Horned Owl in Golden Gate Park** Photos by David Sullivan



## Great Blue Heron Courtship Displays

### Nicolas, Heron Watch Intern

The Great Blue Heron is a large North American bird, with an adult height of four feet and a wingspan of six feet. They typically begin courtship in January, and their chicks fledge in early July. The different displays of heron courtship, like



the Snap, Bill Duel, and Circle Fight, are interesting and wonderful.

Some of the earliest displays performed in the breeding season are Stretch, Snap, and Wing Preen. Stretch is performed mostly by males by stretching the neck and bill upwards, then bringing them down over their back while flexing the legs and making a soft howling noise. This is used during pair formation and during nest relief.

Our next display, Snap, is used by males to establish territory and attract mates. The bird

lifts its head, neck, back, and breast plumes, then stretches its neck down while flexing its legs and snapping its bill once.

Wing Preen is used by males in mate attraction. The male will bring a wing away from its body and run its bill down its primary feathers, on the edge of the wing. Females will often gather to watch.

After a pair forms, during early nest occupancy Arched Neck and Twig Shake become common. In Arched Neck the male will erect his plumes and arch his neck with the bill pointing down. He uses this as a warning to males who may seek to intrude into his territory. In Twig Shake the male grabs a branch, shakes it, and lets go.

Heron sexes look alike. The only visible difference is that males are slightly larger than females. This often isn't obvious, even to herons, and the best indicator of their sex is behavior. When a female wants to join a male, she will perform Circle Flight. She flies around the tree, landing a little closer to the male each time, until she tries to join him.

If you were a heron, you'd probably think it is good to take a slow approach, but no! The males often mistaken the females for rival

males and use Aggressive Forward Display, giving the female a jab with the bill and emitting an angry squawk.

For us it's confusing that these herons can't tell each other apart and that it even gets in the way of breeding. When males start the breeding season, they want to protect their territory and can be very aggressive about the whole thing. If they think there's a male right next to him, of course they're going to attack! After a few more Circle Flights and a little time, the male often finally realizes she's a female and lets her join him and mate.

During the first few hours on the nest a newly formed pair must establish their bond. They will perform Bill Duel, or as I'd like to name it, the Two Musketeers. The male will erect his neck, raise his plumes, and stab at his partner with his bill. As if in retreat, she pulls her neck back and opens her bill—they then start over again. Bill Duel will end when the female takes the tip of her mate's beak in her beak.

After the pair has bonded they will perform a display with many variants, including bill clapping, mutual preening, feather nibbling, and back biting behavior. Each heron extends its bill towards the other mate and makes nibbling movements in the air or towards the mate's back or body. This strengthens their bond.

Heron displays show that these birds are avian love-bugs, and I can't wait to see them at Heron Watch and maybe glimpse a few displays.



Photos: © 2017 Jim Sullivan for SFNE

## UPCOMING EVENTS

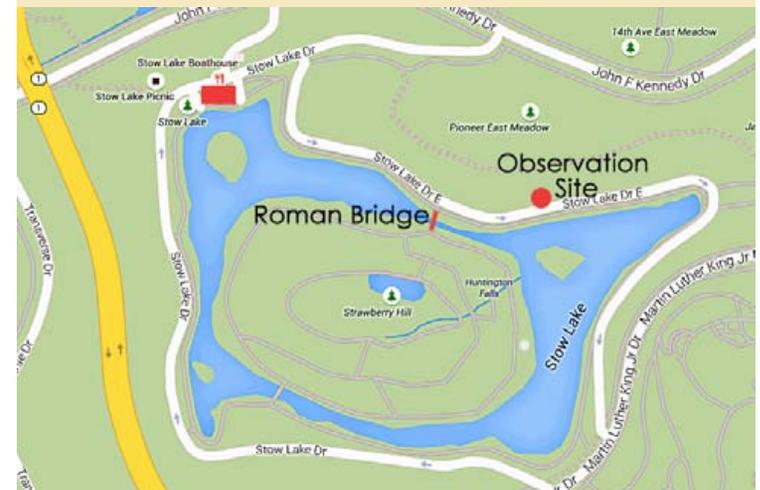
**SF Nature Walks:** From 10 am to noon; *rain cancels all walks.*  
**Members free, non-members \$10, children always free.**

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: Apr. 1 with Megan Prelinger; also May 6 and June 3. Meet at SF Botanical Garden bookstore, 9th Ave. near Lincoln.

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

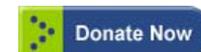
**Heron Watch:** Saturdays from April 15 through May 20. Heron observation site open from 10 am to 1 pm—free. Nature walk every Saturday, 10:15–12:15; adults \$10, members and children free. See map below.



## SUPPORT SAN FRANCISCO NATURE EDUCATION!

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

**Our matching grant for \$5,000 has been extended to April 30th. Please donate online or mail a check.**



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From left: Stretch and Twig Presentation on the nest—two displays of courting herons.

## Family Field Trip at Stow Lake

Missi Gavic, Naturalist



We were lucky to have Bob Hirt and three terrific SFNE interns join us for our March 18th family field trip around Stow Lake.

We began at the boathouse, where we observed the usual suspects: **Black Phoebes, Western and California Gulls, Mallards, American Coots, swallows, sparrows, Canada Geese, Steller's Jays, a California Scrub-Jay, and American Robins.**

A **Great Blue Heron** was landing on an old nest on Heron Island and then flying back towards the new nesting site. With binoculars out to get a better look, we saw that he was gathering sticks from a nest at the new site and adding to an old nest on Heron Island!

This was very exciting news. At the new observation site we observed five active Great Blue Heron nests. This group was feeding their chicks, flying in and out—we even saw a few mid-air heron fights! In an adjacent tree we observed a **Red-tailed Hawk** perched in its nest.

Our walk took us around Stow Lake on Strawberry Island, with a break

mid-way to check off observed birds in our field journals. To name a few of the 45 species we saw: **Ring-necked Ducks, Double-crested Cormorants, Dark-eyed Juncos, Anna's Hummingbirds, Black-crowned Night Herons, Bushtits, Pygmy Nuthatches, a Brown Creeper, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, American Wigeon, Pied-billed Grebe, Bufflehead and Ruddy Ducks, and a Sharp-shinned Hawk.**

Our three interns each claimed a unique bird sighting.

Oscar spotted a not-commonly-seen **Osprey** and a **White-throated Sparrow**. Then Nicolas spotted an elusive **Hooded Merganser**. And finally, after hearing the call of a **Red-shouldered Hawk**, Sabrina spotted it for the group. These interns are natural birders, and headed for bright careers in ornithology.



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Above: Swimming raccoon; Black-crowned Night Heron. Below right: Hooded Merganser (m).



David Sullivan



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Photos at left: David Sullivan

Above left: Nancy DeStefanis with interns Oscar, Sabrina, and Nicolas. Left to right: observing the heron activity at the Observation Site; field trip leaders Bob Hirt & Missi Gavic; young family walk participant checks off birds seen on the walk.

## A Birding Morning at Crissy Field, March 11th

Ileana Betancourt, Naturalist



Sunny and bustling is probably one of the best ways to describe our March 11th bird walk at Crissy Field. For those of you who have been along this bay-front patch of wilderness, you'll know that it's a popular destination for birds and people alike. Both flock to Crissy Fields to eat and enjoy everything the waterfront has to offer.

Our bird walk group assembled at the Warming Hut Café to make a mile-long trek to the Crissy Field lagoon. We started out by spotting a flock of **Surf Scoters** in the bay. We noted a few cormorants over the water. Moving along, we noticed the Snowy Plover beach protection signs, and though we looked, we were unable to spot any. While looking for plovers we did spot a bunch of shorebirds resting on a dock in the water. The assembly included a **Willet**, **Sanderlings**, and some **Western Gulls**.

Continuing on our way, we passed a brushy area where we spotted some **House Finches** of varying

coloration. One had typical red plumage, while the other was very orange. Among the brush we saw several **Northern Flickers** in taller branches. Along the path we saw a number of **Brewer's Blackbirds**, **Brown-headed Cowbirds**, and **White-crowned Sparrows**.

At the lagoon we spotted some ducks, including **Ruddy Ducks**, a **Bufflehead**, **Mallards**, and an **Eared Grebe**. Upon closer inspection, we noticed a flock of **Least Sandpipers** on the shore closest to us. Their camouflage was spot on, so it was tricky to see them initially.

We had a brisk walk back to the Warming Hut to wrap up the walk. We saw a total of 31 wonderful species. Birding with a Golden Gate Bridge backdrop is a scenic and must-do experience!

Thanks to over a dozen people who joined the walk. To those who couldn't make it, we hope to see you next time!

### Crissy Field Report

Oscar, SFNE intern

We had quite a good field trip to Crissy Field on March 11th, with many wonderful birds spotted by our enthusiastic participants. We walked from the Warming Hut almost a mile down to the lagoon.

We got exceedingly good looks at the Brown-headed Cowbird, which has a very interesting story behind its nesting habits.

Cowbirds are brood parasites, which means they lay their eggs in the nests of other bird species, such as small passerines. The host species will incubate the egg and feed the cowbird chick until it is fully fledged. The parent cowbird never even has to see it.

Cowbirds developed this nesting strategy because long ago they migrated with the herds. Before the 19th century, when white settlers hadn't yet begun moving west, giant, nomadic



herds of bison ruled the plains. The cowbirds would follow the bison and eat small invertebrates off their hides. Since the bison were always on the move, the cowbirds had to be as well. There was no time to raise chicks, so they would have to leave them with other birds. But when the bison herds were wiped out, they didn't lose their habits, and continue to exploit other birds today.



From left: Brown-headed Cowbirds, European Starling, Northern Flicker. Above: Sanderlings. **Photos: Grace Ruth**

**Crissy Field**  
**03/11/2017**  
**Compiled by Ileana Betancourt**

**Birds: 31 species**

4 Canada Goose  
4 Greater Scaup  
35 Surf Scoter  
1 Bufflehead  
2 Mallard  
8 American Coot  
3 Western Grebe  
1 Eared Grebe  
1 Brandt's Cormorant  
3 Pelagic Cormorant  
15 unknown Cormorant  
1 Snowy Egret  
1 Red-tailed Hawk  
1 Turkey Vulture

1 Kildeer  
4 Willet  
8 Sanderling  
4 Least Sandpipers  
2 Ruddy Ducks  
17 Western Gulls  
2 Anna's Hummingbird  
17 Rock Pigeon  
3 Northern Flickers  
2 Common Raven  
1 Tree Swallow  
1 American Robin  
1 European Starling  
1 California Towhee  
8 White-crowned Sparrows  
40 Brewer's Blackbird  
3 Brown-headed Cowbird  
5 House Finch

## Birding for Everyone, March 4th

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist



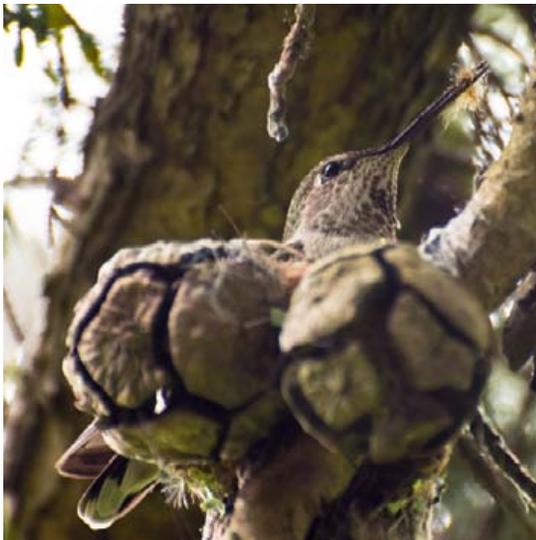
A sky with both bright and dark corners formed the backdrop of our walk. In spite of threatening rain, we gathered with enthusiasm, eventually forming a crowd of fourteen observers. At the beginning of our walk, **Song Sparrows** and **American Robins** were vocal in the flowering shrubs that border the south side of the Great Lawn.

Other species found in the vicinity included a **Townsend's Warbler** browsing a cedar, three **Allen's Hummingbirds** buzzing the blooms, flyover **Double-crested Cormorants** and **Canada Geese**, and **California Towhees**. We took refuge under a big cedar during a burst of rain, and were rewarded with Sarah Barsness's discovery of an **Anna's Hummingbird** engaged in nest-building activity.

Heading downhill towards the California Garden, we stopped to listen to our first-of-the-day singing **Pacific Wren**. Further on we found three **Ruby-crowned Kinglets** in the interior of a live oak, and **Pygmy Nuthatches**, **Chestnut-backed Chickadees**, and **Brown Creepers** in other oak trees. A flock of **Golden-crowned Sparrows** foraged on the ground together with more **California Towhees**.

On the slope heading up the hill toward the Children's Garden we found two **Fox Sparrows** digging in the dirt. In the Succulent Garden a singing **Pacific Wren** perched prominently on an aloe plant. The wind was blowing

hard, so we didn't stay too long, but we found a pair of courting **Red-shouldered Hawks** calling and hopping between the crowns of different conifers, as well as **Dark-eyed Juncos**, and **Yellow-rumped Warblers** in an assembly quite high up in the eucalypts.



On the perimeter path behind the Moon Viewing Garden we found two **Steller's Jays**, and then a singing **Purple Finch** drew our attention toward the Gondwana Circle area. Other highlights of the last half-hour of the walk were a pair of **House Finches** perched high—the male singing and displaying a bright red head and breast.

In the Waterfowl Pond was a **Pied-billed Grebe**, as well as an **American Coot**, and a shore-side **Black Phoebe**. Two **Red-tailed Hawks** were overhead, along with several **Common Ravens**.

Our walk back to the main gate offered additional sightings of **Anna's** and **Allen's Hummingbirds**, **Ruby-crowned Kinglets**, and **Pygmy Nuthatches** high in the crowns of the Monterey Pines. The day was clearing and warming as we wrapped up.

Clockwise from top left: Song Sparrow, California Towhee, Pacific Wren, Anna's Hummingbird.

Photos by Sarah Barsness



San Francisco Botanical Garden  
03/04/2017

Compiled by Megan Prelinger

Birds: 31 species

Canada Goose - 2

Mallard - 2

Pied-billed Grebe - 1

Double-crested Cormorant - 1

Red-shouldered Hawk - 2

Red-tailed Hawk - 2

American Coot - 1

Western Gull - 5

Glaucous-winged Gull - 1

Rock Pigeon - 10

Anna's Hummingbird - 9

Allen's Hummingbird - 5

Black Phoebe - 2

Steller's Jay - 2

Common Raven - 12

Chestnut-backed Chickadee - 6

Pygmy Nuthatch - 4

Brown Creeper - 2

Ruby-crowned Kinglet - 7

Hermit Thrush - 1

American Robin - 6

Yellow-rumped Warbler - 6

Townsend's Warbler - 1

Fox Sparrow - 2

Dark-eyed Junco - 6

White-crowned Sparrow - 1

Golden-crowned Sparrow - 6

Song Sparrow - 10

California Towhee - 12

House Finch - 2

Purple Finch - 1



Clockwise from below:  
Leucistic Hummingbird,  
Allen's Hummingbird (3x),  
Anna's Hummingbird (3x).



**Hummingbirds  
of UC Santa Cruz  
Arboretum**  
Photos by Sandi Wong

