



# The Blue Heron

News from San Francisco Nature Education • February 2017

## Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

I am pleased to report that the Great Blue Herons have returned to Stow Lake and now occupy two of last year's nests! The storms have taken quite a toll on the island near the Waterfall. One nest is hanging by a thread. Another has disappeared. However, it doesn't take long for these birds to build a new nest—about two weeks. Courtship activity should begin in earnest during February.

We have not observed any herons on the original island near the Stow Lake Boathouse. But there is still plenty of time for herons to find partners if they return.

Heron Watch commences Saturday, April 15th, and runs for six Saturdays. We're fortunate to have a new intern, Oscar, who is an astute and enthusiastic birder. Oscar will be assisting on our upcoming trips to Heron's Head Park and Crissy Field. I hope you will join us!

If you haven't renewed your membership, please take a moment to do so. Each member receives a full twelve months of free field trips, and a subscription to our monthly e-newsletter.

Best,

Nancy DeStefanis

### New address and phone:

San Francisco Nature Education  
PO Box 210303  
San Francisco, CA 94121

e-mail: [info@sfnature.org](mailto:info@sfnature.org)  
telephone: 415-205-0776

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students 21 or under, \$20.



[www.sfnature.org](http://www.sfnature.org)

## Birding for Everyone, January 7th Megan Prelinger, Naturalist



Storm conditions were brewing as our group of eight field explorers gathered near the entrance of the SF Botanical Garden. While the wind whistled, we decided to forge ahead as far as the weather would permit and as long as

there were birds to be found.

**Gulls** wheeled high overhead throughout the walk, too high to be clearly identifiable by species, but large ones. The first tree-level flight we found was a pair of **Anna's Hummingbirds** making courtship displays near the Fragrance Garden. We heard the loud "snap" of the tail as these birds made their fast, deep J-shaped flights.

On the slope uphill from the Waterfowl Pond a small flock of **Golden-crowned Sparrows** was foraging, and more was going on: both **Yellow-rumped** and **Townsend's Warblers** foraged in the trees, while in the water were **Coots** and one **Pied-billed Grebe**. When a squall drove us under the shelter of the palms we had excellent views of a first-year **Great Blue Heron**, and watched it catch and eat a small fish a few feet from us.

The "clipped" look of its first basic plumage told us it was a young bird, lacking any crest or shaggy decorative coverts, with head and crown drab gray. Moments later, off in the distance at the east end of the pond, the Grebe caught a crayfish, and we watched it spend a few minutes wrangling this prey and consuming it.



American Coot; Pied-billed Grebe

Photos: Judy Harter

In the Redwood Grove we heard a **Red-shouldered Hawk** calling, and off in the distance, one call of a **Red-tailed Hawk**. Our spotting picked up again in the California Garden, where a male **Bufflehead** was swimming in the reservoir, and two **California Scrub-Jays** chased each other hard and fast.

The buckeye and oak trees of the south walkway were hiding a **Brown Creeper** and a **Ruby-crowned Kinglet**,

another **Townsend's Warbler**, and several **Chestnut-backed Chickadees**. Most of our sparrow sightings, of **Song** and **White-crowned Sparrows**, were by ear: all around the garden, members of these two species practiced spring songs in short bursts.

With wind whipping and skies darkening, we wrapped up the walk after 90 minutes.

### On the pages ahead:

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Photo: Sandi Wong



Photo: Jeff Harter



Photo: Judy Harter



Photo: Sandi Wong

**Some Species Observed in the San Francisco Botanical Garden**



Photo: Sandi Wong



Photo: Bill Hunnewell

**San Francisco Botanical Garden  
01/07/2017  
Compiled by Megan Prelinger  
Birds: 23 species**  
Mallard - 2  
Bufflehead - 1  
Pied-billed Grebe - 1  
Great Blue Heron - 1  
Red-shouldered Hawk - 1  
Red-tailed Hawk - 1  
American Coot - 2  
Gull species - 40  
Anna's Hummingbird - 10  
Black Phoebe - 3

California Scrub-Jay - 4  
American Crow - 5  
Common Raven - 2  
Chestnut-backed Chickadee - 18  
Brown Creeper - 1  
Ruby-crowned Kinglet - 2  
American Robin - 1  
Yellow-rumped Warbler - 9  
Townsend's Warbler - 2  
Dark-eyed Junco - 5  
White-crowned Sparrow - 2  
Golden-crowned Sparrow - 3  
Song Sparrow - 5



Photo: Judy Harter

Clockwise from top left: Townsend's Warbler, Common Raven, Dark-eyed Junco, Bufflehead, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Townsend's Warbler (2x).

## Heron's Head Park, January 14th

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist

A thick fog and midwinter temperatures in the 40s greeted our intrepid group of explorers on Saturday morning, but the marsh was filled with birds and the fog promised to lift. While we were gathering, a **Black Phoebe** called from the fence line on the south side of the park. In the deep pond just south of the EcoCenter we had our first sightings of the day of **American Coot**, **Pied-billed Grebe**, **Bufflehead**, and **Lesser Scaup**.

Our main areas of exploration were the channel to the north of the peninsula, facing the Recology center, and the expanse of open marshland that characterizes the parklands south of the path. Both were filled with birds.

In the shallow northside channel we found many flocks of resting diving birds: **Ruddy Duck**, **Bufflehead**, **Western Grebe**, and individuals of both **Eared** and **Horned Grebe** species, and a bobbing **Mew Gull**. We had good opportunities to compare and contrast the **Eared** and **Horned Grebe**, noting the bright white cheek patch and crisp line between eye and cheek that clearly differentiates the Horned from the Eared.

We also found a dozen pairs of the winter-visiting dabblers **American Wigeon**. On the rocky north shore were local denizens of the rocky intertidal zone, the **Black Oystercatcher**, as well as a **Spotted Sandpiper**, a solitary shorebird. At the outer tip of the peninsula, two **Belted Kingfishers** of opposite sexes called back and forth and flitted between the available perches of offshore posts and poles.

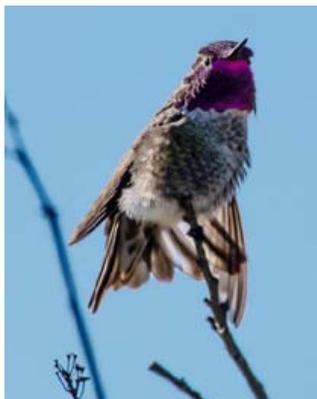


Photo: Bill Hunnewell

The open marshlands were slowly filling with a growing tide during our two-hour exploration. At the beginning the fog was so thick that we had a hard time distinguishing identifying features of some large shorebirds, but persistence revealed **Long-billed Curlews**, **Marbled Godwits**, one **Whimbrel**, and several

small flocks of **Black-necked Stilts** and **American Avocets**. We found small flocks of **Least Sandpipers** and one **Dunlin**.

On the way back, with less fog and brighter light, we had better views of the lumpy lowlands that form soft peninsulas between the marsh and the open water of India Basin. There we found more shorebirds, including **Willetts**, individual **Great Blue Herons**, **Great Egrets**, and **Snowy Egrets**. Resting with a flock of Stilts and Avocets was a **California Gull**, identifiable by the mottled brown patches on the back of its neck that characterize this species' winter color. A **Black-bellied Plover** rested nearby.

On the walk back we revisited the grassland habitat in bright sunshine. A **Bushtit** flock, **Yellow-rumped**



Photo: Bill Hunnewell

**Warblers**, and clusters of both **White-crowned** and **Golden-crowned Sparrows** populated the shrubs, and the local territorial **Anna's Hummingbird** surveyed the scene from its shrub near the EcoCenter.

After the wrap-up we pulled our checklists out of our pockets when a **Red-tailed Hawk** flew over, chased by two **Common Ravens**.

Heron's Head Park 01/14/2017 Compiled by Megan Prelinger Birds: 42 species	
American Wigeon - 24	American Avocet - 22
Lesser Scaup - 18	Black-necked Stilt - 20
Bufflehead - 20	Long-billed Curlew - 2
Ruddy Duck - 30	Whimbrel - 1
American Coot - 25	Marbled Godwit - 2
Pied-billed Grebe - 2	Black Oystercatcher - 4
Western Grebe - 8	Dunlin - 1
Eared Grebe - 2	Least Sandpiper - 30
Horned Grebe - 2	Western Gull - 200
Brown Pelican - 1	California Gull - 1
Double-crested Cormorant - 5	Mew Gull - 1
Great Blue Heron - 2	Anna's Hummingbird - 1
Great Egret - 1	Rock Pigeon - 50
Snowy Egret - 3	Belted Kingfisher - 2
Red-tailed Hawk - 1	Black Phoebe - 1
Cooper's Hawk - 1	American Crow - 4
Black-bellied Plover - 1	Common Raven - 2
Spotted Sandpiper - 2	Bushtit - 10
Willet - 15	European Starling - 25
	Yellow-rumped Warbler - 3
	White-crowned Sparrow - 7
	Golden-crowned Sparrow - 3
	House Finch - 1

From left: Anna's Hummingbird, American Avocet. Below: intern Oscar in blue sweatshirt; center, in black, leaders Ileana Betancourt and Megan Prelinger; volunteer Natasha Y. second from right, with walk participants.



Photo: SFNE - 3 -



## Winter at Heron Head's Park

Photos by Bill Hunnewell



Clockwise from top left: Western Grebe, Horned Grebe, Spotted Sandpiper, Belted Kingfisher, Whimbrel, Spotted Sandpiper, Dunlin.



### Heron's Head Park, January 14th Oscar, Intern

I am a 14-year-old birder and have lived in San Francisco my entire life. I became interested in birds several years ago, and have continued to love them more and more every day since. Though I have been birding for a while now, this was my first time as an intern for an organization.

It was wonderful being able to show the public the different birds of Heron's Head Park. It is so great when nature can flourish in such an industrial environment, and it is even better when there are enthusiastic people to witness it!

A bird I was somewhat surprised to see on our walk was the **Dunlin**. These plump sandpipers breed on the tundra of Canada, Alaska, Greenland, and Siberia, and winter on beaches and in wetlands across the northern hemisphere. Though they are widespread and numerous, they are uncommon in the city.

Heron's Head Park has wonderful habitat variation; the main reason so many birds congregate here. Open meadows, sweeping marshes, and the bay all come together right here.

I was surprised at the dramatic shifts in tide that occurred in the few hours we were there. When we arrived, almost the entire marsh was revealed, but when we were wrapping up, the marsh was buried under water, and not even a few of the marsh grasses were visible over it.

I would like to thank Nancy DeStefanis for making this internship possible, and to thank all the people who attended the walk for being such a kind and energetic group.

## Chain of Lakes Walk, January 21st

Alan Hopkins, Naturalist



After days of high winds and pounding rain, the morning of January 21st was clear with a light breeze. The group started at South Lake, where we enjoyed **Hooded Mergansers** and the flash of a **Belted Kingfisher**. Crossing Chain of Lakes Drive we headed for the Bercut Equitation Ring, where we found a **Red-shafted Flicker** hunting ants in the center of the ring while a **Red-tailed Hawk** sat silently on a branch above.

The trees over the maintenance yard were alive with **Yellow-rumped Warblers** enjoying the morning sun. A few **Townsend's Warblers** were in the flock and fortunately came down to bathe, allowing fine looks at eye level.

A highlight of the walk were the woodpeckers there. The first was a male **Downy Woodpecker**. Downy Woodpeckers were once the most common woodpecker in the park but have

become uncommon recently. As we watched the Downy we heard the rattle call of **Nuttall's Woodpeckers** from high in the eucalyptus trees, and with a bit of neck straining we found a male and a female. Finally we heard the loud *peek!* call of a **Hairy Woodpecker** and were able to see the bird in a dead Monterey Pine.

Crossing Kennedy Drive to North Lake we filled our list with a few more ducks: **Mallard**, **Bufflehead** and **Ruddy Duck**. A pair of **Pied-billed Grebes** entertained us with their subtle courtship display. With the days' lengthening hours, **Pacific Wrens**, **White-crowned**, and **Song Sparrows** were beginning to sing.

But a sure sign that spring was on its way was our first sighting of the season of an **Allen's Hummingbird** perched like a jewel on a willow tree. Can the swallows be far off?



Clockwise from top left: Downy Woodpecker, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker.

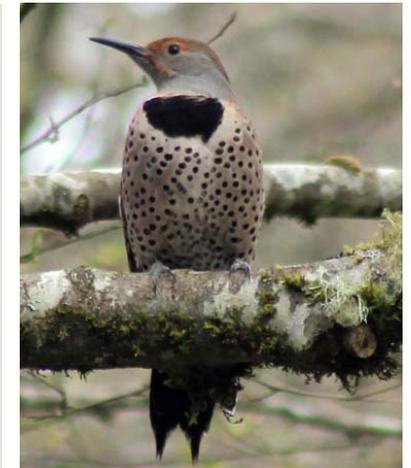
Photos, clockwise from top left: Peter Massas, Alexandra MacKenzie, Len Blumin.

### Chain of Lakes, Golden Gate Park 01/21/2017

Compiled by Alan Hopkins

Birds: 40 Species

- |                           |                           |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Mallard                   | Hairy Woodpecker          |
| Bufflehead                | Northern Flicker          |
| Hooded Merganser          | Black Phoebe              |
| Ruddy Duck                | Steller's Jay             |
| Pied-billed grebe         | American Crow             |
| Great Egret               | Common Raven              |
| Black-crowned Night Heron | Chestnut-backed Chickadee |
| Turkey Vulture            | Pygmy Nuthatch            |
| Red-shouldered Hawk       | Pacific Wren              |
| Red-tailed Hawk           | Ruby-crowned Kinglet      |
| American Coot             | Hermit Thrush             |
| Western Gull              | American Robin            |
| California Gull           | Orange-crowned Warbler    |
| Anna's Hummingbird        | Common Yellowthroat       |
| Allen's Hummingbird       | Yellow-rumped Warbler     |
| Belted Kingfisher         | Townsend's Warbler        |
| Nuttall's Woodpecker      | California Towhee         |
| Downy Woodpecker          | Fox Sparrow               |
|                           | Song Sparrow              |
|                           | White-crowned Sparrow     |
|                           | Golden-crowned Sparrow    |
|                           | Dark-eyed Junco           |



Top: Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shafted Flicker.

Photos, top to bottom: Rick Leche, Jon D. Anderson.

## Volunteers Needed for 2017 Heron Watch

Show Stow Lake's Great Blue Herons and their chicks to the public. We will train you and provide you with a spotting scope for each Saturday that you volunteer (9 AM-1 PM). Choose two Saturdays out of six, between April 15 and May 20. Email us at [info@sfnature.org](mailto:info@sfnature.org). Details to follow receipt.

## Book Reviews



### **King Sequoia** *The Tree That Inspired a Nation, Created Our National Park System, and Changed the Way We Think about Nature*

By William C. Tweed;  
Foreword by Joe Medeiros

Heyday Press; paperback, 6 x 9,  
288 pages, with 40+ black-and-  
white photographs & maps; \$18.

Reviewed by Jeff Harter

On the basis of its title this  
volume could be mistaken

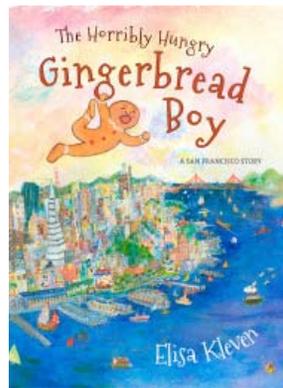
for a field guide to *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, but it is the lengthy old-school subtitle that tells the true tale. The reader is led through a series of stand-alone chapters—long on social history and spare on natural history—that progressively advance the subtitle's thesis.

Although Tweed steers clear of presenting any in-depth information about the botany or ecology of sequoias (or Big Trees, as he prefers to call them) his thirty-year career as an interpretive writer, historian, and naturalist with the National Park Service allows him to bring considerable expertise regarding the history of three national parks: Yosemite, Kings Canyon, and Sequoia.

California history buffs will find chapters dealing with the lives of champions of the sequoias, including John Muir and Galen Clark, and the lesser-known John R. White, who was among the first individuals to express concern about the inappropriate development of park infrastructure within the sequoia groves.

Tweed's focus on the sequoia's centrality to the nascent National Park system, and to the environmental movement overall, causes him to leave California's other big tree, the coast redwood, almost entirely out of his story. In spite of maintaining such a tight focus he manages to range widely, from a chapter detailing the profitless logging of the groves to scientific breakthroughs based on sequoia research, and the secretive role played by the Southern Pacific Railroad in saving sequoias for future generations.

Was the rescuing of the giant sequoia the catalyst for the creation of the National Park Service? Tweed makes a compelling case that it was, and provides an informative and entertaining slice of California's modern history.



### **The Horribly Hungry Gingerbread Boy** *A San Francisco Story*

By Elisa Kleven

Heyday Press; hardcover, 8.5 x  
11, 40 pages, full-color illustrations; \$17.

Reviewed by Judy Harter

Here is a rhymed retelling of  
the American folk tale about  
the gingerbread boy who  
comes to life and runs away.

The author/illustrator has changed the traditional story and set it in San Francisco. Her collage-paintings are vibrant, detailed pictures of Bay Area neighborhoods and landmarks.

Diverse street life, architecture, and the natural beauty of the Bay Area are on full display. The gingerbread boy, who has a ravenous appetite, is chased all over town. The text has been set around the pictures—with the sequence not always obvious to a reader. The real story is to be found in the illustrations, which are more interesting than the expository rhyming couplets of the narrative.

Extras include the author's commentary on the folk tale; a recipe for gingerbread cookies; a guide to the landmarks shown, but unnamed, in the book; a map showing where story events occur; and a brief note about the author, a Bay Area local.

Young children who enjoy detailed pictures will like the numerous painted animals, people, houses, foods, parks, and stores; the Golden Gate Bridge, City Hall, Ferry Building, and Japanese Tea Garden. Adults may enjoy referring to the pictures before or after visiting local sites with children, though they may find real life not quite as brightly colored!

## Get a Spring Heron Watch Internship Application

Middle, high school, and college students: Apply for a spring internship and learn about Great Blue Herons, their chicks, and other local birds at Stow Lake in Golden Gate Park.

Deadline to apply: Feb. 17, 2017. Training will begin in March.

Interns will learn to use spotting scopes, field guides, and binoculars, and communication strategies for talking to the public. Community service hours are available upon request. Internship fee; scholarships available.

Dates, information, and applications are available at: [http://sfnature.org/get\\_involved/intern.html](http://sfnature.org/get_involved/intern.html).

## 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: Feb. 4, with Megan Prelinger, also Mar. 4.

Meet at SF Botanical Garden bookstore, 9th Ave. near Lincoln.

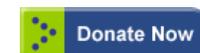
**SF Botanical Garden:** Free to SF residents with proof of residency; non-residents pay a fee.

**Heron's Head Park:** Sat., Feb. 18, with Megan Prelinger and Ileana Betancourt. Meet at trailhead, 10 am to noon.

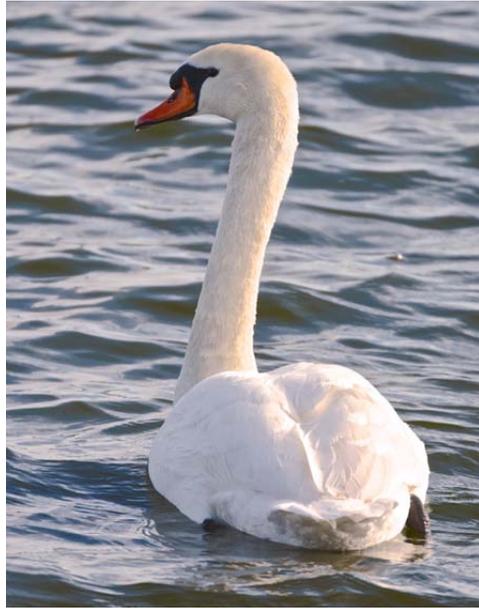
**Crissy Field:** Saturday, March 11, 10 am to noon. Leader: Ileana Betancourt. Meet outside Warming Hut.

## SUPPORT SAN FRANCISCO NATURE EDUCATION!

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



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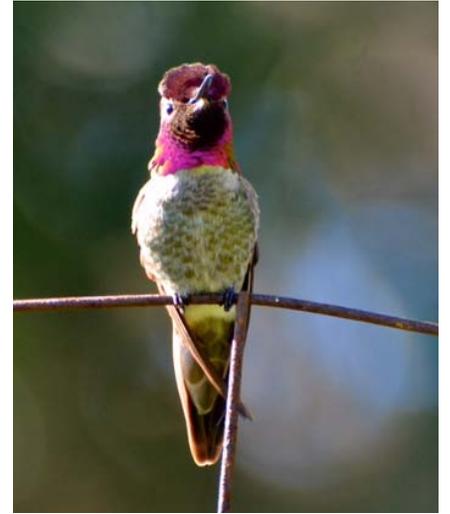


**Birds of Las Gallinas  
Sewer Ponds in San Rafael**  
Photos by Grace Ruth



Top row: Cinnamon Teal, Mute Swan, Black-crowned Night Heron.  
Middle: Canada Geese, Ruddy Duck (m), Mute Swan.  
Below: Common Mergansers (f), American Wigeon pair, American Kestrel.





**In the Fort Mason Community Garden**  
Bay at Franklin Street, SF **Photos by Sandi Wong**



Top row: Yellow-rumped Warbler, White-crowned Sparrow,  
Anna's Hummingbird. Middle row: House Finch (yellow variant),  
Anna's Hummingbird, House Finch, White-throated Sparrow.  
Bottom: Hermit Thrush, Golden-crowned Sparrow, Fox Sparrow.

