



A Seven-Nest Heron Season!

Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director



The excitement was palpable at Heron Watch! Hundreds of adults and children turned out for our final day showing the Great Blue Herons and Red-tailed Hawks to the public!

As we wrapped up the Heron Watch season on May 20th, five of the seven heron nests had 13 chicks. An eighth nest, started on May 13th, had disappeared.

This year may be our best season yet, if we exceed the 2006 total of six nests and 16 chicks. Two of the remaining nests appear to hold eggs.

Meanwhile, in a nearby tree on the island, Red-tailed Hawks fed their four hungry young. Visitors were treated to the sight of the parents tearing off pieces of newly caught prey and gently placing it in their young's mouths. The Red-tailed chicks will fledge at six weeks, which means they will be gone in early June.

The Great Blue Herons will be nesting at Stow Lake for much of the summer. The three oldest chicks now are close to fledging—one is already flying! Other nests got a later start, so those chicks should be leaving in mid-July. Heron chicks fledge at three months.

Once the chicks learn to fly they will leave Stow Lake, but generally do not travel far. Unlike Great Egrets they do not migrate.

During our six-week program we served more than 1,500 adults and children. Our 23 interns and volunteers were incredibly knowledgeable and enthusiastic. A special thank you to the following:

Interns: Oscar, Nicolas, and Sabrina. Volunteers: Natasha Arnold, Ileana Betancourt, Kevin Biggerstaff, Isabelle Chow, Nancy Elsner, Anne Galjour, Jeff & Judy Harter, Kevin & Katie Koenig, Maggie Montenegro, Diane O'Donahue, Summer Pardo, Megan Prelinger, Sharon Pretti, Mike Smylie, Janel Schulenberg, Shannon Westberg, Janet White, and Natasha Yankoffsi.

Thanks to all who came out to see the herons or joined a nature walk. Please support our programs by donating online or by mail.

We depend on your support for all of our programs.

Have a great summer!



SFNE



David Sullivan



Grace Ruth

May 20th Heron Watch team, from left: Janet, Katie, Kevin, Diane, Nancy, Nicolas, Sabrina, Isabelle, Mike, and Oscar. Left: Male heron delivers branch to mate in nest #7 at the end of April. Above: heron catches a fish.

San Francisco Nature Education
PO Box 210303
San Francisco, CA 94121
e-mail: info@sfnature.org
telephone: 415-205-0776
www.sfnature.org



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Nancy DeStefanis, center, and volunteers lead visitors on a nature walk around Stow Lake.



Photos: SFNE

A young visitor used a step to reach the scope.



Volunteer Diane, left, with visitors.



Volunteer Janet at the observation site.



Volunteer Kevin.



Intern Oscar with a watcher.

May 20th: A Whirlwind Final Day at Heron Watch



Observing the heron nests.



Nancy D. with SF Supervisor Sandy Fewer and Jason Chommanard. (Jason was in Ms. D's birding class in fourth grade).



Three heron chicks with parents in nest no. 6.



Three oldest chicks in nest no. 1.

Top row: David Sullivan



Three chicks in nest no. 5.

Frank Marino

Heron and Red-tailed Hawk Chicks in Abundance!



Grace Ruth



Frank Marino

Left: Red-tailed Hawk feeds one of four chicks; above: a hawk chick stands up.



Photo by Nicolas



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Great Egrets at Stow Lake Heron Colony, by Oscar

A few weeks ago our entire Heron Watch crew stood by as three Great Egrets flew high over Stow Lake, gently descending. What no one was expecting was for all three to land among the Great Blue Heron treetop nests. They quietly sat for a couple of minutes before talking off and soaring into the distance.

What were these egrets doing? Were they trying to predate the heron babies? Just popping by to say hello? I believe they were scouting a possible future nesting site.

Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets have been seen nesting together at many locations, such as the famous Audubon Canyon Ranch in Stinson Beach. They hunt similar prey, and have similar requirements in nesting areas.

Does this mean that the egrets and herons will nest alongside each other at Stow Lake within the next couple of years? It could, but I think we may have to wait and find out.

Maybe someday the heron colony will be known as the Stow Lake heron and egret colony! For now, let's enjoy the herons we have.



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Clockwise from top left: Stow Lake's Mandarin Duck; Oscar on Strawberry Island; Pygmy Nuthatch by Nicolas; Nicolas and Sabrina help update the bird list.

Right: female Mandarin Duck at Stow Lake by Sabrina. Drawings courtesy of the artists.

Can a Mandarin Duck and Hooded Merganser Breed? by Nicolas

Recently, Stow Lake's female Mandarin Duck and a male Hooded Merganser have been hanging out together, swimming around, and resting near each other. The question is "will they have chicks together?" In this essay I will explore hybridization among waterfowl and if our two friends can have adorable chicks.

Hybridization occurs where species overlap. Waterfowl in particular have 400+ known hybrids, but most are infertile. While hybrids are fascinating, they can be bad in other ways. Mallards interbreeding with Hawaiian and Mottled Ducks is so common that pure-breed ducks are becoming less common.

will interbreed with Hooded Mergansers occasionally, Mandarin Ducks can't. It's highly improbable that a Mandarin Duck will interbreed with any other species due to an extra chromosome. There have only been three records—two Wood Ducks and one Laysan Teal—but that doesn't mean we'll have babies here at Stow Lake.

Our Mandarin Duck and Hooded Merganser pair can't breed. It would have been cool to see their chicks, but on the bright side, we have our Blue Heron chicks. Who needs hybridized chicks when you have the Blue Herons.

While the Wood Duck, a close North American relative of the Mandarin Duck,



Heron Watch 2017: An Intern's Review by Sabrina

Did you know that there is a way to learn about and spot Great Blue Herons every spring? There is a bird program called Heron Watch, and it happens every Saturday morning for six weeks in April and May at Stow Lake. This report explains my experience at Heron Watch.

What I liked best about being an intern at Heron Watch was getting an opportunity to see eight Great Blue Heron nests at Heron Island, including the first nest, which had chicks on March 17th. I enjoyed sketching different birds and the heron nests, like a Tree Swallow house next to

Heron Island. I liked photographing different birds of Stow Lake with my new Nikon camera, including a Snowy Egret.

On nature walks I learned where to find a Black Phoebe nest made out of mud. I learned how to share bird species data with other birders, like the time I spotted a Red-tailed Hawk. I photographed a female Mandarin Duck we called Mandy, and a male Hooded Merganser called Hoody.

What I enjoyed about my experience at Strawberry Hill with members of the San Francisco Rec and Park on May 13th was that we used teamwork to pull weeds. I saw many different birds, like Anna's Hummingbirds, Steller's

Jays, and American Robins. I learned how to identify plants from countries like Mexico and Spain.

At Stow Lake I like using spotting scopes, because they help birders from around the world spot the Great Blue Heron nests from a distance. I sketched the herons, a Nuttall's Woodpecker, a Tree Swallow, and a Steller's Jay.

Next year I want to participate in Heron Watch again, because I enjoy discovering new nests each week and watching herons up close. I get an opportunity to sketch different birds and photograph them. And I can help clean up Strawberry Hill by working with San Francisco Rec and Park.

Restoring Strawberry Hill: Planting An Oak Tree, by Nicolas

On May 13th, instead of the usual work at the heron observation site, we interns were sent to help with restoration work on Strawberry Hill. The sun was warm as we hiked up to the reservoir. Talking to Andy, the Rec & Park Stow Lake supervisor, I told him how I often do planting in the school garden. Since I wanted to do some planting he told me he had an oak tree to plant.

The oak was big in its pot, a foot taller than me, three times bigger than the biggest plant I'd ever done! Andy moved the tree and I got to work digging a hole, making sure it was deep and wide enough. As I worked I saw Bushtits, a Steller's Jay, Allen's Hummingbirds, and two California Pipevine Swallowtail butterflies.

Later, Janet came to help me get out the tree. It was root-bound and we couldn't get it out! Janet called Marty to help. Thankfully a birdwatcher I knew from Heron Watch came over as we waited for Marty. When Marty finally came we cut the pot open, and pulled it out. As Marty left I added some dirt into the hole and with Janet's help lowered the tree.

While Janet went to go get water for the tree I took a break as I watched the Allen's Hummingbirds buzz about, fighting, displaying, and flashing around their orange-red gorgets. Janet came back with three big buckets of water. She told me how to make a basin for the water by pushing up dirt to create a depression, as I proceeded to dump the two remaining buckets into the basin, which was full of

upturned critters like roly polies (pill bugs). I poured the last bit of water onto the saturated soil.

Folks took pictures of me with the oak tree and the three of us interns—Oscar and Sabrina had been doing tons of weeding. But before we took pictures we watched my first visitor, a lovely Steller's Jay, eating the upturned critters for his lunch in the shelter of



SF Rec and Park supervisor Andy Stone with Sabrina, Oscar, and Nicolas; Nancy with photographer David Sullivan; volunteer Isabelle Chow is honored for her longtime service to Heron Watch. Below left: Oscar, Nicolas, and Sabrina with Ms. D and gifts of binoculars. Right: Nicolas and Sabrina at Heron Watch.

What I Liked About Heron Watch, by Nicolas

Heron Watch was a great experience. I enjoyed restoration work, using scopes...It's hard to say what I liked most, but I think it was talking to people and showing them the Blue Herons. It was fun because I got to socialize with new people, answer questions, and show the herons like a professional. It was funny when people guessed how big the egg was or when they thought the older chicks were the parents. It's a great opportunity for me to get used to talking to strangers. While I consider myself an extrovert, I can get very shy around new people. At Heron Watch I was able to get better at talking to strangers.

I went on two nature walks and learned a few things, but not a ton, since I already know a fair amount about birds. I learned how to tell that there has been a sapsucker at a tree. I learned that Phoebes have mud nests like the one we saw at the Old Stone Bridge. I learned that the type of rock used to make the bridge is extremely old, not 130 years as I guessed. I was also one of the first to learn about new chicks, and one of the last about a camera robbery at the observation site.

Using a spotting scope was something I liked because it's easy to use, you can lock it on one spot, and it has a pretty good zoom. Without



scopes Heron Watch would be impossible...or harder to run.

Sketching birds was very rewarding, but hard to do and time consuming if I picked a detailed bird. Sketching has a fair amount of pros. For example, it can be a very calming, relaxing, meditative experience once you get going. With the book on sketching we got, I learned to use circles, ovals, and angles to draw the basic shape of the bird. That way of drawing is much easier.

I loved Heron Watch, and there's no question of not participating next year. The good things overwhelm the boring things by a landslide. I'd like to do more restoration work on my own time and participate at Heron's Head and Crissy Field. I recommend Heron Watch to other kids because it's a fun, educational, skill-building experience where you make new friends and move forward in life. Heron Watch is a step to my goal in life: being an ornithologist.

Heron Watch: May 13th Volunteers and Visitors



Volunteers Judy, left, and Maggie, in black, with visitors.



Volunteer Diane, right, with visitors.



Mallard ducklings drying off.

Photos: Jeff Harter



Volunteer Isabelle with a watcher.



Nancy DeStefanis, fifth from left, with nature walkers and volunteer Summer, far right.



Canada Goose with goslings. Right: volunteer Anne, left, with a visitor; Maggie with visitor at a scope.





May 6th: A Full Day at Heron Watch

Top row: volunteers Janel, Shannon, and Mike with watchers.

Middle row: volunteer Natasha with visitors; family with volunteer Summer.

Below: Naturalist Sharon Pretti (in purple) and Nancy DeStefanis (center) with group on nature walk; interns Nicolas and Sabrina on Strawberry Island.



**April 29th
Was a Very Busy Day
at Heron Watch!**



Top row: a visitor at the scope with Nicolas; Oscar with two visitors.

Middle row: Isabelle with a watcher; Oscar, left, and others on a nature walk.

Bottom row: Nancy DeStefanis (center), with visitors and interns on a nature walk; volunteer Janel and a young watcher point at a Red-tailed Hawk nest.



Photos: SFNE

Third-Grade Stow Lake Field Trip

Alan's Group

It was a hot day when we started our bird walk around Stow Lake; fortunately we had some really cool kids along. It was clear that spring was in full swing when we spotted a pair of Mallards flanked by two little ducklings. A short way down the path there was a group of Canada Geese protecting their fluffy yellow-faced goslings from the watchers. After crossing the Rustic Bridge we found Stow Lake's odd couple along the lake's edge. The male Hooded Merganser and female Mandarin Duck looked like a happy couple, although genetically they are miles apart.

We climbed the steep trail to the top of Strawberry Hill, where we found Anna's and Allen's Hummingbirds. A highlight was finding an Olive-sided Flycatcher catching bugs at the top of the hill. After snacks we made our way down the steep steps next to the dry Huntington Waterfall to the telescope for fantastic views of the Great Blue Heron Nests. A Red-tailed Hawk gave us great views too.

On our return to the Boathouse we saw a Red-winged Blackbird singing, showing its red wings, and a Brewer's Blackbird with its pale yellow eye. We had a fine day and some great birds to add to our lists.



Alan Hopkins

Jeanne's Group

My group of students set off right away to see the nesting herons. En route, we passed a Mallard pair with three very new babies, plus quite a few turtles. The group used their ears to hear a Red-winged Blackbird, and then their sharp eyes spotted it.

Ms. Jeanne had two terrific parents helping her. Once we arrived at the heron observation site it was exciting because we had two telescopes, and were able to see teenaged herons, parents, little fuzzy youngsters, and a Red-tailed Hawk.

We observed the parents flying off to find food. Then, on the other side of the island, our path passed close to a heron standing like a statue in the reeds on the edge of the water.

The group saw and identified the Red-tailed Hawk in the sky. On our hike up the side of the waterfall we noticed beautiful red flowers that we knew were attractive to hummingbirds—and right on cue, there was an Anna's Hummingbird. On our way back we loved seeing three families of Canada Geese—one had ten goslings. What a great group of enthusiastic young hikers and naturalists!



Top: male Hooded Merganser and female Mandarin Duck. Left: Alan with his third-grade group. Above: Jeanne and her group, with two parents along for supervision. Top right: Megan, at right, with chaperones and third-graders near the Stow Lake Boathouse.



Group photos: SFNE

Megan's Group

The day was warm and sunny, and the whole group was enthusiastic about exploring the wildlife of Stow Lake. At the outset, my group was captivated by the discovery of a large crayfish traversing the sidewalk near the edge of the lake. The group made informed observations about the crayfish, noting its resemblance to other crustaceans such as lobster and crab.

A number of young Canada Goslings challenged our ability to keep count of them as they padded around the lakeshore. We counted at least 25 young in three families. Other young birds in the water included Mallard ducklings. Our group was also impressed by the appearance of the Muscovy Ducks, and had fun counting Red-eared Slider turtles.

On Strawberry Hill we found Black Phoebes, American Robins, Pygmy Nuthatches, Steller's Jays, Dark-eyed Juncos, Anna's and Allen's Hummingbirds, and one Brown Creeper. We also saw a Red-tailed Hawk pulling twigs from a tree, presumably to improve its nest.

The day was capped by studying the Great Blue Heron colony, where our group watched the older chicks standing tall in their nests as well as the downy heads of newly hatched young.

Birding for Everyone, May 6th

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist, with Sarah Barsness

We had a crisp, bright spring day for our May walk in the SF Botanical Garden. As we gathered, the first of several flocks of **Cedar Waxwings** filled the Monkey-hand tree over our heads. We found both **Anna's** and **Allen's Hummingbirds** as soon as we started walking. An early highlight of the day was a bright male **California Quail**, which we tracked by its booming voice and careful observation to the fragrance garden area.

Another highlight was the solid number of breeding raptors. In the crown of a tree at the west end of the Waterfowl Pond we observed the nesting **Cooper's Hawk** pair. The nest is just visible, and there was a tail wiggling over the edge of the nest, and then a minute later one of the birds alighted on a branch and preened in full view.

Later, on the hill that separates the children's garden from the succulent garden we found a pair of **Red-shouldered Hawks** dancing between trees. One was carrying a large rodent, while the other had nesting material between its talons. The two birds called to each other, circled, and perched near each other while we observed them.

We caught glimpses of two **Red-tailed Hawks** high in the sky, possibly a pair that's nesting at nearby Stow Lake.

Other birds exhibiting breeding behavior included **Downy Woodpeckers**, observed entering a nest hole near the succulent garden; **Pygmy Nuthatches** too, and the vivid spring songs of three different **Pacific Wrens**. In the Succulent Garden was the surprise of a **Pacific-slope Flycatcher**, while in the Children's Garden we found **Lesser Goldfinches** and frogs in a pond.

We found **Bushtits** foraging in pairs, and heard the melodic spring songs of **Purple Finches** and **House Finches**. The **Brown Creeper** also sang for us, "tree, tree, beautiful tree!"



Jeff Harter

Rounding out the noteworthy sightings was a **Brown-headed Cowbird**, perched by itself, and Sarah found a **Hutton's Vireo**. In addition to avian life we also appreciated the large number of **Pipevine Swallowtail** butterflies, probably twenty of them, and other spring butterflies, including **Western Brown Elf** and **West Coast Lady**.

Next walk: June 3rd. No walks in July or August.



Sarah Barsness



Sarah Barsness



Grace Ruth



Sarah Barsness

Top row: Pipevine Swallowtail; True Frog. Middle row: California Quail; Song Sparrow; American Robin. Below: Cedar Waxwing; Cooper's Hawk.



Grace Ruth



Sarah Barsness

San Francisco Botanical Garden 05/06/2017	California Scrub-Jay - 3
Compiled by Megan Prelinger	American Crow - 2
Birds: 35 species	Common Raven - 5
Canada Goose - 7	Tree Swallow - 10
Mallard - 5	Chestnut-backed Chickadee - 10
California Quail - 1	Bushtit - 4
Double-crested Cormorant - 1	Pygmy Nuthatch - 4
Great Blue Heron - 1	Brown Creeper - 1
Cooper's Hawk - 2	Pacific Wren - 3
Red-shouldered Hawk - 2	American Robin - 25
Red-tailed Hawk - 2	Cedar Waxwing - 60
Western Gull - 5	Dark-eyed Junco - 9
Rock Pigeon - 16	Song Sparrow - 10
Anna's Hummingbird - 10	California Towhee - 2
Allen's Hummingbird - 8	Brewer's Blackbird - 5
Downy Woodpecker - 2	Brown-headed Cowbird - 1
Pacific-slope Flycatcher - 1	House Finch - 3
Hutton's Vireo - 1	Purple Finch - 4
Steller's Jay - 6	Lesser Goldfinch - 3



Heron Catches a Fish on Strawberry Island

Photos by Sandi Wong

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: *No walks in July or August.* First Saturdays from 10 am to noon in the SF Botanical Garden. Next: June 3, Sept. 2, and Oct. 7; 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.

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