



The Blue Heron

News from San Francisco Nature Education · September 2018

A Record-Breaking Year for the Stow Lake Colony!



**Nancy DeStefanis,
Executive Director**

2018 turned out to be the best year ever at the Stow Lake Heronry!

Six nests produced 17 chicks—one more than our all time record in 2006 of six nests and 16 chicks.

The season got off to a very slow start. In April and May we saw only two nests with chicks, and the first nest fell on April 9th. We were left to observe only one nest with two chicks. In early June there were five nests with eggs! By mid-June there were 15 chicks in the Monterey Pine. Adult herons flew in constantly to feed hungry nestlings, and the chicks could be heard all around the lake.

We were also able to watch the three hawklets in an adjacent tree. It was thrilling to see them learn to fly.

We were fortunate to have 30 diligent adult volunteers and three middle-school interns to assist the public over nine Saturdays. About 2,500 adults and children visited our observation site to watch birds and attend field trips.

2018 marked the 25th anniversary of the Great Blue Herons nesting at Stow Lake. 211 chicks have since fledged at Stow Lake.

Thanks to all our donors who contributed to our \$10,000 matching grant by July 30th; I'm pleased to report that we met our goal! Stay tuned for a list of our fall and winter programs in the October issue.

Best regards,

Nancy DeStefanis

Membership: Adults, \$35; Seniors 65+, \$30; students 21 or under, \$20.

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Frank Marino



Nancy DeStefanis

Top: Three juveniles. Above: Three chicks approximately four weeks old at the end of June.

On the pages ahead:

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Crew for final day of Heron Watch. First row: Kathy Duffy, Diane O'Donohue, Kathleen Sullivan, Nancy DeStefanis; in back: Steve Walsford, Greg Lyons.

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Isabelle Chow shows herons to a Stow Lake regular.

SNFE

Lots of Visitors in June to See 15 New Heron Chicks!

Director's Note We are very grateful to our 30 dedicated volunteers who volunteered multiple Saturdays to share their knowledge and expertise with the public: Natasha Arnold, Kevin Biggerstaff, Isabelle Chow, Jeanne Crawford, Kathleen Duffy, Nancy Elsner, Anne Galjour, Ashley Gallagher, Missi Hirt-Gavic, Jeff & Judy Harter, Bob Hirt, Alan Hopkins, Trace Kannell, Kevin & Katie Koenig, Greg Lyon, Jennifer McCarthy, Diane O'Donohue, Megan Prelinger, Sharon Pretti, Janel Schulenberg, Sueellen Sleamaker, Kathleen J. Sullivan, Angela Tremolada, Shannon Westberg, Steve Wolford, Natasha Yankoffski, Jennie Yoon, and Shana Simondi.

Our interns have been outstanding: Sabrina Chin, Nicolas Forestall, Joachim Gonzalez. Also, thanks to Jeff Harter, Bill Hunnewell, Frank Marino, Grace Ruth, David Sullivan, Sandi Wong, and all of our talented contributing photographers.



Nancy DeStefanis, left, with Supervisor Sandra Fewer, whose district includes the Richmond and Golden Gate Park. Supervisor Fewer joined the Stow Lake nature walk.

SNFE



Two chicks about to fledge.

Frank Marino



Two new chicks arrived in June.

Nancy DeStefanis



Volunteer Kathleen Sullivan shows herons to teenager.

SNFE

Red-tailed Hawks and Great Horned Owls



Top two rows: Sandi Wong

This row: Alan Hopkins

Stow Lake Bird Walk, June 9th

Alan Hopkins, Naturalist

June is one of the slowest months for birding in San Francisco; spring migration is pretty much over, and our common wintering birds are long gone. Many city birders head for the mountains or someplace exotic. While Stow Lake was devoid of most of its ducks and gulls, and the warblers and sparrows were gone, we took great pleasure in watching our local resident and summering birds. Seeing a pair mating, nest-building, and feeding the downy hatchlings gives us an understanding of bird behavior that listing simply can't.

Fortunately for all of us, SF Nature Education has been following the nesting Great Blue Herons at Stow Lake for 20+ years. As participants for the walk began to assemble, the volunteer staff provided stunning views of the nesting **Great Blue Herons** and **Red-tailed Hawks** through their scopes.

As we headed off we noted a **Pied-billed Grebe**, a few **Mallards** and the ever-present **Canada Geese**. We crossed the Roman Bridge and found **Song Sparrows** singing in the elms while **Tree Swallows** skimmed above the water.

A few **Western Gulls** remained on the lake; other gulls that frequent Stow Lake had left for their breeding grounds. We watched a **Caspian Tern**, which unlike the winter gull comes to SF to breed along the bay shoreline. Our Caspian Tern may have spent the winter in northern South America.

Although terns and gulls look similar, gulls are omnivorous, while terns eat only fish and other aquatic animals. Terns have slender wings, and most have a forked tail adapted for rapid aerial maneuvers and plunge-dives. It was a bit uncommon to see this individual in Golden Gate Park—they are more common at Crissy Field, Ocean Beach, and Heron's Head Park.

We headed past the Chinese Pavilion and walked to the top of Strawberry Hill. The bridge above Huntington Falls gave us a view of the heron nests from a different perspective. There was a **Hairy Woodpecker** calling but it was difficult to see.

One of our sharp-eyed members spotted a recently fledged Great Horned Owl in a close pine. We were noticing the owl's fuzzy-looking head and small ear tufts when one of the adults swooped down and landed next to the fledgling. The birds were quite entertaining. **Pygmy Nuthatches** visited a nest hole, and a **Tree Swallow** zipped into a nest hole just above the nuthatch cavity.

After making our way back down Strawberry Hill we found a nest box intended for Wood Ducks that had three **Tree Swallow** chicks peeking out of the oversized hole. We watched quietly for about ten minutes while the chicks called for food, but the parents never came. I realized that our group of binocular-wielding birders might be keeping the adults away, so we moved on. The last bird of the day was an **American Coot**.



Alan Hopkins

Stow Lake	Harry Woodpecker
June 9, 2018	Downy Woodpecker
Compiled by Alan Hopkins	Black Phoebe
30 species:	Steller's Jay
Canada Goose	Western Scrub Jay
Mallard	Common Raven
Pied-billed Grebe	Tree Swallow
Double-crested Cormorant	Violet-green Swallow
Great Blue Heron	Chestnut-backed Chickadee
Red-shouldered Hawk	Pygmy Nuthatch
Red-tailed Hawk	American Robin
American Coot	California Towhee
Western Gull	Song Sparrow
Caspian Tern	White-crowned Sparrow
Rock Pigeon	Dark-eyed Junco
Great Horned Owl	Brewer's Blackbird
Anna's Hummingbird	House Finch

Left: Tree Swallows in a Wood Duck nest; below: our birding group ready to set out on the Stow Lake walk, Alan Hopkins, center.



SFNE

Nature Walk, June 16th Stow Lake and Strawberry Hill Megan Prelinger, Naturalist

The mid-June walk started with close observations of the five active **Great Blue Heron** nests, and all the feeding and fledging activity that was happening in the tree holding the nests. We also looked at the **Red-tailed Hawk** nest in the adjacent tree and found an adult guarding a fuzzy nestling from an adjacent branch.

From there we walked around Stow Lake, stopping to identify the **Barn, Tree, and Violet-green Swallows** over the lake. Species in the lake included **Pied-billed Grebes, Western and California Gulls**, and a **Double-crested Cormorant**. At the Stone Bridge we watched two adult **Black Phoebes** tending their nest.

On the island we circled the shoreline perimeter, where there were **Pygmy Nuthatch** active nests, with adults tending young fledglings. Memorably, two fledglings and an adult combed the moss on a low-hanging branch just over our heads.

Other species making noise or visible were **Steller's Jays, a Wilson's Warbler, and Song Sparrows**. We finished the walk back at the Great Blue Heron colony.



Sandi Wong



Above: Violet-green Swallow.
Top: Steve Walsford with visitor. Right: Volunteers Shannon Arnold and Greg Lyon show birds to visitors.

Below: The group assembled on June 16th. Naturalist Megan Prelinger is third from left. People photos: SFNE.



UPCOMING EVENTS

SF Nature Walks: Members free, non-members \$10, children always free. Please bring binoculars if you can, and a pencil. Rain cancels all walks. For directions see our [events calendar](#).

Birding for Everyone: First Saturdays from 10 am to noon in the SF Botanical Garden. Next walks: **Sept. 8** (note revised date!) and Oct. 6, with Sarah Barsness or Megan Prelinger. 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.

Membership: Adults, \$35;
Seniors 65+, \$30; students 21
or under, \$20.

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Birding for Everyone, June 2nd Megan Prelinger, Naturalist

It was a balmy and cloudless spring day for our Botanical Garden walk in June. We found many birds expressing behavior of the season, with adults nesting and young birds fledging. Around the Waterfowl Pond young **Song Sparrows** were identifiable by their pink gape, and by following adults around, begging for food.

Sparrows were identifiable by their pink gape, and by following adults around, begging for food.

A flock of **Canada Geese** was at the pond, and a first spring **Black-crowned Night Heron** was foraging at the water's edge. **Brown Creepers** called from the high pines west of the pond, while the voices of **House Finches** and **Purple Finches** pulled us toward the Gondwana Circle.

High in the sky **Violet-green Swallows** circled overhead, while **Barn Swallows** buzzed the grass for insects in the Moon-viewing Garden. We found two **Bushtits** feeding on bushes nearby, and **Chestnut-backed Chickadees** in the woods heading toward the Succulent Garden. There, the century plants hosted nesting **Downy Woodpeckers** and **Tree Swallows**, as in other years.

In the Children's Garden a **Red-shouldered Hawk** perched near the path, while two **Red-tailed Hawks** circled in the sky. Other highlights were **Pygmy Nuthatches** tending a nest site, and a **Wilson's Warbler** in a low tree.

There were **hummingbirds**, both **Anna's** and **Allen's/Selasphorus**, **American Robins**, **Steller's** and **California Scrub Jays**, and a calling **Pacific Wren** outside the California Garden.

**San Francisco Botanical Garden
June 2, 2018
Compiled by Megan Prelinger
30 species:**

Canada Goose
Black-crowned Night Heron
Red-shouldered Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Western Gull
Rock Pigeon
Anna's Hummingbird
Allen's Hummingbird
Downy Woodpecker
Black Phoebe
Steller's Jay
California Scrub-Jay
American Crow

Common Raven
Tree Swallow
Violet-green Swallow
Barn Swallow
Chestnut-backed Chickadee
Bushtit
Pygmy Nuthatch
Brown Creeper
Pacific Wren
American Robin
Wilson's Warbler
Dark-eyed Junco
Song Sparrow
California Towhee
Brewer's Blackbird
House Finch
Purple Finch



Bird photos: Jeff Harter



Clockwise from top: Red-shouldered Hawk, Purple Finch, Song Sparrow, Downy Woodpecker.

The Snowy Egret

Sabrina Chin, Intern

Latin Name Egretta thula

Range The Snowy Egret is found in the United States, southern Canada, Central America, the West Indies, and South America.

Identification Height: 20-27 inches; wingspan: 3 feet 2 inches; weight: 13 ounces. Adults are white with black legs, yellow feet, and a black bill. Juveniles are the same, with greenish legs and a gray beak. Why is it called the Snowy Egret? The Snowy Egret gets its name because most of its body is white, like the snow.

Facts

- Sometimes the Snowy Egret mates with other heron species and produces hybrid offspring.
- Over the course of a year the Snowy Egret's greenish-yellow feet become orange-yellow.
- The lores (bare areas around the bird's eyes) change from yellow to bright pink or red during the breeding season. (Note: Great Egrets' lores turn green).
- The Snowy Egret uses one foot to create circular motions in shallow areas of ponds and marshes to scoop up prey from under water.
- This bird makes startlingly harsh flight calls, "gagging" sounds.

The Snowy Egret in Environmental History

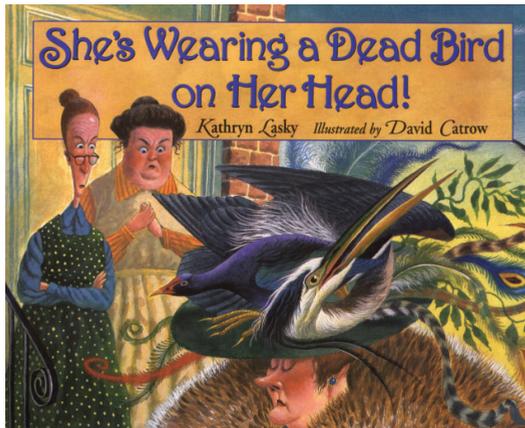
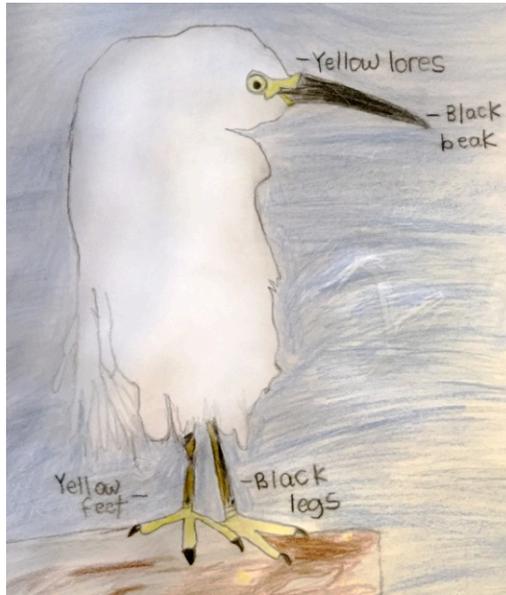
Starting in 1895, the Snowy Egret, Great Blue Heron, and other wild birds were hunted by the millions for their feathers for ladies' hats. Hunters would kill the adult Snowys in their nests so that their plumes were as white as possible, leaving their chicks to starve. The Snowy Egret was on the verge of extinction until a law was passed in 1918.

Harriet Hemenway and her cousin Minna Hall of Boston opened their local newspaper and saw gruesome photos of the Snowy Egrets being killed. They were determined to end this terrible plume trade and enlisted other women to volunteer. They soon organized the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and eventually various groups formed the National Audubon Society. Their organizing culminated in the passage of Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 (MBTA), which saved millions, if not billions, of wild birds from slaughter.

Note from SFNE Director

In April, 2018, the Trump Administration's Interior Dept. issued guidance that the MBTA would no longer apply to oil spills and other catastrophes when the underlying purpose of the activity was not to kill birds. Oil companies are the greatest beneficiaries of the new law, according to the National Audubon Society.

See *The Washington Post*, April 13, 2018, "The Trump Administration Has Officially Clipped the Wings of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act."



Clockwise from top: Woman wearing a hat with feathers, circa 1910; Snowy Egret with a catch; cover of a book about the women who organized the campaign to end the feather trade; Snowy Egret drawing by Sabrina; Intern Sabrina at Stow Lake.

Sabrina Chin



Nesting Behavior of Snowy Egrets
Photos by Sandi Wong



Top row: the lores turn red; a display in the nest.
Middle row: mating, parent with two chicks. Bottom row: parent with new chick.