



The Blue Heron

News from San Francisco Nature Education • February 2019



Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

On January 16th, I was delighted to observe three Great Blue Herons occupying three of the old nests by the Stow Lake

waterfall on their island. The herons generally return to their nesting site between mid-December and mid-January.

The males, who always arrive first, will spend their time trying to attract a female, and then commence courtship activities, including twig presentations, mutual preening—i.e., combing the partner's feathers—bill dueling, and so on.

There will be a multitude of twig presentations during February, in which the male flies to the nest with a stick or branch and hands it off to the female, who constructs a new nest or renovates the old one. After a succession of presentations, the male hops on the female's back and they mate.

During the six-month nesting period male and female herons develop bright orange beaks. Last year six pairs of Great Blue Herons produced 17 chicks. We are hoping to exceed that number in 2019!

Heron Watch begins April 13, 2019, and continues every Saturday through June 15th, from 10 am to 1 pm. Details to come in upcoming newsletters.

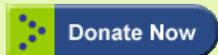
Best,

Nancy DeStefanis

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THE GREAT BLUES ARE BACK!

Great Blue Herons begin their spring mating season.
Photos by Jim Sullivan.



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Heron's Head Park, January 19th

Alan Hopkins, Naturalist

Saturday's trip to Heron's Head Park turned out to be a beauty. After a week of nonstop rain the sky was a cloudless blue. At the beginning of our walk

intern Joachim Gonzales gave an informative presentation on the history of Heron's Head. Joachim is one of our hot young birders, and is too young to actually remember the days before the area became a park.

As we headed out, the first pond was as smooth as glass; **Pied-billed Grebes** and **Buffleheads** swam on the surface. Along the edge a **Belted Kingfisher** and **Great Egret** watched for fish close enough to make a meal.

We followed the trail that runs along the southern edge of the peninsula. The high tide was at its peak, and areas that are usually covered with marsh vegetation were under water. The high water forces some of the birds in the vegetation onto high ground. As a result we had numerous **White-crowned Sparrows**, a few **Golden-crowned Sparrows**, and one **Lincoln's Sparrow**. A few lucky folks saw a **Spotted Towhee** in the **Coyote Brush**, an uncommon bird for the park. The flooded marshland that was once habitat for sparrows became habitat for **American Wigeon**, **Buffelhead**, and **coots**.

The tide was a king tide, the highest tide of the year, caused by an alignment of the sun and moon so perfect that we had a lunar eclipse the next evening! During king tides birders flock to



Barry Biderman

Clockwise from above: Least Sandpiper, Heron's Head group, Black Oystercatcher.



Grace Ruth

tidal marshes to look for rails only seen when the tide flushes them from their densely vegetated hiding places. The week before our trip, intern Nicolas Forestall, Joachim, and I spotted a **Ridgway's Rail** while scouting Heron's Head for this trip.

It is amazing that the rail is at Heron's Head at all. Ridgway's Rail was a species on the verge of extinction; habitat destruction and introduced predators took a terrible toll. Fortunately, groups like the Audubon Society and Save the Bay promoted protection for the rail and created new habitat in places like Arrowhead Marsh. The rail habitat is quite small at Heron's Head, and truthfully I never expected to see one there, but they showed up and even bred one year.

Many of the other birds were huddled together on what little protected land there was. **Black-necked Stilts** and **Avocets** were in good number. **Killdeer** chased each other around a small island. **Whimbrels** and a **Long-billed Curlew** were found. A **Forster's Tern** was blending in with a large group of **Mew Gulls**.

By the time we reached the end of the peninsula the tide was on its way out. **Least Sandpipers** flew nearly to our feet with the newly exposed shoreline. And a **Spotted Sandpiper** came bobbing along. It was a great day at Heron's Head Park.



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Heron's Head Park January 19, 2019 Compiled by Alan Hopkins

51 species:

Canada Goose
American Wigeon
Mallard
Greater Scaup
Surf Scoter
Bufflehead
Ruddy Duck
American Coot
Pied-billed Grebe
Western Grebe
Horned Grebe
Double-crested
Cormorant
Pelagic Cormorant
Great Egret

Snowy Egret
Black-bellied Plover
Killdeer
Spotted Sandpiper
Willet
Greater Yellowlegs
American Avocet
Black-necked Stilt
Long-billed Curlew
Whimbrel
Black Oystercatcher
Least Sandpiper
Wilson's Snipe
Western Gull
Glaucous-winged Gull
California Gull
Mew Gull
Iceland (Thayer's) Gull
Forster's Tern

Anna's Hummingbird
Rock Pigeon
Northern Flicker
Belted Kingfisher
Black Phoebe
American Crow
Common Raven
Bushtit
European Starling
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Spotted Towhee
California Towhee
Lincoln's Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Golden-crowned Sparrow
Western Meadowlark
House Finch



Intern Training at Heron's Head Park

Joachim Gonzalez, Intern

In the second training day at Heron's Head Park, I learned a lot. Not only did I learn what birds and other wildlife can be found at the park, but I also learned about leading walks.

One skill that I am very happy to have learned is how to use a scope. I now know how scopes work, how to set them up, and how to focus on birds efficiently. I will be using the scope, and showing others how to use it, on walks.

Thanks to my SF Nature Education internship I have had gained experience leading or co-leading birdwalks. That is something I have always wanted to do—to teach other people about birds, so it's cool that I get to do it at a young age.

I learned about wildlife diversity at Heron's Head Park. Normally I don't get there, so it is nice to know the different local species. I also learned some good strategies, and where you can find some resident birds.

We saw large numbers of ducks, including **Greater Scaup**, **Bufflehead**, **American Coot**, and **American Wigeon**, with lower numbers of **Northern Shoveler**. There was also a large number of gulls in the bay, including lots of **Mew** and **California Gulls**, possibly due to a herring run.

Shorebird numbers were surprisingly low. We didn't see any **Black-necked Stilts**, which are normally common, and we only saw three **American Avocets**. Low numbers of **Least** and **Spotted Sandpipers** were also noted. We did see one **American Pipit**.

Although numbers of shorebirds and land birds were low, the main highlight of the day was a **Ridgway's Rail**.



Alan Hopkins

Above: Western Meadowlark.



Barry Biderman

Left: White-crowned Sparrow.
Below: Forster's Tern by Joachim.



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Alan Hopkins

Left: Interns Nicolas and Joachim with naturalist Alan Hopkins. Above: Spotted Sandpiper.



Birding for Everyone, January 5th

Megan Prelinger, Naturalist

It was a cool and overcast day on this first walk of the year in the SF Botanical Garden, where we saw a first-of-the-year **Wilson's Warbler** at the main gate. We walked

clockwise, heading in the direction of the California Garden.

In the Bamboo Pond we found a **Great Egret** and a **Great Blue Heron** browsing amid the lily pads. While Great Blues are commonly seen in their colony at Stow Lake, Great Egrets are less commonly found in the garden, preferring tidal wetlands habitats.

The first **Pacific Wren** of the year was vocalizing distinctive "timp!" and doubled "check-check" calls. At this time of the year the lengthening daylight can trigger vocalizations from birds that were silent in December.

Resident **Song Sparrows** were beginning to sing at regular intervals around the garden, and also an occasional **White-crowned**, interspersed with small flocks of wintering **Golden-crowned** and individual **Fox Sparrows**. Other winter residents were **Hermit Thrushes** and abundant **Ruby-crowned Kinglets**.

Overhead, dozens of different kinds of **gulls** circled, and we noticed how the number of gull species is higher with winter residents than summer. With most of them silhouetted against the sky we weren't able to ID each bird, but we saw between 50 and 100 of at least five different species.

In the last stretch of the walk we encountered a flurry of activity west of the Waterfowl Pond. We found **American Robins**, **Steller's Jays**, a dozen **Yellow-rumped Warblers**,

a **Nuttall's Woodpecker**, and our first **Brown Creeper** of the winter—all species that were first of the day, if not first of winter discoveries for our group.



Jeff Harter



Grace Ruth



Grace Ruth

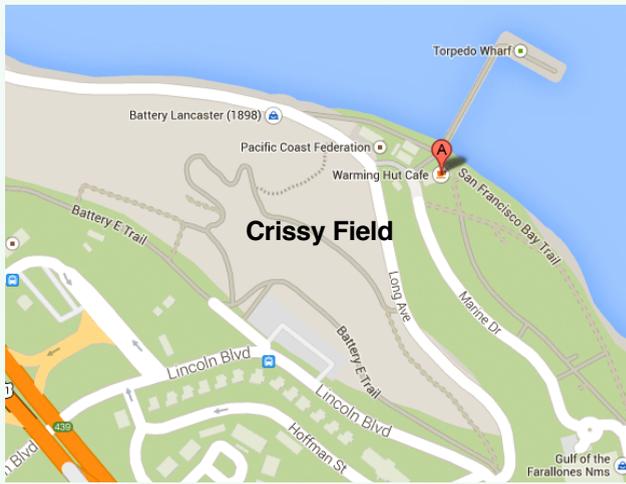
From top: Great Egret and Great Blue Heron in the Bamboo Pond. Above: Great Egret. Right: Black Phoebe.

SF Botanical Garden January 5, 2019 Compiled by Megan Prelinger and Sarah Barsness

31 species, including gulls:

Canada Goose = 2
Mallard = 2
Anna's Hummingbird = 10
5 gull species, unidentified = 75
Great Blue Heron = 1
Great Egret = 1
Nuttall's Woodpecker = 1
Black Phoebe = 2
Steller's Jay = 3
California Scrub-Jay = 2
American Crow = 18
Common Raven = 3

Chestnut-backed Chickadee = 4
Pygmy Nuthatch = 3
Brown Creeper = 1
Pacific Wren = 1
Ruby-crowned Kinglet = 12
Hermit Thrush = 2
American Robin = 6
Fox Sparrow = 3
Dark-eyed Junco = 15
Golden-crowned Sparrow = 16
Song Sparrow = 5
California Towhee = 1
Orange-crowned Warbler = 1
Yellow-rumped Warbler = 18
Townsend's Warbler = 5



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, 10 am to noon in the SF Botanical Garden. Next walks: Feb. 2, Mar. 2, with Megan Prelinger or Sarah Barsness. Meet at SF Botanical Garden bookstore, 9th Ave. near Lincoln. **SF Botanical Garden:** Free to SF residents; non-residents pay a fee.

Crissy Field: Saturday, Feb. 9, with Megan Prelinger. Meet outside Warming Hut. From 10 to 12:30 approx. Volunteers will carry spotting scopes.

Family Walk: Saturday, Feb. 23, 10am–noon. Join Missi Gavic and Bob Hirt for a special family walk (children ages 5-12) in the SF Botanical Garden. Meet at the garden bookstore. Adults \$10, children always free.

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Adult volunteers needed for Heron Watch 2019:

http://sfnature.org/get_involved/volunteer.html.

Deadline to apply is March 15.

Heron Watch internships are available for 7th to 12th graders on our website:

http://sfnature.org/get_involved/intern.html. Apply by Feb. 8.



From left: volunteer Trace Kannel at Heron Watch, naturalist Missi Gavic with children at Stow Lake, intern Nicolas with two heron watchers. Photos by SFNE. Below: Townsend's Warbler by Jeff Harter.



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San Francisco Nature Education is in its 19th year of delivering comprehensive environmental education programs to students from schools in the San Francisco Unified School District.

Berries are Tasty at the SFBG
Photos by Sandi Wong



American Robins, Cedar Waxwings, and a Golden-crowned Sparrow feast on toyon berries in the San Francisco Botanical Garden.

