



## Executive Director's Corner



Dear Friends,

What a year we've had! I hope you're safe and well despite the smoke and the pandemic.

2020 is the 20th anniversary of the Heron Watch program and SF Nature Education. Before the pandemic postponed them, we had many great events and adventures planned to celebrate this milestone with

you. Many will be rescheduled when safe to do so.

Like other nonprofit birding groups we have experienced a significant loss of income this year due to the cancellation of our outdoor programs.

I'm writing to ask you—as a friend of the Stow Lake Heron Colony and nature education in the parks—to make a year-end contribution to SF Nature Education, so we will be ready to welcome the herons when they return next spring to nest.

Your donation will support these ongoing programs:

- Heron Watch Spring 2021—Eight Saturdays at the Stow Lake colony are scheduled, along with nature walks. This program introduces park visitors to the Great Blue Herons and informs them about the life cycle of these magnificent birds.
- Our Youth Internship Program will continue to teach and mentor middle and high school youth, who interact with park visitors during Heron Watch Saturdays.
- Field trips throughout the city: these 30 field trips will be scheduled as soon as it is safe to walk together in small groups.
- School field trips to the Heron Colony at Stow Lake will resume when safe.

*The Blue Heron* newsletter is published ten times per year (September through June). Besides wonderful photos of our favorite birds, new features include a column by Alan Hopkins, a longtime birder, on where to bird locally during the pandemic, or anytime; a video link to interesting nature videos; and more.

Please donate online—Network for Good portal is secure—  
or mail a check payable to SFNE: PO Box 210303, SF CA 94121

Our tax ID no. is 54-2111941. Membership: Adults, \$35; Seniors 65+, \$30. Joint Membership for two seniors at same residence \$50; students 21 or under, \$25.

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Ian Reid

Highlights of the Great Blue Heron 2020 season are [on our website](#).

We look forward to the time next year when we can come together again to celebrate, share our stories of this unusual year, and marvel at the herons as they begin their nesting season. Please be as generous as you can, and know that every tax-deductible donation will make a difference, whether it is \$1,000, \$500, \$250, \$100, \$50 or another amount.

Thank you so much for your support. I look forward to seeing you on our field trips.

Best regards,

Nancy H. DeStefanis

SUPPORT OUR END-OF-YEAR CAMPAIGN!

P.S. Highlights of the 2020 Great Blue Heron season featuring photographs by Helene Sobol and Ian Reid are posted [on our website](#).

### On the pages ahead:

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Lesser Goldfinch



Wilson's Warbler

**Birds of Strawberry Hill** Sandi Wong



Black-throated Gray Warbler



Hermit Warbler



Townsend's Warbler



Cassin's Vireo

# Seen Around Stow Lake



Herbert M. Goodman



Herbert M. Goodman



Helene Sobol



Helene Sobol

Clockwise from top left: Raccoon; Red-shouldered Hawk; Wood Duck; Mallard female with ducklings.



Andrew Bland

## Video Link of the Month: Great Horned Owls, Mother and Baby

Andrew Bland, a San Francisco native, shot this [video of Great Horned Owls](#) at the western end of Golden Gate Park in May, 2020.

Andrew has worked in TV, film, and video for over 15 years. Cinematography has been his primary focus. Recently he merged camera work and his love of nature into wildlife videography. He hopes his work will reach a wide audience and have a positive influence on our relationship with urban wildlife.



**This spring I was at my studio on the Hunter's Point Shipyard and checking a little ravine where water flows year-round.** This place is far from natural—the water comes out of a pipe and flows through an asphalt ditch for a hundred yards or so, where it enters another pipe and disappears into

the bay. The whole area was paved over to cover up any remaining toxic residue left by the US Navy.

To the northwest behind a fence is a large fallow field with toxic area warning signs. This hardly seems like a great place for birding. Maybe not, but I like it because any place you find water, you'll find life. The most common birds here are Starlings, Canada Geese, and Eurasian Collared-Doves. There is a small patch of cattails and water from the pipe where blackbirds, sparrows, and finches find enough cover to drink and bathe. During migration I've seen Western Kingbirds



Photos: Alan Hopkins

and Lazuli Buntings on the fence. Water is scarce in this area, so who knows what will come for a drink?

**Checking the ravine in May, I found two adult Killdeer and a single adolescent chick on a patch of open dirt!** I did not have a chance to check on the birds until July, when I

found adults but no chick. I noticed that one bird would get up briefly and then return to the same spot. Sitting on a second clutch of eggs, I wondered? I checked a few more times: the birds had found a nice spot between two pipes for their nest. I brought my shipyard colleague Sharon Beals, who wrote the book *Nests* to see the birds, but they were nowhere in sight. We carefully walked to the nest spot, and there were three



Killdeer and their nest at Hunter's Point.

speckled eggs between the pipes. I returned later that afternoon and found a bird sitting on the nest and the other bird nearby. When I went back a few days later there were no birds and no eggs, and I have no idea what became of them.

Killdeer's chicks, like other shorebirds, are precocious, meaning they run around as soon as they are hatched. Maybe my birds just went to the other side of the fence. With eggs laid on the ground, precocious young Killdeer are susceptible to numerous predators.

**We have four nesting shorebirds in San Francisco: Killdeer, Black Oystercatcher, and occasionally American Avocet and Black-necked Stilt.** I am sure that before the western part of the city was developed, Snowy Plovers nested here as well. All these birds lay their eggs in the open. Oystercatchers will place their



eggs on large rocks. One of the Heron's Head pairs have nested on the old pier. The rest nest on the ground and depend on their cryptic coloration to hide their eggs and themselves from predators.

The shipyard Killdeer blended in amazing well with a rusted pipe and a new shiny one. A few years ago a pair made a nest just a few feet from the trail at

Heron's Head. The eggs were very hard to see, but the Killdeer's display and distress calls warned birders they were too close. Unfortunately the nest didn't survive.

I am not without some guilt in regards to Heron's Head nests. Way before Heron's Head became a park it was a blighted landfill. There was a brackish pond that hosted shorebirds in the winter and had Avocets in the summer. I was working on the *Breeding Bird Atlas* and as I checked the area Avocets would aggressively swoop down at me! A sure sign they were nesting nearby, but where?

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I figured I could find the nest if I stood on top of a small dirt mound. I got to the top and heard a sickening crunch under my feet. I had stepped on two of the Avocets' four eggs. There were no trails then, but this is a good reason to keep to established paths.

**Killdeer, Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, and Black Oystercatchers have all nested at Heron's Head Park**, however they have a hard time of it due to the large colony of Western Gulls nesting on the roof of the Recology building. Baby gulls need a source of protein, and their parents can find an easy source in the eggs and chicks of other birds.

Our nesting shorebirds may be doing better on the southern edge of Hunter's Point along Yosemite Slough, where there is a rustic landscape with fewer predators. The Black-necked Stilts have returned for the winter and the Avocets should arrive soon. To learn whether they decide to nest this spring we'll just have to wait and watch.



Photos: Alan Hopkins

Clockwise from above: American Avocets; Black Oystercatchers; Black-necked Stilt with chicks in the water.

# San Francisco Nature Education



## Become a Member/Donate Online

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Membership: Adults, \$35; Seniors 65+, \$30; Joint Membership for two seniors at same residence \$50; students 21 or under, \$25.

e-mail: info@sfnature.org telephone: 415-205-0776 www.sfnature.org. All contributions are tax-deductible. Our tax ID no. is 54-2111941.

San Francisco Nature Education is in its 20th year of delivering comprehensive environmental education programs to students from schools in the San Francisco Unified School District and conducting Saturday field trips and programs for adults and children.

## Mourning Doves Nesting at Sutro Heights Photos by Sandi Wong



Adult Mourning Dove sits on the nest, August 2020.



Adult, chick, and one egg are visible.



Growing up.



One chick above, a larger one below with eyes closed.

Recognized by their mournful call, Mourning Doves typically raise two or three broods a year.

Courtship: male on ground struts before female with feathers spread and head nodding. The female builds the nest and the male brings materials.

Clutches are usually two or three eggs. The male incubates most of the day; the female covers the remainder of the day and nights.

It is the most abundant dove in North America and most widely hunted and harvested game bird!

Source: *The Birder's Handbook*, Ehrlich, Dobkin & Wheye