

Executive Director's Corner



Dear Friends,

Five Stow Lake heron nests are now occupied. We know that heron pairs occupy nests 1, 2, 3, 6 & 7. We're not sure whether nests 4 & 5 have attracted herons yet. In the past, Great Blue Herons have begun nesting as late as May at Stow Lake. So there's still time for new birds to fly in.

During March, we should see Great Blue Herons taking turns sitting on eggs. Chicks generally hatch in April after an incubation period of 30 days.

This year five students will join our Youth Internship Program. During March they will be studying the life cycle of the Great Blue Heron, local birds, and sketching heron activity.

Heron Watch will start on April 10th from 10 to 1pm, and continues each Saturday through the end of May. We will be pointing out the active nests from our [Observation Site](#). Volunteers and interns, wearing masks, will be answering questions.

Precautions: All visitors must wear masks at our site. We will cordon off a section to enable our volunteers to practice social distancing, and will set up another site nearby if necessary.

We urge all visitors to bring binoculars, as we will not be sharing spotting scopes until it is safe. People can spread out and observe the herons while we answer questions. Seating is available on two benches nearby.

You can purchase 8X42 binoculars at Fireside Camera on Chestnut Street in SF, or order Vortex Optics 8x42 Diamond-backs online. Please tell them we referred you. I look forward to seeing you at Heron Watch!

Best regards,

Nancy H. DeStefanis

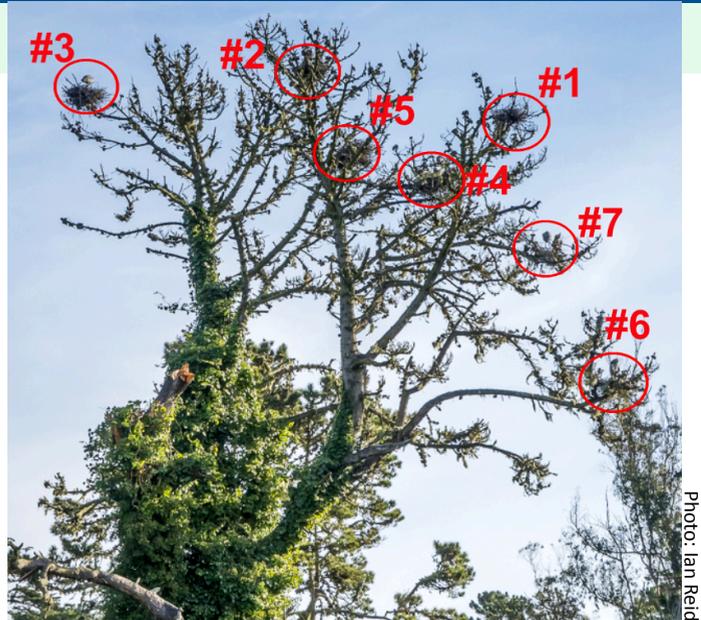


Photo: Ian Reid

Above: Seven Heron Tree nests in mid-February from north side of Stow Lake. Below: New heron pair in nest #6 on Jan. 31, 2021.



Jeff Harter

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Heron's Head Park and India Basin Alan Hopkins



I like to start my walk to Heron's Head from India Basin Shoreline Park at the end of Hawes Street. The newly-developed trail that runs along the old PG&E plant to Heron's Head is worth taking. From the trail there is a view of Heron's Head's shoreline that can't be seen from the main path.

Located at the end of Cargo Way at Jennings Street, Heron's Head Park has become a favorite birding spot along the bay. The park opened to the public after the Port of San Francisco increased the wetlands and improved the trails.

In the 70s, landfill was dumped into the bay to create the peninsula known as Pier 98, which eventually became Heron's Head Park. The concept was to create a place for ships to offload their cargo, but improvements at the Port of Oakland made the plan obsolete.

As the years passed the peninsula became blighted from neglect, and the fill subsided so that parts were exposed to the tides.

I began birding Pier 98 sometime in the early 80s, after my friend Mark Elliott found a **Long-tailed Duck** there. Not only did I see the duck, but there were species such as **Avocets**, **Black-necked Stilts**, and **Wilson's Snipe** using the subsided wetland. This was the only place in San Francisco County

where these species could be found. I began to lead Audubon field trips there.

In 1991, Golden Gate Audubon presented to the Port of San Francisco the concept that Pier 98 should become a park. Members of the Port were favorable to the idea.

Eventually funding was found, and the restoration of the peninsula was completed.

Pier 98 became Heron's Head Park in 1999. Later, the parking lot and Visitor Center were added. While not part of the Heron's Head project, the public's park experience was greatly enhanced when the old noisy and polluting PG&E power plant was removed.

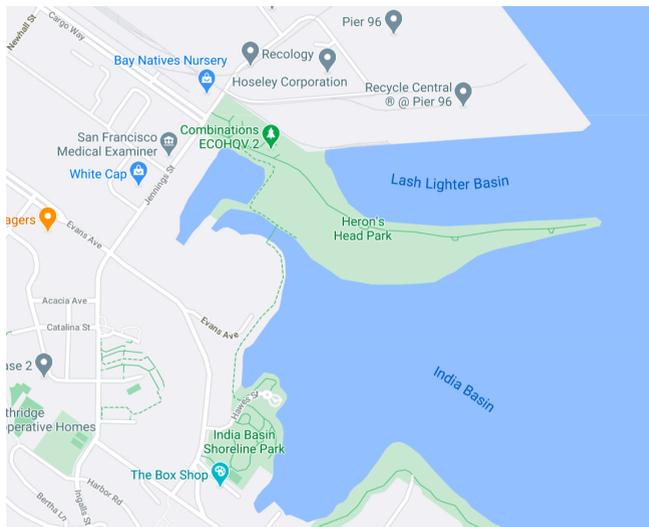
Birding Heron's Head is fairly straightforward. The best time to visit is from August to March on a tide that is just below high. From the parking lot, look for **sparrows** and **Anna's Hummingbirds** near the

Visitor Center. The collection pond for the old power plant can sometimes have **Belted Kingfishers**.

Common birds along the northern edge of the peninsula are **Greater Scaup**, **Bufflehead**, and **American Wigeon** on the water. **Double-crested Cormorants** roost on the pier pilings, and **Western Gulls** nest on the Recology building's roof.

Watch for **Black Oystercatcher** and **Spotted Sandpiper** along the rocky shoreline. The southern shoreline has the

continued on next page



Top: Least Sandpiper (1) and rare Rock Sandpiper. Left: Map of India Basin Shoreline Park and Heron's Head Park. Above: Black Oystercatcher.

Heron's Head Park and India Basin Alan Hopkins

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restored wetland. Common birds there are **American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Willet, Whimbrel, Long-billed Curlew, Snowy and Great Egrets, and Great Blue Herons.**

The most common little shorebird is the **Least Sandpiper**, although **Dunlin** can be common too. **Elegant, Forster's, and Caspian Terns** mix with **California and Mew Gulls** at the bay's edge. The list of rare species is too long to include.

Chemical restrooms are at Heron's Head parking lot and inside the visitor center, and portable toilets are sometimes found at India Basin Shoreline Park, which also has a parking lot. Do not leave any items visible in your cars.

A **birding guide** to Heron's Head Park by local naturalists can be found online.



Photos: Alan Hopkins

Above: PG&E plant at Pier 98 in 1988. Below: current view from the Heron's Head path at high tide.



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San Francisco Nature Education is in its 21st 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.

February Means Courtship for Herons



Ian Reid



Ian Reid

Anyone observing the heron colony can see many signs of courtship at the nests. By late February males had attracted females to five nests.

The herons offer courtship greetings to each other in stretch displays; deliver long branches from adjacent trees to the females (she adds to the existing nest or constructs a new one); and mate at the nest. It's a delicate operation where the male hops onto the female, spreads his wings, and clasps her neck in his beak to balance for perhaps 4-5 seconds.

The mating ritual happens during February. The herons also comb each other's feathers with their beaks. Herons are antagonistic birds, so the rituals reinforce the pair bond they will need to successfully produce offspring. Beaks turn bright orange during the breeding season and then revert to dull yellow.

—Nancy DeStefanis



Grace Ruth



Helene Sobol

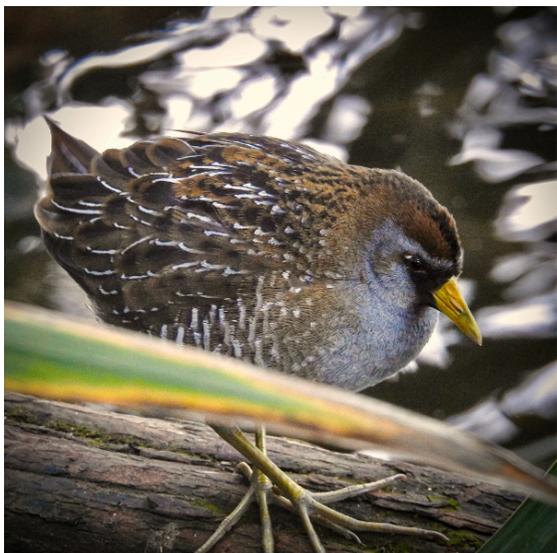
Around Stow Lake



Helene Sobol



Ian Reid



Helene Sobol



Peter L. Knapp

Clockwise from top left: Nuttall's Woodpecker at Stow Lake; Sora wading at Stow Lake; Great Blue Heron with Sora at Salton Sea; Sora hiding in shrub at Stow Lake.

El Polin Spring: Presidio Winter Birds Grace Ruth



El Polin Spring is at the end of MacArthur Avenue in the Presidio (8600 MacArthur). There is a small parking lot with seven regular spaces (for 2-hour parking) and two spaces for folks with placards. In the parking lot is a building with bathrooms.

If the lot is full, you can drive up to the Inspiration Point Overlook and walk down and back: .3 miles. It can also be reached from the Julius Kahn playground, a .2 mile trail walk. From 1 am to 8 pm, Monday-Friday, all nearby street parking is by permit only.



Ruby-crowned Kinglet



Townsend's Warbler



Lesser Goldfinch



House Finch



Yellow-rumped Warbler



Clockwise from top left: Heron with mouse; heron with vole; sometimes herons look for direction; heron in profile.

Diet of the Great Blue Heron Nancy DeStefanis

While Great Blue Herons' diets consists mostly of fish of all sizes, they also eat gophers, voles, snakes, squirrels, mice, and smaller birds. Once they stab and grab their prey, the herons always turn it so it goes down head first. With fish, this maneuver is critical so the gills do not get stuck in their throats. They are also capable of eating Least Bitterns, goslings, and ducklings. Since they can strike at 90 miles per hour, they rarely miss.