

THE GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE BIRD ALLIANCE // VOL. 109 NO. 2 SPRING 2025



SURVEYING THE STATE OF THE WESTERN BURROWING OWL

BY RYAN NAKANO

The Western Burrowing Owl is disappearing in California. From continued habitat loss caused by agricultural practices, urban development, and industrial energy, to the elimination of ground squirrels whose burrows provide the owls breeding grounds and refuge, this species needs further protection.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) is currently reviewing research across the state on Western Burrowing Owl populations as part of the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) petition process to potentially designate the birds as endangered or threatened. On February 13, Golden Gate Bird Alliance (GGBA) submitted a letter to CDFW to support an endangered designation status.

CONTINUED on page 3





American Robin and nest.

Bob Lewis

SECURING THE FUTURE OF THE GOLDEN GATE BIRD ALLIANCE

BY GLENN PHILLIPS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Planned giving is a profound way to leave a lasting legacy, ensuring that the causes we care about thrive for generations to come. At the Golden Gate Bird Alliance, we have witnessed firsthand how such generosity can transform our ability to protect birds and their habitats. Recent bequests from two dedicated members, Nancy Elsner and Linda Devigne, have had an extraordinary impact, reinforcing the importance of planned giving for our organization's future.

Nancy and Linda's thoughtful contributions have enabled the Golden Gate Bird Alliance to make strategic investments that would not have been possible otherwise.

Their generous bequests, along with your support, allowed us to hire our first Director of Conservation in over a decade. This crucial position strengthens our efforts to protect local bird populations and habitats, from Meeker Slough in Richmond to Pier 94 in San Francisco. Having a director enhances our ability to advocate for bird-friendly policies, like Berkeley's Bird-safe Building ordinance and lights-out for birds. It helps conduct essential conservation research, like monitoring Burrowing Owls in Western Alameda and Contra Costa Counties, and it helps us mobilize volunteers to safeguard vital ecosystems across the Bay Area.

These gifts have supported conservation initiatives and helped replenish the Alliance's financial reserves, which were significantly depleted during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many nonprofits, we faced unprecedented financial strain during this period, forcing us to draw heavily on our reserves to maintain our programs. Thanks to Nancy's and Linda's generosity and your continued support, we have regained financial stability, ensuring that we can continue our mission in this unstable time.

Planned giving offers a unique opportunity for members and supporters to contribute to the long-term success of the Golden Gate Bird Alliance. Bequests, charitable trusts, and beneficiary designations provide crucial funding that enables us to expand our programs, respond to emerging conservation challenges, and inspire future generations of bird advocates. Whether large or small, every planned gift makes a meaningful difference in protecting the birds we cherish and the habitats they depend on.

By including the Golden Gate Bird Alliance in your estate plans, you can ensure that our work continues to thrive for years to come. That's why we've teamed up with FreeWill, an easy-to-use estate planning and smart giving resource for you to use in building a legacy of bird conservation in the Bay Area. Your legacy can be one of conservation, advocacy, and a lasting commitment to birds and nature.

Nancy Elsner's and Linda Devigne's gifts have left an indelible mark on our organization, and their contributions will resonate for years to come. We are deeply grateful for their vision and encourage you to consider how you, too, can make a lasting impact through planned giving.

NEWS BRIEFS

Lights Out for Spring Migration

Join us in going "Lights Out" this spring migration (now through June) to keep birds safe during their journey north. This means turning any unnecessary lights off during the evening time to reduce skyglow from disorienting and taking migratory birds off their proper routes.

New GGBA Staff Member

Golden Gate Bird Alliance continues to grow with the latest hire of Jeni Schmedding as the organization's Digital Communications Assistant. Schmedding brings her expertise in environmental studies, education, and community outreach to her work to inspire our community to protect birds.

GGBA Backyard Habitat Program

We're rolling out our Backyard Habitat Program which allows you to pledge to create Bird-friendly habitat in the place that you live, offers helpful resources for doing so, and builds a network of dedicated environmental stewards! See the conservation page on our website.

WESTERN BURROWING OWL from page 1

For the past 16 years GGBA volunteers have monitored Burrowing Owls along the Berkeley Shoreline. From 2009-2017 our data shows an average of 3-4 owls present throughout the winter months. From 2018-2025 that number dropped to 1-2 owls.

In addition, GGBA Christmas Bird Count data from Oakland saw an average of 24 Burrowing Owls observed between 1974 and 1993. This number dropped to 10 between 1994 and 2011 and to six from 2012 to 2024. The CBC data alone shows a 75% decline since they were designated as a Species of Special Concern in 1978.

Between the two state-wide Burrowing Owl surveys conducted (1991-1993) and (2006-2007), the San Francisco Bay Area saw a 30% decrease in its local population from 165 to 119 owls. Using regional surveys and eBird data, the petitioners believe there are only 25 or fewer Western Burrowing Owls left in the Bay Area today.

The CESA petition, submitted by seven environmental nonprofits, requests that “the Commission list the Western Burrowing Owl as threatened throughout its entire range in California.”

Alternatively, the petitioners offered the possibility of listing certain Western Burrowing Owl populations connected to seven biographic regions, the San Francisco Bay Area being one of them.

For the past six months, the Western Burrowing Owl has been waiting in the wings as a wildlife candidate for endangered/threatened status.

“What the protections of CESA means is that unauthorized take (hunting, pursuing, catching, capturing, killing or the attempts to do these things) is prohibited,” CESA Wildlife Listing Coordinator Anne Hilborn said. The department (CDFW) can authorize potential take through permitting mechanisms but any take that a development project does, has to be fully mitigated.” According to Hilborn, mitigation typically means “putting money toward conserving habitat for that species in perpetuity.”

The Commission agreed to make the species a candidate on Oct 25, 2024 upon review of the petition, setting off the formal process for CDFW to prepare and



Western Burrowing Owl.

Tara McIntire

For the past six months, the Western Burrowing Owl has been waiting in the wings as a wildlife candidate for endangered/threatened status.

submit a status review report to the Commission within 12-18 months. It could be anytime between now and next spring before we know the official status of the Burrowing Owl based on the Commission’s final decision.

This isn’t the first time that a petition was sent out on behalf of the Burrowing Owl. Back in 2003, many of the same organizations leading this recent effort pushed for such a designation through the CESA petition process. At that time, conservationists were unsuccessful and the Commission ended candidate status for the bird upon evaluating their petition.

For Jeff Miller, Center for Biological Diversity’s Senior Conservation Advocate and the primary author of both petitions, several things have changed since their original attempt in 2003. “The makeup of the Commission has changed. It used to be a holdover of all the Governor’s hunting buddies,” Miller said. “But since then the state has made an effort to put people on who have ecology backgrounds.”

Despite 99% of California’s native grassland habitat being lost to agriculture and urbanization, the Western Burrowing Owl is

still here occupying precious ground squirrel burrows, maintaining habitat through soil aeration and nutrient cycling, and nodding at each burrow entrance before entering—as if to acknowledge the work needed to peacefully coexist.

Thank you to the incredible work of our GGBA Burrowing Owl monitors Della Dash, Mary Malec, Peggy Loper, and so many others who contributed to our data and knowledge of Burrowing Owls in the Bay Area, and to Jay Aggarwal who compiled our data and drafted the letter of support for their endangered status.

You can acknowledge the current state of the Western Burrowing Owl in California, by visiting <https://fgc.ca.gov/CESA> and signing up for the commission’s email list <https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/CNRA/signup>.

Petitioning Groups: Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, Burrowing Owl Preservation Society, Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, Urban Bird Foundation, Central Valley Bird Club, and San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society



EcoEd partnering with ROC. Photos courtesy of the Richmond Outdoor Coalition.

GGBA AND THE RICHMOND OUTDOOR COALITION

BY CLAY ANDERSON AND WHITNEY GROVER

On a beautiful, misty, weekday morning, GGBA Youth Education Manager Clay Anderson, a teacher, a few volunteers, and 25 squirrely 4th graders hiked up a hill. As they approached the top, the group peered through the haze where large creatures moved above them. “What is that?” “It looks like monsters!” “Are they UFO’s?” Before panic set in, Clay resolved the mystery: “It’s cows,” he said. “Don’t worry—they won’t hurt us.”

Clay gathered the students in a line. “Please be calm and the cows will be calm,” he said. The students mustered their courage. They continued on the trail through the middle of the herd as Clay clapped and barked at the cows, which looked like giant dirigibles floating in the mist.

As they moved through to the other side of the herd, one of the students reached out to touch a calf, and a volunteer quickly intervened. “No, you don’t want to do that.” Another student wore a big smile and exclaimed, “Ooo, that was crazy!” Then asked seriously, “Are they for real?” “Yes

they are very real,” Clay replied.

For over 20 years GGBA has taken 3rd through 5th grade students from Title I schools on field trips. Students learn by exploring the impacts that plants, bugs, birds, and humans have on the watershed environment. Providing classroom presentations and field trips for each participating class, Clay and his dedicated team of volunteers serve around 350 students in the Bay Area each year through our Eco Education program.

Field trips are the core of the program, taking kids to creeks, marshes, and oceans in the Bay Area. In the last couple of years, students have visited Wildcat Canyon, Glen Canyon, Arroyo Viejo, Pier 94 Wetlands, Pt. Pinole, Crissy Lagoon, Arrowhead Marsh, Lake Merritt, Crab Cove, and Muir Beach.

In 2023 GGBA expanded its Eco-Education program by participating in the brand new Richmond Outdoor Coalition (ROC). ROC partners collaborate toward a common vision: people in and near Richmond should spend more time outdoors for education, health and wellness, positive youth develop-

ment, and social justice.

Last year Golden Gate Bird Alliance was in a group of nine other program partners: Bay Area Wilderness Training, ESCAPE Club, Growing Together, Headwaters Science Institute, Inner City Bliss, KIDS for the Bay, Rich City Rides, The Watershed Project, and YES Nature to Neighborhoods. Across the 10 program partners ROC reached 1,049 students and family members in Richmond!

Perhaps most impressively, all of the students at Verde and Nystrom Elementary/Middle schools participated in some form of ROC programming.

With the support of ROC, GGBA adapted our Eco-Education curriculum to serve middle school students for the first time. In the 2023-2024 school year, between our work both outside and inside the ROC, 550 students around the Bay Area participated in Eco-Education! We are now deep into the 2024-2025 school year and in our second year as proud members of the Richmond Outdoor Coalition.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Bay Birding Challenge - April 26

Our “Big Day” team birding and fundraising competition takes place on Sunday, April 26 to see who can observe the most bird species and raise the most funds for GGBA. Deadline to register a team is Thursday, April 10 at charity.pledgeit.org/baybirdingchallenge.

Earth Day Events - Saturday, April 19

Join us out at the Oakland Zoo for their “Coexistence with Wildlife” Earth Day Event from 9:30am-3pm or at our own Earth Day habitat restoration event at MLK, Jr. Regional Shoreline’s Arrowhead Marsh (9:30am-12pm). These are great opportunities to connect to the earth and community.

Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour

The Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour is back this April for its online tour (April 5-6) and in-person this May (May 3-4) to bring you opportunities for viewing local native gardens by your neighbors in the Bay and getting inspired to start or finish your own project!



Mines Road, courtesy Tara McIntire.

A CALIFORNIA LANDSCAPE—MINES ROAD AND BEYOND: BAY AREA HOTSPOT

BY BRUCE MAST

LOCATION

37.665101,
-121.732883
to 37.391790,
-121.490375
Mines Rd,
Livermore, CA
94550

*The
ceanothus-
covered
slopes are
painted a
glorious
blue in
spring.*

This car-birding road climbs high into the Diablo range through quintessential California landscape. Specialty birds include Golden Eagle, Lewis's Woodpecker, Bell's Sparrow, Tricolored Blackbird, Phainopepla, and an occasional Greater Roadrunner.

Mines Road starts south of Tesla Road in Livermore, passing vineyards and following sycamore-lined Arroyo Mocho Creek, where Yellow-billed Magpies regularly used to nest. About 3.5 miles in, the road forks left along the arroyo, while Del Valle Road continues straight to the reservoir and regional park. By mile 4, the road enters a lovely pastoral valley. In breeding season, Cliff Swallows overhead may be coming from a colony under the bridge upstream. Watch for Western Bluebirds, Black-headed Grosbeaks, and Bullock's Orioles. Look and listen for White-breasted Nuthatches.

Crossing the bridge, the road climbs through coastal sagebrush. Stop at mile post (MP) 6.25, a water drip near a majestic Valley Oak. In spring, it often hosts nesting Bullock's Orioles, Western Kingbirds, Acorn Woodpeckers, and sometimes Phainopeplas. The adjacent sagebrush slopes are good for Rufous-crowned Sparrows, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Lazuli Buntings, Lark Sparrows, and an occasional skulking California Thrasher or Greater Roadrunner. On an early summer night you may hear Common Poorwills.

Multiple pullouts along the next eight miles offer

opportunities to check mistletoe-clogged trees for Phainopeplas. Blue oaks replace Coastal Live Oaks here. Scan the ridgelines for Golden Eagles, American Kestrels, and White-throated Swifts. Steller's Jays show up once the Gray Pines enter the scene. Through much of this section, the road traverses high above the creek through a narrow canyon. Canyon Wren has been known to perform its cascading "chewy chewy chewy" song around MP 12.67 and a few other points in the rocky gorge.

The road eventually returns to creek level with a convenient pullout around MP 14.5, a good spot for neotropical migrants and breeders. The upper reaches of the creek are home to Northern Pygmy-Owls and a good place to listen for the flight calls of Lawrence's Goldfinch. In spring, the ceanothus-covered slopes are painted a glorious blue.

After the Santa Clara County line, much of the landscape to the east is recovering from the SCU Complex wildfires of 2020. The distant hills are dotted with old mine tailings, hence the road's name. To the west, the rolling hills are carpeted with chamise chaparral. This is a great area to check for California Thrashers, Bell's Sparrows, and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers.

Dropping into San Antonio Valley, look for Lewis's Woodpeckers in the open oak savannah. A trip along Mines Road guarantees great birding in a stunning California landscape.

Have a favorite birding site you'd like to share? Contact rnakano@goldengatebirds.org.

DONATIONS

Thank you for being a part of our donor and member community. We are deeply appreciative of every individual, business and organization that supports Golden Gate Bird Alliance. In this issue we recognize all End-of-Year Appeal Donors and all of our major donors from the past year.

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Remember the Birds

Including Golden Gate Bird Alliance in your estate plan is a generous way to ensure that the Bay Area remains a haven for the birds you love.

A bequest can be expressed in a will as simply as, "I bequeath [a sum of money, a percentage of my estate, or an IRA, life insurance policy or investment/bank account] to Golden Gate Bird Alliance, 2150 Allston Way, Suite 210, Berkeley, CA 94704."

Consult with your attorney to discuss your particular situation. Learn more on our website at goldengatebirdalliance.org/plannedgiving.

Please know that we work hard to ensure the accuracy of this list. If your name has been omitted or misspelled, let us know at 510.843.2222.

MEMBER PROFILE: MARY WAND

We're organizing our biggest fundraiser of the year, Birdathon, and no one has been busier than Chair of the Birdathon 2025 Committee, Mary Wand. We recently caught up with Mary to talk about her life, birds, and Birdathon.

Where were you born and where did you grow up? I was born in San Francisco and we moved around a bit growing up. Most of my youth was in California and then Australia for a number of years when my dad was transferred to Melbourne.

When did you first become interested in birds? About 25 years ago. I had friends who were into birding and I started taking classes at Piedmont Adult School (they used to have a lot of birding classes). This got me some basic knowledge so I could go out and know what I was looking at. I enjoyed being outdoors, seeing the seasons change, and watching birds and their behavior.

In addition to being a birder, you're into sailing? Yes, I've been sailing since I was a kid. My best friend's family in Melbourne were sailors, so I learned to sail on their tiny dinghies. Since then I've been on the water a lot. It was probably 25-30 years ago that I learned to sail on the Bay.

What do you do when you're not birding or sailing? I just got back from Scuba diving in the Cayman Islands. It's similar to birding—when you're underwater you're looking for fish and observing “oh these fish hide under rock, these fish like sandy bottoms, etc.” As far as sailing goes, I used to race. I'm a U.S Sailing Certified Race Officer, so if I'm not actually sailing, I'm out managing regatas on the Bay. I spend a fair amount of time with that, travelling, and dealing with my dogs.



Mary Wand.

What do you do as a Certified Race Officer for regatas? We're in a powerboat setting a course for the boats on the Bay. We're also communicating with racers, starting and monitoring the race, recording finishes, scoring, talking to the coast guard, monitoring ship traffic, and having fun.

Did your experience as a race officer help prepare you to run Birdathon this year? Before I retired, my job was a lot of herding cats as an attorney doing intellectual property licensing. It's true that between my job and my role as a race officer there are a lot of documents and organizing that needs to happen. That said, I've gotten a lot of guidance and support from our Birdathon committee to make this year a success.

What is your approach to birding? I ask “What can we learn from the birds? What are the birds telling us about where they are and what they are doing?” These kinds of questions make you observe and be present in the environment around you.

SPEAKER SERIES

Our very own GGBA board member John Callaway will present on “Restoring the SF Bay Estuary” amidst sea level rise and climate change on April 17, 2025, 7pm online via Zoom. Please visit us online for more Speaker Series dates and information at goldengatebirdalliance.org/education/speaker-series.



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MISSION STATEMENT

Golden Gate Bird Alliance's mission is to inspire people to protect Bay Area birds and our shared natural environment.

ABOUT GOLDEN GATE BIRD ALLIANCE

The Golden Gate Bird Alliance was founded January 25, 1917.

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www.goldengatebirdalliance.org

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Calling all bird advocates!

Federal wildlife protection and conservation programs are being systematically dismantled as we speak, which means the birds we love risk losing critical habitat. Join us in advocating for birds by contacting your congressional representatives today to ask for “fully-funded conservation programs and agencies.” Find your reps contact at: www.congress.gov/members/find-your-member.



BACKYARD BIRDER



Tara McIntire

Lincoln's Sparrow.

TRY ON A LINCOLN'S SPARROW

BY TARA MCINTIRE

Many birders classify sparrows as LBBs (little brown birds), finding their subtle physical characteristics difficult to define. There is even a ‘New World Sparrow sp.’ choice in eBird (new world = North/South America) to further reinforce identification avoidance. Though there are nearly 50 sparrow species found in North America (not including sub-species), local birders need to learn roughly 12 to 16 species that appear across the Bay Area. Of that small group, one in particular deserves a birder's attention: Lincoln's Sparrow.

One might guess the name refers to a 16th President. Instead, it is linked to a biologist, Thomas Lincoln, who collected a speci-

men during an 1883 expedition to Quebec led by the infamous John James Audubon. It was a new species for Audubon so he chose to name this ‘lifer’ in honor of Thomas. As part of a larger re-naming initiative to remove exclusionary terms and name birds by physical traits, this lame-duck name will soon be changed by the American Ornithological Society.

Unlike similar Song, Savannah, and Swamp Sparrows, Lincoln's stand out and above the rest (sans stovepipe hat). Their beautiful, ochreous buff ‘yokes,’ decorated in thin vertical dark-brown streaks over a creamy-white belly, are not unlike that of an iconic Icelandic sweater pattern. Some even taunt birders with a small ‘button’ on their chests, luring you to question why they're not Song Sparrows. Because this shy and solitary bird often presents just one fleeting visual opportunity, it's important to learn its key field marks! Not surprisingly, their fine features are complemented by equally delightful songs, which some describe as Purple Finch and House Wren melodies combined. Sadly, their songs are not heard locally since Lincoln's breeding territory is found in the Sierras and Rockies, stretching north and east across nearly all of Canada and Alaska. So brush up on learning the buzzy, high-pitched ‘zeet’ calls heard here in our region between September and May.

Sparrows can indeed be challenging, but the Lincoln's serves as a model sparrow—both alluring, lovely, and unforgettable. Once you refine your focus and appreciation for their visual subtleties, you will no longer think of any sparrow as plain little brown birds. Instead, you'll soon be driving around with a Sparrow Appreciation Society sticker proudly plastered on your vehicle's rear window. So just try.

“I say ‘try’; if we never try, we shall never succeed”

President Abraham Lincoln, 1862.