

THE GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE BIRD ALLIANCE // VOL. 110 NO. 1 WINTER 2026



THE TIME IS NOW: CALIFORNIA'S FIRST STATEWIDE BREEDING BIRD ATLAS

BY VAN PIERSZALOWSKI

In early 2024, I was asked to take over leading a second Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA) for Los Angeles County. I accepted, and soon after realized I needed to step back and understand the bigger picture. First, I set out to understand exactly what a BBA is. BBAs are large-scale efforts that mobilize trained community scientists and professional field technicians to collect fine-scale, behavior-based data, such as courtship, nesting, and fledging, all georeferenced across a statewide grid.

CONTINUED on page 3

California Thrasher.
Peter Shen





Song Sparrow in Tilden Park.

Ralph Goodwin

SPRING BIRDATHON

BY GLENN PHILLIPS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Every spring, as the days lengthen and the first Song Sparrows begin staking out territories with their bright, bubbling melodies, I feel a familiar stirring of anticipation. Birdathon season is almost here!

For many of us, Birdathon marks the true beginning of spring: a chance to immerse ourselves in the rhythm of migration, reconnect with the places we love, and celebrate the birds that bring wonder to our lives.

Beginning March 15 and running through May 16, Birdathon is our biggest fundraiser of the year and one of the most joyful community-building traditions at Golden Gate Bird Alliance. Whether you are a first-time participant or a seasoned pro, there is a place for you in this

celebration.

One of the most beloved ways to participate is by collecting sponsors and counting all the bird species you see throughout Birdathon. Some people tally their backyard visitors. Others head out before dawn and chase as many species as they can until the last light fades. Every bird, every moment of delight, becomes a gift to conservation.

If you are drawn toward friendly competition, our Bay Birding Challenge is entering its fifth year and growing fast. What began with just two teams now brings 11 or more into the field, each one attempting to find as many species as possible in a single day. This year, we've extended to cover all nine Bay Area counties. The day is high energy and full of good-natured rivalry.

Our Birdathon Adventure Tours will return, bringing participants into remarkable places, including sites that are not ordinarily open to the public. This year's lineup includes everything from intimate wetland walks to mountain rambles to one of my personal favorites, Birds and Wine in Sonoma County. We will explore Pine Flat Road and the Modini Preserve, then stop for lunch and a wine tasting at a local winery. Birds, wildflowers, and good company create one of the most memorable days of spring.

None of this would be possible without our volunteers. Every year, dozens of dedicated community members donate hundreds of hours to plan Birdathon, organize events, coordinate teams, and lead field trips. Their generosity of time, skill, and spirit is at the heart of Birdathon. When you join a walk led by one of our volunteer leaders, you are experiencing something powered entirely by people who love birds and want to share that joy with others.

As Birdathon draws to a close, our Birdathon Online Auction opens with a selection of special birding experiences donated by members of our community. These one-of-a-kind offerings are another expression of the same spirit of generosity that carries this event each year.

Birdathon funds our conservation, education, and habitat restoration work year-round. Every bird saved, every young person introduced to nature, every acre of habitat restored is possible because people like you choose to show up.

Spring is a season of abundance, and Birdathon is our annual reminder that when this community comes together, we can do extraordinary things for the birds we love. I hope you'll join us.

NEWS BRIEFS

Bird-Safe Building Coordinator

We're pleased to announce super-volunteer Erin Deihm as our official Bird Safe Building Coordinator, not only highlighting her past work pushing bird-safe building ordinances in the Bay Area but also her continuing commitment to make our urban environment more bird-friendly.

Congrats to our 2026 BFE Cohort

Huge congratulations to our latest slate of Birding For Everyone Fellows who will receive a year's worth of GGBA classes and focused cohort programming—Christian Trujillo, Verónica Norio-Tomasino, EKela Autry, Sophie Haruna Klimcak, Virgyl Basas, Annie Chien, Boon'Tianga Athj, Kryst, Noor Khashe Brody, Crystal Acevedo.

New Bay Area-based Bird Book

Berkeley-based Heyday Books recently released *Of the Shadow of the Bridge*, the latest art book featuring the incredible wildlife photography of Dick Evans and wonderful prose by Hannah Hindley spotlighting the abundant avian life of the San Francisco Bay Area. Visit heydaybooks.com to get your copy.

BREEDING BIRD ATLAS from page 1

The resulting baseline is exceptionally powerful foundational data essential for land managers, agencies, and conservation groups to detect trends, prioritize conservation efforts, and track how ecosystems are responding to rapid change.

I knew some states had done statewide BBAs, but I was shocked to learn that 44 of 50 U.S. states had conducted at least one. Even further, 19 states had conducted more than one statewide BBA, with four working on their third.

Meanwhile, California has taken a county-by-county approach. Since fieldwork began for the first Marin County Breeding Bird Atlas in 1976, there have been some truly invaluable county-specific projects. There have also been several county atlases that were abandoned due to insufficient resources. As of today, only 15 of California's 58 counties have successfully published BBAs. This means over 80 percent of the state's land area remains under-surveyed in this gold standard way.

Luckily, recent advances in participatory data collection platforms like eBird, combined with the unprecedented growth of the birding community, now make a statewide effort achievable. And it could not be at a more important time.

Climate shifts are accelerating, ecological conditions are growing more unpredictable, and California urgently needs stronger, spatially-explicit tools to guide strategic land acquisition, habitat restoration, and conservation action.

With my initial background research on BBAs out of the way, I spent the next year on a listening tour, having hundreds of conversations with conservation leaders across California, county and state BBA coordinators, agency representatives, and of course, birders.

The sentiment was nearly unanimous: it won't be easy, but we need to do this.

To coordinate this effort, I founded a new 501(c)(3) nonprofit called California Bird Atlas (CBA) along with a founding board of directors that includes respected leaders such as Andrea Jones (Audubon California). I also assembled a science advisory committee chaired by Morgan



Yellow-billed Magpie.

Gail West

Only 15 of California's 58 counties have successfully published breeding bird atlases. This means over 80 percent of the state's land area remains under-surveyed in this gold standard way.

Tingley (Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, UCLA) to guide project design and methodology.

At the same time, I started reaching out to local conservation groups who I thought I might support the development of the organization and its custom-built eBird Atlas website. More than thirty organizations stepped forward with seed funding, including Golden Gate Bird Alliance, Audubon California, Western Field Ornithologists, and dozens more.

Now that we have raised sufficient early support, here is the plan.

This landmark initiative will begin year-round fieldwork on January 1, 2026, and continue through December 31, 2030 with the expressed aim of producing the most complete dataset ever assembled on the distribution, status, and behavior of all breeding bird species across California. It will combine broad-based community science with targeted surveys in historically under-surveyed regions. Data will be collected primarily through a custom-built

eBird Atlas website, developed in collaboration with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

To structure the survey, California will be divided into approximately 16,500 atlas blocks, created by subdividing USGS 7.5-minute topographic quadrangles into six equal units, each about three miles by three miles. This grid-based approach ensures consistent coverage across deserts, rangelands, mountains, and coastal habitats. All observations will be georeferenced with precise latitude and longitude coordinates, enabling robust spatial analyses at multiple scales. Rigorous quality control measures will be applied throughout to ensure scientific integrity and usability.

The best part: anyone can contribute. Learn how to support the effort by donating, signing up for our mailing list, and volunteering at www.californiabirdatlas.org.

I cannot wait to meet many of you in the field. This is going to be *extremely* fun.

Van Pierszalowski is the Executive Director of California Bird Atlas (CBA).

A SOARING RETURN: BERKELEY BIRD FESTIVAL

BY JENI SCHMEDDING

From blue skies, dancing birds and groovy music, to art and science, excitement filled the air in Berkeley as the community came together to celebrate birds. On October 19th, 2025, hundreds of residents from around the Bay Area flocked to the David Brower Center for the 4th Annual Berkeley Bird Festival.

Golden Gate Bird Alliance, in conjunction with California Institute for Community, Art & Nature (Cal ICAN), and the David Brower Center hosted the event for bird lovers and nature enthusiasts to come together for an array of free, family-friendly activities.

Arriving at the festival, chalk art-lined sidewalks of different bird species surrounding booths of community partners welcomed participants. Palomacy brought some of their featured friends to give participants a chance to see pigeons up close, pet, and hold them. UC Berkeley birding club, Bears for Birds, led walks through the redwoods and nature areas of UC Berkeley's campus every hour; participants saw Brown Creepers, Steller's Jays, hawks, Dark-eyed Juncos, and so many more. In total 15 community exhibitors contributed to the atmosphere of the festival and gave participants new experiences and insight into conservation work happening around the bay.

Inside the David Brower Center, curiosity and excitement filled the building as people immersed themselves in children's book storytimes, arts and crafts, science



Sarah Bush Dance Project's Murmur at Berkeley Bird Festival 2025.

Xiao Wen

talks, poetry, and film screenings. Families built gourd birdhouses and folded origami birds on the terrace, while others listened to speakers in the Tamalpais Room. The Goldman Theater hosted talks by a variety of amazing speakers, including Daniel Sheire who flew from Texas to talk about his documentary, "Lights Out Texas". Harmony Yu, a local author read from her book, "Wings Above the Campanile"; the author has written and published four books already at just 14 years old.

There were a few new and exciting additions to the festival this year that brought live entertainment to Allston Way. Sarah Bush Dance Project performed "MURMUR", an immersive journey where dance merges with flight—blurring the lines between bodies and birds, movement and wind, stage and sky. Festival participants stopped dead in their tracks as they watched the

street transform into a mesmerizing journey of dance and birds. Later on, groovy music filled the street when "Flight Lessons," a folk opera created by Deborah Crooks, held a live performance. Crook's opera explores themes of home, adaptation, and recovery as it follows a true story about Peregrine Falcons and humans living at the intersection of wild and urban habitats.

The Berkeley Bird Festival is more than just an event that happens once a year; it is a day to create lasting community by celebrating birds. This festival gives light to local talent, brings local organizations together, and gives the community opportunities to show, learn about, and share their appreciation for nature.

This festival is made possible by those who organize, contribute, and participate. We thank all who joined us for this year's festival and hope to see you there in 2026.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Cal Academy Nightlife Birds January 8

Fly into the Cal Academy of Sciences for their Nightlife event on all things Birds! Our Conservation Director Whitney Grover will share what we can do to protect our avian neighbors. Starting at 6pm, this event explores how migration, communication, and adaptation shape avian life. Learn more at calacademy.org.

Great Backyard Bird Count Feb 13-16

Did you miss the Christmas Bird Count this year or looking for more opportunities to contribute to community science? Take part in the Annual Great Backyard Bird Count by spending at least 15 minutes observing birdlife and submitting your findings to ebird. Learn more at www.birdcount.org.

Birdathon March 15 - May 16

Our biggest fundraiser of the year Birdathon is right around the corner. Set your own birding goals, earn support from your friends and family, compete in our Bay Birding Challenge, and/or join us on our highly curated unique birding adventure tours. The season ends with our classic online auction and in-person celebration!



View from Nicholl Knob in Miller/Knox Regional Shoreline (Wikipedia).

MILLER/KNOX REGIONAL SHORELINE

BY DEREK HEINS

LOCATION

900 Dornan Drive
Richmond, CA
94801

With the right timing, this might be the best spot in the East Bay for hawk migration.

Emerging through the tunnel on South Garrard Blvd, you'll find a gem of the East Bay, Miller/Knox Regional Shoreline. It will invite you to enjoy panoramic views of the San Francisco and Oakland skylines, Marin county mountains, and much more. If you're interested in local history, visit the train ferry pier at Ferry Point, or the Golden Gate Model Train Museum.

Local birders know Miller/Knox to be a go-to birding hotspot for a variety of species. They usually focus their outings to the salt-water lagoon, the shoreline, and the hills east of Dornan Drive.

A former quarry, the lagoon's saltwater comes from underground, seeping in from the Bay. Wintering waterfowl and gulls can be plentiful—scan the American Wigeons to see if a Eurasian Wigeon is with them. The lagoon area is attractive to ducks, gulls, swallows, herons, egrets and bluebirds. The fairly open scrub habitat south of the lagoon supports residents such as finches, mockingbirds, wrens and bushtits. It's also a good spot in fall migration to find a Willow Flycatcher, along with warblers, other flycatchers and sparrows.

The bay here is much shallower than you would think, with the exception being a dredged lane between

the shoreline and Brooks Island. From Ferry Point, scan the bay for overwintering ducks, loons, grebes and cormorants. Take notice of reports of winter herring runs as they can cause feeding frenzies. There isn't ideal habitat to attract large concentrations of shorebirds, but Black Oystercatchers, Spotted Sandpipers, and Black Turnstones are often seen. From April through August, enjoy terns (Caspian, Elegant and Forster's) and Osprey that breed locally. With some patience and a spotting scope a Pigeon Guillemot can possibly be seen, white wing bars contrasted against their black bodies as they fly low over the bay.

The least birded area at Miller/Knox are the hills, partially due to some steep hiking required. The favored time in this area is fall with migrating Vaux Swifts often joining resident White-throated Swifts. With the right timing, this might be the best spot in the East Bay for hawk migration, with outings always hoping for a rare Broad-winged Hawk.

Overall, Miller-Knox delivers a great breadth of scenery and a broad range of bird species to see.

For information on accessibility at Miller-Knox, visit https://accessca.org/access-california/explore/explore-detail-view/?site_id=188.

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 Summer 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: ANALICIA HAWKINS

For this issue we interviewed BFE Fellowship Mentor Analicia Hawkins.

What impact did the fellowship have on your personal and professional life?

I started birding in 2018. When I applied for the fellowship and got involved with GGBA I had been searching and yearning for a space that involved more people who look like me or were in my community. Finding BFE and cultivating these relationships helped me build confidence in my leadership abilities enough to found my own birding group (QTPOC Birders). A year is a good amount of time to get to know the people you're in community with, learning with, and growing with, and those relationships have lasted to this day. Two of the people I was in the cohort with are now my co-leaders for QTPOC Birders.

Why is there such a demand for spaces like QTPOC Birders or the BFE cohort?

I've heard from a lot of people that they're not used to being able to fully be their authentic selves in the outdoors. That has been my experience as well. Also, we're in a time when the empire we live in is egregiously affecting people's lives in every way, so people are looking for a sense of community.

How do you see your role as the Birding for Everyone Fellowship Mentor?

I see my role as a guide, helping fellows have the most fulfilling and enriching year possible within the cohort. This program contributed a lot to my life and I want more people to have that same opportunity. I want people to feel the tangible support to pursue things they're passionate about, things that they can bring back to their own communities.

What is the role of the BFE program within the larger Bay Area environmental conservation community?



Analicia Hawkins.

One of the benefits of the program is just allowing people to feel like their ideas or desires for opportunities aren't isolated. I think about the Spanish language trips that have grown and been happening over the past couple years. It's really powerful for people to be like "Hey, I really want to start leading Spanish language walks for people in this community" and just to be able to make it happen. The longer this program goes on the more powerful it is to make room for these potential connections and allow folks to see their ideas come to fruition.

Who inspires you to do this work?

So there are a couple people who were pretty prominent on bird twitter in 2018-2019. Corinna Newsome, their handle is HoodNaturalist. Tykee James. Folks that were involved in Black Birders Week. It was cool to watch them carving a path for people to be in these outdoor spaces and in significant leadership positions. Rachel (Katz) was a great part of my experience to feel tangible support. Also folks from my cohort who continue to do really cool things and inspire me.

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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.

The Gull is published four times per year. Special third-class postage paid in Oakland, CA. Send address changes to the office promptly. The post office does not forward *The Gull*.

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Berkeley, CA 94704
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This issue of *The Gull* was published Jan. 2026.

SPEAKER SERIES

Join California Coastal Conservancy's SF Bay Area Project Manager Marilyn Latta on Thursday, January 22 at 7pm online via Zoom as she talks about nature-based solutions in the midst of climate change. Please visit us online for more Speaker Series dates and information at goldengatebirdalliance.org/education/speaker-series.

www.goldengatebirdalliance.org

 The Gull is printed with soy-based inks on chlorine-free paper, 30% postconsumer waste content.

Calling all bird advocates!

Looking to volunteer in the New Year? Is your resolution restoration, writing, or record keeping? We've got plenty of opportunities for you to support our mission, whether in office or in nature. Volunteers make our work to protect birds in the Bay Area possible. Reach out to our Volunteer Manager jcarpinelli@goldengatebirds.org or visit goldengatebirdalliance.org/volunteer.



BACKYARD BIRDER



David Asmann

Anna's Hummingbird.

ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD

BY LAURIE SAMPLE

The first time I experienced a real Bay Area storm, I spent the whole evening fretting about the two Anna's Hummingbird fledglings in the maple tree outside my San Jose apartment.

Their mother had built their delicate spider-silk-and-lichen nest in early January. The maple stood alone in a brick-lined courtyard, which made up for a lack of flowers with another crucial resource: the two hummingbird feeders dangling from a neighbor's balcony.

Feeders have been a major element in the Anna's Hummingbird's breeding success story, fuelling their two percent annual population increase since the 1950s to around 9.6 million individuals today. Even the bills of Anna's hummers have evolved to drink better from feeders, having become on average longer and more sharply tapered.

By mid-February the two chicks had fledged. The adult Anna's Hummingbird is possibly the world's fastest bird relative to its size, able to dive at up to 50 mph, but these fledglings were more bumblebee than speed demon. They maneuvered clumsily around the maple tree in search of insects, which Anna's eat more of than any other North American hummingbird, snatching them from bark crevices, leaves, riverbanks and even out of mid-air.

At sunset, after a hard day of Hoovering up bugs and sugar water, the fledglings tended to fall asleep wherever they happened to be sitting when the sky went dark. On the night the storm rolled in, this happened to be a high, exposed branch. Luckily, Anna's Hummingbirds are well-adapted to winter weather. They've pushed into colder, more northerly ranges than any other hummingbird, able to live year-round as far north as Alaska. Their varied diet lets them increase their body mass by 16 percent daily, which they then burn off for warmth at night. They can survive even subfreezing temperatures by entering torpor, a state in which their heartbeats slow from their usual 420 beats per minute to 50, and their body temperature drops to as low as 48°F.

Morning found the chicks sitting right where I'd last seen them. Looking just a little bedraggled, they shook themselves awake, waited for their hearts to come back up to speed, then zoomed off to the nearest feeder.