

THE GULL

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

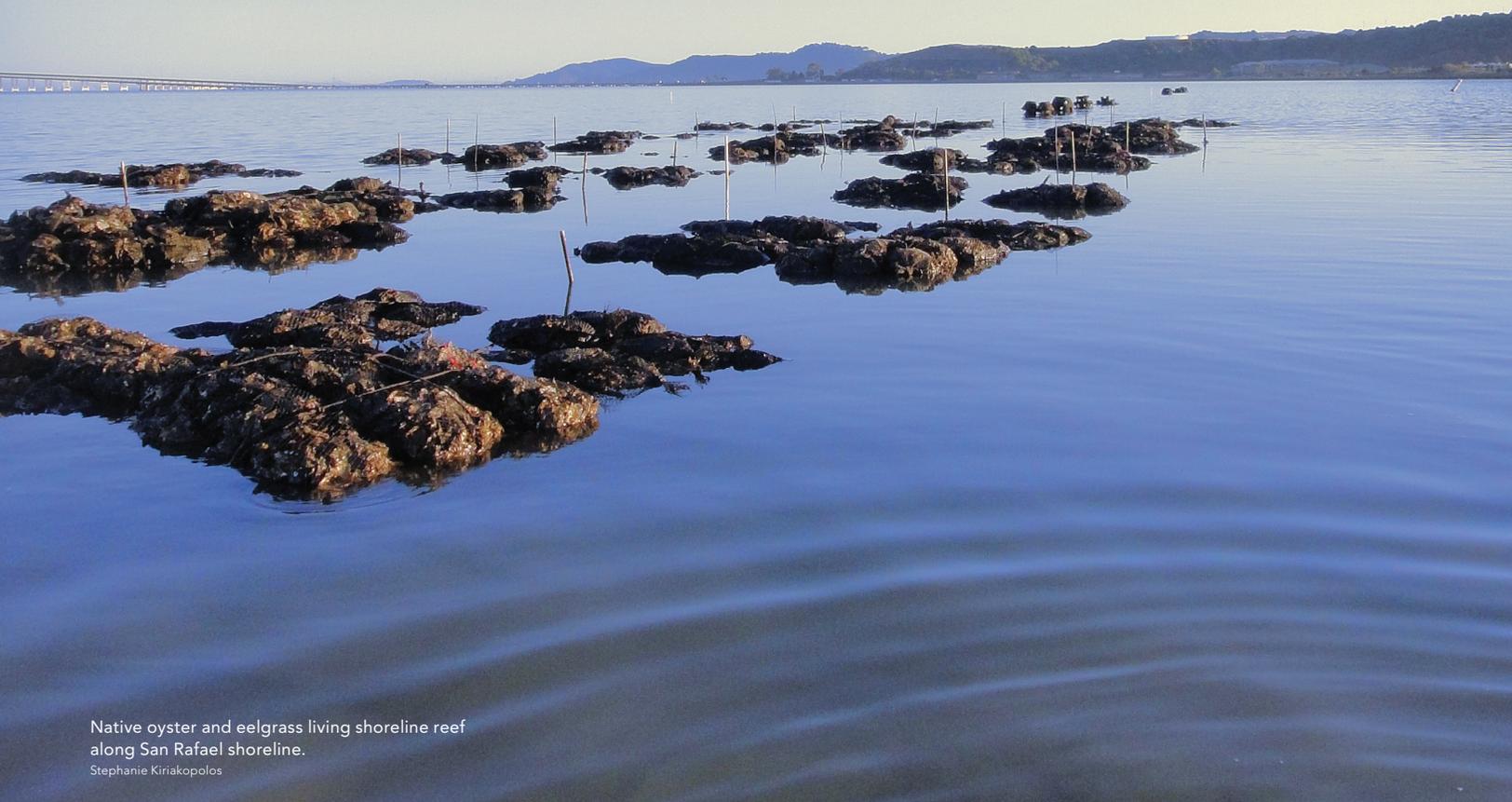


THE FUTURE OF COASTAL PROTECTION IS NATURE-BASED

BY CASSANDRA TELENKO

Flooding, storms, and sea-level rise are increasingly damaging communities and tidal habitats in the San Francisco Bay. Fortunately, we can protect our shorelines while restoring native ecosystems at the same time. Through the Regionally Advancing Living Shorelines (RALS) project, Golden Gate Bird Alliance (GGBA) and others are creating the body of knowledge from which future shorelines will be built.

CONTINUED on page 3



Native oyster and eelgrass living shoreline reef along San Rafael shoreline.
Stephanie Kiriakopoulos



Allen Hirsch

Willet in storm surf.

LIVING SHORELINES: A PROMISE WE CAN KEEP

BY GLENN PHILLIPS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Last February, during one of the highest tides of the year, I stood on the edge of Arrowhead Marsh, watching a Willet pick its way along the last tiny strip of dry land left after the marsh had completely submerged. Hundreds of godwits, stilts, and other shorebirds loafed on the closed pier, bills tucked into their feathers, safe from the rising tide below them. It was a quiet moment, just a bunch of birds doing what they have done for millions of years along this estuary.

A recent study reported that not only has North America lost nearly three billion birds since 1970, but also that those losses are accelerating. Habitat loss remains the single greatest driver. Here in the Bay Area, we see that reality up close. According to

the State of the Birds: San Francisco Bay report, many of our shoreline-dependent species are vulnerable, especially as climate change accelerates sea-level rise and intensifies storms. The edges of the Bay, the places where land and water meet, are under pressure as never before.

This is why living shorelines matter. For birds, these projects are lifelines.

Unlike hardened seawalls, living shorelines use nature-based solutions—restored tidal marsh, native oyster reefs, eelgrass beds, gently sloping beaches—to buffer storm surges while providing habitat for birds, fish, and countless other species. They slow waves, capture sediment, and create the shallow-water and marsh transition zones that shorebirds, herons, rails, and

waterfowl depend upon.

As sea levels rise, tidal marshes drown if they have nowhere to migrate. Living shoreline projects are designed with that future in mind, allowing marshes to move inland and maintain the dynamic mosaic of mudflat, marsh, and transitional uplands that support biodiversity. When we restore a marsh edge or remove an old shoreline barrier, we are not just stabilizing sediment—we are securing foraging grounds for Black-necked Stilts, high-tide refuge for Ridgway's Rails, and nesting sites for endangered Least Terns.

This work is deeply connected to our conservation efforts across the Bay. The preservation of the former Alameda Naval Air Station offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to protect and enhance shoreline and upland habitats in a rapidly developing region. Similarly, the future of Point Molate, recently acquired by the East Bay Regional Park District, holds tremendous promise: a chance to safeguard open space, restore habitat, and create a climate-resilient shoreline that benefits birds and people alike.

Living shorelines also remind us that conservation is not about holding nature in place. It is about working with natural processes—accommodating change rather than resisting it at all costs. In a time of accelerating climate impacts, this shift in thinking is essential.

If we invest in living shorelines—and protect places like Alameda and Point Molate—we can give birds what they need to persist through the changes ahead.

In doing so, we protect something vital in ourselves as well: the simple, steady miracle of a Willet at the water's edge.

NEWS BRIEFS

New Staff: Samina Jain

We are so excited to introduce Samina Jain, our newest Environmental Educator for EcoEd. Samina is currently pursuing a Certificate in Conservation and Resource Management at Merritt College and she's excited to share the awe and wonder of the natural world with students in the Bay Area.

BFE received the Tahoe For All Grant

For the past two years we've included a "Birds of the Sierras" trip for the Birding For Everyone Fellowship cohort in the summer. This year we received a grant to take the next three BFE cohorts to the Tahoe Basin for a weekend of birding and community building. Learn more about our BFE program at goldengatebirdalliance.org/fellowship.

Searching for New Board Members

Looking to get more involved in Bay Area bird conservation work? We're currently looking for candidates to join our Board. This is a great opportunity to help steer the organization toward its mission. If you're interested, reach out to Nominating Committee Chair Rachel Lawrence at rlawrence@goldengatebirds.org.

COASTAL PROTECTION from page 1

Unlike traditional concrete seawalls and levees that have no living elements, living shorelines use natural coastal habitat like mudflats, oyster reefs, and aquatic vegetation for coastal hazard management. This modern, bio-inspired approach enhances and restores vital ecosystems. The result is a shoreline that breaks waves and provides habitat and food for invertebrates and the birds that eat them.

Over the past decade of restoration, birds like Brant, which graze on eelgrass, have reappeared in the bay. United States Geological Survey (USGS) researchers, who monitor living shoreline pilot projects in San Rafael and Hayward, recorded Black Oystercatchers feeding in one oyster reef and double the number of overall shorebirds in the mudflats. This site-specific increase differs from the overall decline of shorebirds in the bay. Shorebird populations have significantly decreased since 2006, according to the current SF Bay State of the Birds report.

“We really want to [construct] more of these projects and faster... to transfer the knowledge between different land owners and each project more seamlessly,” said Marilyn Latta of the California State Coastal Conservancy, which co-leads RALS with the San Francisco Estuary Institute (SFEI). “We are utilizing all of the data and the lessons learned from [the] pilot projects to help inform design and constructability guidance. That type of guidance just doesn’t exist from the ecological side or the engineering,” Latta explained.

The next phase of RALS will develop that regional guidance and accelerate construction through a collaborative design and permitting process for 10 sites around the bay. GGBA leads the San Francisco sites with the Port of San Francisco at Pier 94, Pier 70, and the future seawall at Rincon Park. Marin Audubon Society leads the Corte Madera, San Rafael, and Ocean Science Center sites. The East Bay sites are Cogswell Marsh, Emeryville Crescent, North Basin, and Point Isabel, led by Ducks Unlimited. Initial designs are anticipated by the end of 2026.



Brant munching on eelgrass in the Bay.

Phil Chen

Over the past decade of restoration, birds like Brant, which graze on eelgrass, have reappeared in the bay.

The Conservancy selected the sites for their high potential to achieve long-term goals such as the regeneration of native eelgrass and Olympia oyster.

“We want to ensure that we keep this mosaic of habitats that has good mudflat habitat, good subtidal habitat, good vegetated wetland habitat,” said Susan De La Cruz of USGS, who has monitored birds and food webs at RALS sites. “That’s really key for supporting a variety of bird species and something we don’t want to lose in the San Francisco Bay.”

According to GGBA’s Director of Conservation Whitney Grover, these projects also have the ability to inspire in the same way that urban sites like Seattle’s new waterfront seawall does by allowing visitors to see kelp and spawning salmon through glass blocks.

“There is the human element [of living shorelines] that is teaching people... connecting people to nature and the envi-

ronment,” said Grover.

Jeremy Lowe of SFEI stressed, however, that no single site can show the full “rainbow” of opportunities. Each site in the bay has its own story. Readers can visit Heron’s Head, Jean and John Starkweather Shoreline Park, and Giant Marsh at Point Pinole for current examples of living shoreline resiliency projects in progress.

The RALS collaborative meetings are open for anyone interested to learn and share, especially land owners and others who can help expand living shorelines. Visit <https://www.sfestuary.org/transforming-shorelines-collaborative> to sign up for updates.

Thanks to Susan De La Cruz, Whitney Grover, Marilyn Latta, Jeremy Lowe, Barbara Salzman, and Renee Spenst and USGS, GGBA, California State Coastal Conservancy, SFEI, Marin Audubon Society, and Ducks Unlimited for their work on RALS and interviews for this article.

BRINGING NATIVE OYSTERS BACK TO THE BAY

BY MAURA HURLEY

Native Olympia oysters were once abundant in San Francisco Bay, forming extensive reefs that played a significant role in the Bay's health. Today oyster reefs, made up of large groups of many individual oysters, are at one percent of historic levels, victims of overharvesting, pollution and habitat loss.

The loss of the reefs means that the vital work they do to filter and clean water, buffer and protect shorelines from storms and erosion, and provide food for people, birds and marine life, has also drastically declined.

Efforts are now underway to restore native oyster populations to address climate threats.

Restoration efforts typically involve creating artificial reef structures made of cement and crushed oyster shells. These hard structures, which oysters need to attach to and grow, are then deployed offshore for oyster larvae to settle on. Together with native eelgrass and marsh grasses, these reefs form part of a living shoreline that protects coasts and estuaries from erosion and rising sea levels.

One of the organizations involved in restoration efforts in the Bay is the Wild Oyster Project (WPO). In 2024, the WPO, working alongside the Port of San Francisco, constructed an artificial reef on the northside of Heron's Head Park in San Francisco. In addition, groups of volunteers collected used oyster shells from Bay Area restaurants to supply the reefs with important components.

"In year two of this 10-year monitoring



Oyster reef balls installed along San Rafael Shoreline.

Stephanie Kinakopoulos

study, an oyster-density of about 1,000 oysters per square meter has been found," said Giulio Salerno, the Wild Oyster Project's Executive Director. "This exceeded expectations and makes it a very successful project."

Another Bay Area nonprofit, the Watershed Project deployed 100 community-built reef balls at Point Pinole in 2013 through its Wild Shorelines program. The reef structures were made by volunteers using concrete, bay sand, and crushed oyster shells. Volunteers now monitor the reefs twice a year to collect data on the number of oysters that the reefs have attracted.

In a separate project, the San Francisco Bay Living Shorelines project, a program of the California State Coastal Conservancy and its partners, installed 350 reef structures along with eelgrass plantings at the giant marsh at Point Pinole and 200 structures at Point San Pablo.

On the Embarcadero in San Francisco, a pilot Living Seawall project has been under-

way to test how traditional urban seawalls can be modified to support native marine life as opposed to invasive species that occur with concrete walls. Leading the effort is the Port of San Francisco and the Smithsonian Institute's Environmental Research Center.

The project, which began in 2022, attached specially fabricated tiles to the smooth surface of the Embarcadero seawall. The tiles were designed to attract and support marine organisms, such as oysters, seaweed, and crabs, through a mix of different textures and materials.

Most recent monitoring results show the textured surfaces attracting native marine life, including oysters.

For Port of San Francisco Executive Director Elaine Forbes, these projects are critical for protecting our built infrastructure and bay ecosystems.

In Forbes words, "What we learn here will shape the rebuilding of the waterfront to achieve a resilient shoreline."

UPCOMING EVENTS

The Bay Birding Challenge Saturday, April 25

Our single-day team birding competition and fundraiser has returned! Gather 3-10 birding buds, create a team page to raise donations through peer-to-peer fundraising via PledgeIt, and prepare for a fun day exploring the Bay! Learn more at the following link: <https://charity.pledgeit.org/baybirdingchallenge>.

Flight Patterns Art Exhibit Now - April 24

There's a beautiful art exhibit down in Alameda at the Rhythmix Cultural Works titled "Flight Patterns" that's all about birds. Curated by GGBA member, artist, and birder Deborah Crooks, Flight Patterns showcases photography, drawing, painting, ceramic, print and mixed media from several local artists.

Together Bay Area Conference May 12-15

Are you working towards climate resilience and equity in the Bay Area? Our friends at Together Bay Area are hosting their annual conference in San Francisco, bringing together the "who's who" of environmental nonprofits and agencies for talks, field trips, and other exciting programming. Learn more at <https://togetherbayarea.org>.



View from Berkeley North Basin, courtesy Ryan Nakano.

BERKELEY NORTH BASIN

BY TINA SZPICEK

LOCATION

599-100 Virginia St
Ext, Berkeley, CA
94720

At dawn or dusk, you might spot Burrowing Owls.

The first place I truly felt at home since moving from the East Coast in 2023 was the Berkeley North Basin. This mess of an ecosystem reminds me of the Marine Park salt marsh I grew up near in Brooklyn.

Two to three thousand years ago, 190,000 acres of bay tidal marshes formed in this area—the largest concentration of salt marsh on the West Coast at the time. Shellmounds—layers of ancestors and shells—and the land were stewarded by the East Bay Ohlone, Bay Miwok, and Northern Valley Yokut peoples.

When Spanish settlers arrived in the 1770s, they brought hundreds of invasive species and disturbed thousands of years of ecological management. Water canons blasted rivers and hillsides, flooding the land as new arrivals sought gold in the 1800s. The land eroded in response. Land was diked, drained, and filled with trash.

In 1999, only 16,000 acres of marsh survived—over 90% of shoreline wetlands were gone. Twenty-four thousand acres of new marsh grew from this destruction, and one of these new arrivals was the North Basin Strip.

This land formed by filling the Bay for railway infrastructure. In the 20s and 50s, five to ten feet of silty sand, gravel, and clay was added atop the infill garbage. Remediative action to remake safer soil didn't happen until after 1980.

The history of this place peaks through the 2,800 feet

of shoreline today. Refuse dots the dirt—pieces of the past that keep resurfacing in an unbroken cycle. But a cycle of life can be found here too. The shoreline supports Chinook Salmon, Sturgeon, and Pacific Staghorn Sculpin, feeding birds like pelicans, cormorants, and herons.

At dawn or dusk, you might spot overwintering Burrowing Owls along Cesar Chavez park shoreline. Walking through coyote brush you can see a hummingbird's nest. In the adjacent restored Berkeley Meadow, Great Egrets wade. Nearby, other life flies by. People play at Tom Bates Field complex. Children bike near Point Isabel. Adventurous wind surfers ride the edges of the shore. So many of us are finding a place to rest here.

Like these fleeting moments of joy, the wetland habitat is fast disappearing. A sign posted in the area notes erosion and long-term risks from sea-level rise. The North Basin Shoreline Park Improvement Project predicts five feet by 2100.

Yet construction begins again along the North Basin Strip, this time intended to restore. With community input, plans are being made to not only replace invasive harding grass with native wild rye, but also to plant rockweeds, barnacles, eelgrass, and oysters. The future being planned, this time, is one where this habitat remains a home.

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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ALL ABOUT ADVOCATES: DEVYANI JAIN

BY RYAN NAKANO

For this issue we interviewed Deputy Manager for the SF Port's Waterfront Resilience Program, Devyani Jain.

ID: I'm an environmental professional advancing equitable climate resilience along the San Francisco Bay Waterfront.

Habitat: I find joy in walking along the waterfront.

Food: My favorite place in the Bay might be Hog Island Oyster Company in the Ferry Building. They seem very responsible in the way they harvest oysters. Also I get to view the waterfront and look at our project sites all while enjoying the bounty of the Bay Area.

Nesting: I live in Berkeley. I think Berkeley hits a sweet spot as an urban place that allows you to enjoy the outdoors.

Behavior: I love reading, art, visiting museums, travelling, yoga, hiking, and walking.

Cool Fact: So I used to do lost-wax casting during my sculpture days, which is about heating up metal and pouring bronze into molds. I would love to do that again.

Range/Migration: I was born in Kolkata, India, in the bay of West Bengal. I actually have a connection to ports as my dad was a chief engineer for merchant vessels at the Shipping Corporation of India. Because of his work, I sailed to places like former Yugoslavia, North Africa, Eastern Europe, Malaysia, Singapore, on large merchant ships until I was five. Then school started and I was onshore in Mumbai from five to ten. I lived in Delhi from 10 to 18. After that, I went to architecture school in Ahmedabad, Gujarat for five years where I got my architectural degree. I worked there for a year before going to Berkeley to do my Masters



Devyani Jain.

in City and Regional Planning. Since then I've been here with my husband in Berkeley.

Conservation: For the Regionally Advancing Living Shorelines Project (RALS), I'm working as a CEQA specialist, doing environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). I'm also working on the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), to see how the project or its alternatives being studied might affect existing conditions of the environment and how the project will change baseline conditions for various topics including: tribal cultural resources, geology, hazardous materials, biological resources, energy, environmental justice, and so on.

Challenges: We have this San Francisco Waterfront Flood Study with wonderful federal partners, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the study is nearing completion. We hope to get to the milestone of a chief's report for this study so we can release it to the public and start the work of building on the recommended plan.

Find: You can find me at Devyani.Jain@sport.com.

SPEAKER SERIES

Join us on Thursday, April 16 on Zoom to hear local Ridgway's Rail Monitoring Manager Jen McBroom at Olofson Environmental Inc. share how this elusive and endangered species is doing in the Bay Area. Please visit us online for more Speaker Series dates and information at goldengatebirdalliance.org/education/speaker-series.

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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

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Calling all bird advocates!

We love cats, and we love responsible cat ownership even more! These cute and cuddly creatures are best when spayed/neutered, and kept indoors, on a leash, or contained in your at-home catio! After all, our feline companions are introduced, invasive predators and the second leading cause of human-related bird deaths. Of course, it's not their fault, it's our responsibility. Let's keep birds safe by keeping our cats at bay.

BACKYARD BIRDER



Subha Joshi

Black Oystercatcher.

SPECIES IN SIGHT: BLACK OYSTERCATCHER

BY SUBHA JOSHI

The size of a crow, but absolutely not a crow. That's the first thing you learn when a Black Oystercatcher lets out its sharp, ringing *wheep!* and flashes that unmistakable orange-red bill. Few birds announce themselves with such confidence.

This stocky, all-black shorebird with a long, blade-like bill, pinkish legs, and bright yellow eyes, is loud, conspicuous, and fiercely territorial. Its sharp calls echo across rocky shorelines, especially when pairs perform synchronized boundary walks to defend their turf. I have spent early mornings and evenings photographing them

along the Northern California coast, watching them navigate slippery rocks with surprising agility. Their bold silhouettes against the surf make them irresistible subjects—always alert, always expressive.

While they're present year-round, low tide offers the best viewing as they forage on exposed rocks and reefs in places like Point Reyes National Seashore, Bodega Bay, The Marin Headlands and parts of the San Mateo and Sonoma coasts. These birds thrive on rocky, wave-battered shorelines, where tidepools, mussel beds, and barnacle clusters provide abundant food. They pry open mussels, stab into gaping clams, and hammer loose shellfish against rocks. But this specialized feeding makes them vulnerable; a mussel clamping down on their bill can trap them as the tide rises.

While their range stretches from the Aleutian Islands of Alaska to Baja California, their suitable habitat is surprisingly narrow; just the band between high and low tide. With only 12,000-17,000 individuals globally, they are considered a species of conservation concern. In the Bay Area, habitat loss from erosion, sea-level rise, and degraded oyster reefs has reduced nesting and foraging areas.

These oyster reefs play a crucial role. They support dense communities of mussels, limpets, and crabs—prime oystercatcher food. They help stabilize shorelines, protecting nesting sites. And they create shell rakes—natural piles of old shells used by oystercatchers and other shorebirds for nesting. *Healthy reefs mean healthy birds.*

Along the Pacific shoreline, the Black Oystercatcher is both sentinel and storyteller, its presence a reminder of how tightly life is woven into the tides. This striking shorebird depends on healthy intertidal habitats, and in turn, reveals the health of the coastline itself. As oyster reefs decline and sea levels rise, the oystercatcher's future becomes a window into the challenges facing coastal ecosystems.