

THE GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE BIRD ALLIANCE // VOL. 110 NO. 2 SUMMER 2026



STRAY: HOW INTRODUCED PREDATORS BECOME OUR PURRRFECT COMPANIONS

BY RYAN NAKANO

Last July, Tiffany Ashbaker walked along the Hayward Shoreline past endangered Western Snowy Plover habitat, laid a trap, and waited. Two weeks passed with failed attempts. Each time food was set in the trap—ants. Undeterred, Tiffany asked to borrow a camping cot from a friend so she could stay overnight near the salt ponds.

CONTINUED on page 3





Claude Lynels

Red-shouldered Hawk at Jewel Lake.

WILD PREDATORS AMONG US

BY GLENN PHILLIPS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Not long ago I observed a Red-shouldered Hawk perched on my neighbor's redwood tree. Moments later, a mob of crows, dive-bombing and squawking angrily, drove the hawk away. It was a brief, dramatic reminder that even in our urban landscapes the ancient rhythms of predator and prey are always around us.

Predators can stir up complicated feelings. It's easy to root for the small bird at the feeder or the threatened species we're working to protect. But predators such as hawks,

owls, and even crows and jays are essential threads in the fabric of healthy ecosystems, helping to regulate populations and shape behavior in ways we are only beginning to fully understand.

At the same time, not all predation plays out on even ground. In today's world, ecosystems are deeply influenced by human choices. Some predators, like raptors, are returning after decades of decline and are reclaiming their role in the landscape—a powerful reminder of what recovery can

look like when we protect habitat and reduce harm. Others, like rapidly growing crow populations, are thriving in human-altered environments, sometimes creating new pressures for vulnerable species like Snowy Plovers along Ocean Beach.

And then there are impacts we've introduced more directly. Free-ranging and feral cats, beloved companions to many, can also pose significant challenges for native wildlife. This is not a story of blame but of responsibility. The systems we've shaped call for thoughtful, humane, and science-based solutions, ones that reflect both our care for animals and our commitment to protecting wild birds.

Amid these complexities there are also stories of hope. Efforts to reintroduce California Quail in San Francisco remind us that we can restore what has been lost, rebuilding connections between species and place. For years the presence of feral and free-ranging cats along with other subsidized mid-sized predators (such as skunks and raccoons) in our parks have made reintroduction impossible. With the return of coyotes, these "mesopredator" populations have been balanced, giving birds like Quail a chance.

Living alongside wild predators invites us to see the world more clearly: not as separate from us, but as something we are part of. The choices we make shape these relationships every day: how we care for our pets, how we steward habitats, and how we support conservation.

Wherever you are, I hope you take a moment to notice these dynamics at work. They are closer than we think, and they remind us that a healthy, vibrant world depends on all of us playing our part.

NEWS BRIEFS

Board Update

Welcome to our newest member of the Board, lawyer and Master Birder Alumnus Rory Reid. We'd also like to acknowledge the transition of our former Board President Chris Tarr to our new President Mary Wand as well as thank Chris Okon and Blake Edgar for their time on our board.

BFE Fellowship Application Opens

Our Birding For Everyone Fellowship application will open Wednesday, September 16th. This opportunity provides 10 individuals from underrepresented communities with a cohort experience, a free year's worth of GGBA classes, and membership. Visit goldengatebirdalliance.org/fellowship to learn more.

Seeking Volunteers for Berkeley Bird Festival 2026

Our annual Berkeley Bird Festival returns on Sunday, October 18th with a new theme of Myth and Memory. This free public event invites participants to learn, celebrate, and honor birds in the Bay Area. Interested in volunteering for the festival? Email us at rnakano@goldengatebirds.org.

PURRRFECT COMPANIONS from page 1

Instead, her friend suggested an elevated dog bed, not for sleeping on, but for dodging the ants. It worked. She set the trap on the bed, covered the bed's legs in soap, came back the next morning, and there, sitting in the trap, was the cutest introduced predator in the entire park—Marshall.

"I screamed so loud when I was on that trail. I was so happy" Ashbaker recalled. "I held him for three weeks in my home to help him recover from being out there. We didn't lose any of the Plovers, and the cat is now in an amazing working cat home in Orinda."

Back in 2021, the East Bay Regional Parks District (EBRPD) updated its Free Roaming Cat Management Policy in response to community backlash over the lethal removal of cats in the parks by EBRPD staff.

Since then, the district has been working with local animal shelters to trap and rehome cats, largely facilitated and organized by Ashbaker in her role as a Community Cat Coordinator with Oakland Animal Services.

According to EBRPD Wildlife Biologist Natalie Reeder, around 50 cats a year are trapped on EBRPD property, fixed, and evaluated for placement into normal pet adoption or working cat programs.

"It's been going really well. We've been getting in touch with people feeding cats in the parks and bringing them into the program as well," Reeder said. "We let them know we no longer kill the cats we capture, and, as a result, they've been assisting us in trapping and notifying us when new cats show up."

Over the past few years, Reeder and Ashbaker have responded to free-roaming cat sightings at parks like Martin Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline and Big Break Regional Shoreline, prioritizing areas with highly sensitive and vulnerable bird populations like the endangered Western Snowy Plover and Ridgeways Rail.

According to the American Bird Conservancy, outdoor cats kill roughly 2.4 billion birds every year in the U.S., making them the largest human-caused anthropogenic threat to birds in the country.

As introduced predators with a much



Marshall (top) exploring the catio in his new home in Orinda, CA.

Tiffany Ashbaker

Around 50 cats a year are trapped on EBRPD property, fixed, and evaluated at the nearest shelter for placement into normal pet adoption or working cat programs.

larger population density than wild cats like bobcats and mountain lions, domesticated free-roaming cats have historically destabilized wildlife populations, contributing to the extinction of over 60 other animal species globally according to a 2016 study from the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

In working cat programs, like the one Marshall is in, feral cats are paired with people seeking rodent control. After acclimating to their new space, many "working cats" are then released into their immediate environment outdoors.

For Reeder, these programs, while not perfect, are a necessary step toward reducing their impact on sensitive ecosystems.

"None of these working cats are placed within a half a mile of park land, and all of them are fixed, vaccinated, and under some kind of care," Reed explained.

Still, questions remain: will removed cats return to shoreline habitat? Why are they ending up there in the first place? And what factors drive free roaming cat behavior?

Last year, a study published in the *Journal of Urban Ecology* began to answer the latter. Setting up 26 motion-triggered cameras across ten regional shoreline parks in the East Bay for 250 days, UC Berkeley

PhD student and wildlife ecologist Tyus D. Williams observed that the closer housing was to a shoreline park, the more likely cats would be detected at the park.

Additionally, Williams found that the closer regional parks were to residential housing and greater vegetation cover, the more likely cats were to select nocturnal and twilight periods to be active in parks.

"We think cats are going back and forth between neighborhoods and natural areas during night and twilight to access and maximize food subsidies of both natural origin and anthropogenic supplementation," Williams explains. "It makes sense for the cat. It's like 'Cool, I'm going to hunt without being disturbed in these natural areas at night and then go back to the neighborhood for food, water, and shelter from predation of other crepuscular mammals like coyotes.'"

While the problem of free-roaming cats in sensitive ecosystems is complex, the efforts by EBRPD, local animal shelters, and individuals remind us that these cute introduced predators are our collective responsibility, and if "curiosity killed the cat", it might be our own curiosity, compassion, and creativity that saves them and the wildlife they threaten.

THE STATE BIRD RETURNS TO SAN FRANCISCO

BY PRABHA RAMAKRISHNAN

Visitors to the Presidio might soon encounter an unfamiliar but exceedingly Californian sight: coveys of quails. That is, if a reintroduction project led by The Presidio Trust and San Francisco Estuary Institute succeeds.

Once numbering in the thousands, the state bird of California has not been seen in San Francisco's urban parks since 2017, when the last male quail was heard calling for a mate. Habitat destruction, lack of connectivity between parks, and predation by feral cats have contributed to quail extirpation.

To reintroduce the ground-dwelling bird to our city, the project's researchers are counting on an unlikely hero: the coyote.

Eliminating coyotes from North American ecosystems has reduced populations of Scaled Quail, Northern Bobwhites, and similar ground-dwelling birds. In an effect termed "mesopredator release," the removal of apex predators such as coyotes results in a rapid increase in populations of small mammals—raccoons, skunks, feral cats—and a decline in the diversity and populations of animals lower in the food chain, like birds. A 2021 study by Kelly Iknayan in the *Journal of Applied Ecology* found that in urban parks, where the main predators for California Quail are free-ranging cats, the presence of coyotes is correlated with 73 percent higher odds of co-occupancy by quail.

The same study also found that three conditions were necessary to re-establish



California Quail.

quail in urban parks—large areas, coyote presence, and connectivity between green spaces. Because of the newly constructed Tunnel Tops Park corridor connecting the Presidio to Crissy Field Marsh, a dramatic reduction in outdoor cats following the removal of feeding stations, and the establishment of a resident coyote pair, the present seems promising for reintroduction.

In a small pilot scheduled for the fall, 50 wild-reared quail from Point Reyes will be introduced to two sites over the course of the year, and monitored closely using banded collars and GPS/Bluetooth trackers.

"Our objective with this initial study is to make sure we can collect the data that will inform whether we should attempt a larger-scale reintroduction. We want to understand how well the North Bay quail are adapting to the Presidio, and whether we can assess the factors contributing to



David Smith

their survival," said Phoebe Parker-Shames, a project co-lead and wildlife ecologist at the Presidio Trust.

California Quail populations have a 60 percent annual turnover rate in the wild and individuals typically lay 10-15 eggs over a breeding season. To maintain genetic diversity, a handful of quail will be reintroduced every five to ten years. Over time, the researchers hope the quail will grow to a stable population of a few hundred.

"City kids should be able to see and hear their state bird," said Dr. Parker-Shames. "Ground-dwelling birds like California Quail fill a niche for seed dispersal and soil aeration, and more broadly, our learnings will generate knowledge about how quail coexist with urbanization statewide."

If all goes well, visitors to the Presidio will start hearing the distinctive "*Chi-ca-go*" call later this year.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Coastal Cleanup Day Saturday, September 19

We'll be at Arrowhead Marsh (MLK Jr. Regional Shoreline) from 9:30am–12pm restoring prime habitat for the endangered Ridgway's Rail as a part of California Coastal Cleanup Day. Come pick up trash, plant native plants, and remove invasive species with us! Learn more at goldengatebirdalliance.org/volunteer.

Volunteer Picnic Sunday, October 4 (9am–1pm)

Are you a Golden Gate Bird Alliance volunteer? If so, you're invited to our Volunteer Appreciation Picnic. While we're still working on locking down a venue, we'll be meeting somewhere in the East Bay and offering all our volunteers some early morning birding and a sandwich lunch to celebrate your hard work!

Annual Members Meeting Thursday, August 20

Vote in our new Board Members, meet other members like yourself, and honor our Elsie Roemer and Paul Covel Conservation Award winners at our Annual Members Meeting. Make sure to stay after the meeting for a talk by former director of Golden Gate Raptor Observatory Allen Fish at the David Brower Center.



From left: Ocean Beach (Wendell Shinn), Snowy Plover signage, and a dog properly on leash (provided by Lydia Bruno).

OCEAN BEACH

BY REGAN CRISP

LOCATION

Great Highway
San Francisco

It's important to think about this space not just as a place to recreate, but as someone's home.

Ocean Beach is having a moment. The sandy, western edge of San Francisco between Seal Rock and the Fort Funston bluffs has long been a beloved destination for birders, surfers, and weekenders. When its characteristic fog recedes, the beach offers stunning views of the city, of Mount Tamalpais to the north, and the Farallon Islands on the Pacific horizon.

For nature lovers, the beach and its rolling dunes are home to a variety of wildlife, from marine mammals to shorebirds, including flocks of Sanderlings, Willets, and most famously, threatened Western Snowy Plovers.

Ocean Beach's popularity is on the rise thanks to a new adjacent city park—Sunset Dunes—established in April of 2025. With the closure of the four-lane Great Highway, the Outer Sunset's recreational space grew considerably.

In the past year almost two million visitors have flocked to the newly established beachfront promenade. As more people enjoy Ocean Beach, advocates for its protection are working overtime, including Golden Gate Bird Alliance (GGBA) Bird Curious leader Lydia Bruno.

According to Bruno, the plovers, while a popular pull for birders, can be a mystery to the average beachgoer. Plovers hide from predators by laying low and still in the

sand, preferring the dry middle beach in order to blend into their environment. While at Ocean Beach, make sure to stick to the wet sand so as not to disturb them!

"They need to have a calm, safe place where they can rest and restore their energy," says Bruno, who co-chairs GGBA's San Francisco Conservation Committee.

Off-leash dogs are another major threat to plovers. Fortunately, this problem is being tackled by B.A.R.K., a National Park Service initiative that has been adopted in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which includes Ocean Beach.

B.A.R.K. participants like Lydia speak to dog owners in these spaces, encouraging them to take the B.A.R.K. pledge. Deputized dogs (and their owners) agree to four rules: to follow leash laws (leashes are required on Ocean Beach everywhere except the area north of Stairwell 21), to bag and dispose of all poop, to respect wildlife, and know where it's safe to recreate.

"It's important to think about this space not just as a place to recreate, but as someone's home," she says.

So grab a Snowy Plover soda from nearby Andytown Coffee Roasters, don your windbreaker, and make your way to this enthralling San Francisco ecosystem. Even in heavy fog, the beach offers tranquility and a taste of a time before urban sprawl.

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

DONATIONS

Golden Gate Bird Alliance gratefully acknowledges our major donors and the generous donors, volunteers and trip leaders who contributed during our 2026 Birdathon fundraiser. We also appreciate all those who registered for trips and participated in our online auction.

Major Donors

\$10,000+

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Case by Case, Vivian Hsu

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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.

ALL ABOUT ADVOCATES: LISA OWENS VIANI

For this issue, Susan Sobeloff interviewed Lisa Owens Viani, founder of Raptors Are The Solution: R.A.T.S and author of graphic novel "R.A.T.S, the Ongoing Fight Against Wildlife Poison." This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

When did you start watching birds?

When I was in my twenties I ended up rescuing a cockatiel, and that got me obsessed. Then I started finding injured, orphaned baby birds, and I would take them to WildCare (a wildlife rehabilitation center in San Rafael). I started taking classes in ornithology at SF State, so it's been a long, long love...

What do you love about Raptors?

I love the thrill of seeing a raptor. Two Red-shouldered Hawks in my neighbor's yard are mating and doing displays right now and it's breathtaking to me. They also provide free non-toxic ecosystem benefits like helping control rodents.

What is the mission of R.A.T.S.?

Our mission is to educate the public about the dangers of rodenticides in the food web and how they affect raptors and other predatory wildlife. We use legislation and litigation to protect raptors as well.

What are the most pressing challenges to raptor populations?

Climate change and habitat destruction. Some raptors are still affected by lead. It's not totally out of our ecosystem yet in California, even though we banned it. Rodenticides are a huge, huge, huge threat, and everyday impacts from us, cars, and buildings.

What's the current issue with California Department of Pesticide Regulation?

Starting in 2020, we have been working to get legislation passed that would greatly restrict anticoagulant poisons. Right now, the State



Lisa Owens Viani.

Department of Pesticide Regulation is trying to weaken these laws. For example, [the DPR] are proposing to allow grocery stores and restaurants that have not been able to use these products for the past several years to start using them again for periods of up to a third of a year. And that's just not acceptable. A raptor doesn't care what part of the year you're putting out poison.

How can we be better raptor allies?

Habitat preservation is really important. I'm really big on this 'lights off at night' issue because some owls' vision can be impaired by bright light at night. Another way is by not using any poisons, toxins, pesticides, or insecticides because we know birds like kestrels are being really harmed. If you see a raptor in distress, Craig Nikitas from Bay Area Raptor rescue is the person to call.

Any Bay Area raptor success stories?

When I first started working on this issue I was constantly hearing about poisoned raptors in the city, specifically Barn Owls and Great Horned Owls. And now I haven't heard of any poisoning cases. It seems like the legislation and the laws that have been put in place are helping.

SPEAKER SERIES

Join us on Thursday, July 16 for a talk on free-roaming cats, their impact on birds, and solutions from a panel of experts from local adoption/shelter services to wildlife ecologists. 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.

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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This issue of *The Gull* was published June 2026.

www.goldengatebirdalliance.org

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

Calling all bird advocates!

With over a billion birds migrating over the Bay Area every year, this is your reminder to turn off any unnecessary lights at night to help keep birds safely on their migratory path. Take our pledge to let us know you're going lights out during fall bird migration! If you can't turn off all your lights, reduce skyglow by switching to sensor or timer-based lighting and downshielding lights.



SPECIES IN SIGHT



Rudy Rosa

American Crow at Coyote Hills Regional Park.

SPECIES IN SIGHT: AMERICAN CROW

BY VANESSA CABRERA

The American Crow, *Corvus brachyrhynchos*, flies outside my window to a tree down the street.

Ever since moving back to the Bay Area I feel like I see more crows. I hear their distinct “caw” which differs from the watery “ohs” of the fish crow I’d hear on the East Coast.

And indeed, there are more crows.

Data from Golden Gate Bird Alliance’s most recent Christmas

Bird Counts shows an increase in American Crows. In San Francisco, observed crow numbers doubled from the total count of 1,532 crows back in 2024 to 3,260 in 2025.

Though crows are found year-round across 48 states, winter is the best time to see them.

In the winter they can be seen roosting in large numbers for protection and for sharing information among each other. Smaller than a raven but similar in appearance with their all-black plumage, American Crows are not only highly social, but they are also highly opportunistic.

On top of eating a variety of food like seeds, nuts, fruits, berries, earthworms and mice, they’ve also been known to eat eggs and nestlings of different species. That said, they have not been found to impact overall populations of other birds via predation. American Crows will also eat carrion and garbage. I once saw a crow land on the floor in front of me and grab a sandwich wrapper. Some think this opportunistic behavior is why they’ve adapted so well to city life.

Another reason crows are thought to have flocked to cities from rural areas is that corvids, along with 32 other families of birds, were included in the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1972. This amendment to the Act protected crows from being shot at within urban environments, while allowing landowners to kill crows who predate their agricultural crops and livestock. As a part of the Corvidae family, crows are very smart and will share information with other crows about where it is safe to exist.

American Crows survive because of this evolutionary trait—their social behavior—which has shaped their habits, nesting, breeding, and feeding.