



Photos by Terray Sylvester / The Chronicle

At Point Lobos, Rob Cullison (left) and Alan Hopkins watch seabirds during the Audubon Society's charity month.

# Counting on birds

Champions depend on eyes, ears at Audubon Society's marathon

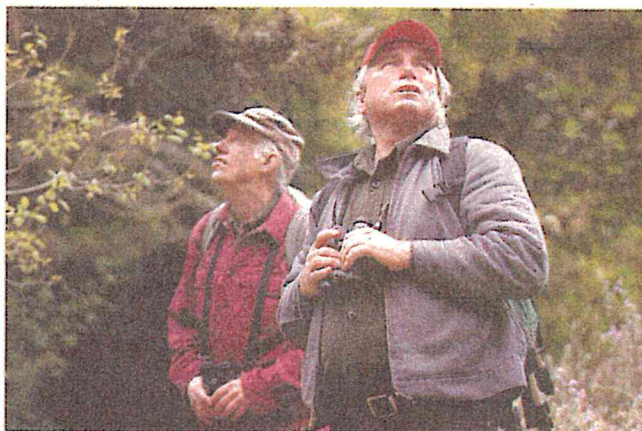
By Steve Rubenstein

A world-class birdwatcher does not really watch birds.

There's no time. Not when your job is to watch 100 different kinds of birds in San Francisco in a single day.

Every so often, the hardcore Audubon Society folks attempt to do such a thing. Right now is such a time, being the society's annual Birdathon fundraising month.

So champion birdwatcher Alan Hopkins set off at sunrise Sunday into Golden Gate Park and invited a reporter along. His mission was to walk all over San Francisco and spot 100



Cullison (left) and Hopkins try to spot a Pacific slope flycatcher in Golden Gate Park during Sunday's count.

different bird species by sunset.

"Red-shouldered hawk," Hopkins said, within moments of beginning his

quest. "Pacific wren. California towhee."

No, the birdwatcher said, he had not watched them. He had heard them. That

counts. Birdwatchers, Hopkins said, actually do not call themselves birdwatchers. They call themselves "birders," in order to stay on the up and up.

"House finch," Hopkins said. "Junco. White-crowned sparrow."

The 100-bird marathon had only been going a few minutes, and Hopkins had 15 birds. Alas, Hopkins said, it's not that easy. In the first place, a lot of the birds he was hoping to see or hear had probably already flown north for the summer. That's what birds do. They don't stay put. And the birding will get progressively harder because all the easy-to-find

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species get bagged early.

"Things will slow down," Hopkins said, and they did.

Birding is the kind of hobby that gets you up and into the park early on a Sunday morning, before things fill up with picnickers, noise and double-deck buses. At sunrise, even Stow Lake is quiet, empty and a long way from anyplace. Hopkins crossed the footbridge and climbed to the summit of Strawberry Hill Island. He had the place to himself. The early human gets to see the early bird getting the worm.

### **Confusion for newbies**

And Strawberry Hill Island was only a short way from the Big Rec ball field where, late last year, Hopkins scored his greatest coup — a rare rustic bunting. That find — known as a "mega" in the hobby — drew birders from throughout North America and made the ball field famous for something besides being the place where Joe DiMaggio was discovered.

Hopkins was not so lost in the memory of that ruby-letter day, however, to miss a black phoebe and an Anna's hummingbird.

"And a yellow-rumped warbler," Hopkins said.

After an hour, Hopkins sat down on a bench and began crossing off birds on a small list. Thirty birds down, 70 to go. The sun was beginning to show itself even if the fox sparrow that Hopkins expected to see hadn't.

Birding is a great hobby, Hopkins said, even if newbies

get confused. A ring-necked duck, Hopkins said, does not have a ringed neck. A great blue heron isn't blue. And a Canada goose is really Canadian and, knowing a good thing when it sees it, hangs out year-round in San Francisco and visits Canada not at all.

"If you're seriously into birding, you get to spend time at the dump and various sewage treatment plants," said Hopkins, who paints houses to keep himself in binoculars.

Hopkins' binoculars are not the bulky, show-off kind with

big numbers. Good optics and a wide field of vision are more important. That gives the bird some context. It is true that the humble-looking pair of Swarovski binoculars around his neck was worth \$1,500, but a lot of hobbyists spend a lot more on a knickknack and never see a California towhee through it.

Hopkins runs an honest game. He was pretty sure he had heard a California quail but pretty sure isn't good enough to count. A birder who checks off unseen or unheard

birds is an abomination to the hobby and understands nothing about birding.

"What would be the point?" Hopkins said.

As the day wore on, the rate of check marks continued to slow. Hopkins walked the length of the park, gazed at shorebirds at Ocean Beach and the Cliff House, strolled through the Presidio and finally arrived at Crissy Field in late afternoon. Ninety-one birds down; nine to go. But now they were coming every 15 minutes, if that. Hopkins said he prob-

ably wouldn't make an even 100.

It was getting late, and Hopkins was getting tired. An egret turned out to be a white pipe, and another species turned out to be a stick. Neither counted. Hopkins said he had already walked 18 miles. No Muni, no cabs, according to the official rules, which Hopkins made up himself.

At Crissy Field, several non-birders had stopped to look at a great blue heron in the lagoon. It was preening and searching about for a late lunch. Hopkins did not bother with the heron, as he had already seen one.

"No time," he said. "Sometimes birds are doing nice things, and you look at them even after you count them. Not today."

### **Achieving his goal**

After two more hours, Hopkins spotted his 99th bird, a house sparrow in a bush near the Palace of Fine Arts. That was it. The sun was down, and the birds had knocked off for the day. Hopkins was one bird short.

Then he checked his list and, miracle of miracles, the sandpiper that he had seen at Crissy Field a couple of hours earlier he had forgotten to mark off. That made an even 100.

"I can't tell you how happy I am," Hopkins said. "I know I'm carrying this thing to an absurd level, but there it is."

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