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Focus on Oakland's avian ambassadors

Group seeks to raise awareness of black-crowned night herons

Oakland residents will awake Friday to find a chalk outline on the sidewalk — no not *that* kind. This one is for the birds. Literally.

As part of a Golden Gate Audubon Society public awareness and education campaign, Oakland artists will draw chalk art of black-crowned night herons on the sidewalk outside the U.S. post office on Alice and 13th streets to commemorate the site of last spring's gut-wrenching destruction of nests holding bunches of the baby birds.

Night herons are found

CHIP JOHNSON

On the East Bay



all over the world. Cindy Margulis, director of the Golden Gate Audubon Society, calls them cultural ambassadors because they are familiar to Oak
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Above: Baby black-crowned night herons are kept warm in an incubator during treatment last year at the International Bird Rescue center in Fairfield.

Top: The Golden Gate Audubon Society wants to raise awareness about black-crowned night herons.

BAY AREA

Campaign to increase awareness of night herons

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land residents, no matter their native country.

They're nocturnal creatures that hunt the Oakland estuary and Lake Merritt by night and grace downtown Oakland sidewalks by day. They can grow to be 2 feet tall and, yes, they are capable of making a prodigious mess with their ... leavings.

It's that mess that led to another kind of mess last May that got a whole lot of people in trouble. It began when the post office hired tree trimmers to cut back a bunch of city-owned trees whose branches were hanging over into the post office parking lot.

Clearing branches

The idea was to put an end to the bird-pooing that was dirtying up their postal trucks.

Instead, they sort of put an end to some members of a protected migratory species.

Workers for Campos Tree Service rammed branches into a wood chipper as nests with baby birds fell out of the trees — and passers-by watched in horror.

Onlookers called the Oakland Police Department, and the officers who responded to the scene immediately halt-

ed the work. Eventually the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was brought in, and an investigation was done to determine whether the migratory bird treaty was violated when the bird nests were destroyed.

No one knows if any birds died, but about five baby night heron chicks were taken to International Bird Rescue that day. The volunteer rescue organization in Fairfield treated the baby birds for a variety of injuries, from scrapes and bruises to a fractured jawbone.

Tree-trimmer Ernest Pulido was never charged. He apologized and donated \$2,500 to the chicks' care and recovery and even visited the injured birds at the Fairfield wildlife hospital. They were released into the wild in June.

The chalk drawings are part of a campaign by Audubon to teach the public that another community exists in the trees above us — and it's everyone's responsibility to help nurture and protect it.

It's in the trees of downtown Oakland where the black-crowned night heron and snowy egrets nest, raise babies, and bring new life to a concrete and asphalt-surfaced world.



Photos by Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

A black-crowned night heron sits in its nest above Jackson Street near Lake Merritt in Oakland.



Droppings from black-crowned night herons dot the sidewalk outside Oakland's post office, which hired trimmers last year to reduce the mess.

The Audubon Society's effort began with brochures printed in English and Spanish distributed to professional tree-trimming companies and landscapers, educating them

about what to do when they encounter breeding birds and informing them that cutting down those trees is a violation of both state and federal laws.

"When people see an

animal in trouble, they have the impulse to help but not the knowledge," Margulis said. "The birds are helpless and that's why we're in Oakland: to get artists to come out and draw a

circle of compassion around these birds."

The campaign includes placing posters in downtown Oakland, including Chinese language posters around Chinatown, Margulis said. Walking tours for the general public and school groups are also planned.

Let's do more

Oakland has one of the largest urban bird sanctuaries in the nation, and it should expand on the Audubon Society's work and install permanent art that celebrates and recognizes the city's natural beauty and highlights the importance of protecting it.

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