

THE GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY // VOL. 104 NO. 2 SPRING 2020



MASTER BIRDER CLASS FLEDGES BIRDING LEADERS

BY ILANA DEBARE

Dawn Lemoine wrote a species profile of Ridgway's Rails. Megan Jankowski wrote a profile of White-crowned Sparrows. Cathy Bleier wrote a profile of Allen's Hummingbirds. These profiles—descriptions of a bird's behavior, life cycle, and natural history—are just one small part of the coursework undertaken by participants in the year-long Master Birder class co-sponsored by Golden Gate Audubon Society and California Academy of Sciences.

CONTINUED on page 5

California Scrub Jay.
Robert Ho





Rick Lewis

Sandhill Cranes.

OUR STRATEGY FOR A LIVABLE CLIMATE

BY PAM YOUNG, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Climate change poses the single gravest threat to wildlife and humanity. So, what to do in the face of such potential catastrophe? The GGAS Board of Directors spent the better part of 2019 tackling this very question.

You may have read on our Golden Gate Birder Blog that we officially developed a Strategic Plan to guide us forward in the coming years. A large part of this plan identifies actions for shifting toward a livable climate within our communities. Our Strategic Plan provides clear guidance on actions we can each take to restore and protect productive habitats and healthy communities.

With our new Strategic Plan in mind, our springtime Birdathon 2020 campaign offers exciting opportunities to experience the

wonder of birds in behind-the-scenes tours, special events, custom tours, and specially auctioned items. Please participate in our Birdathon and have a front-row seat to witness first-hand how our favorite beautiful Bay area birding spots automatically sequester carbon. Healthy habitats and high biodiversity are natural remedies to the deadly threats of climate-impacted ecosystems.

Our plan identifies what we do best: encourage individual and community actions that benefit the birds that we all love. And we intend to take this a step further by helping communities understand how intrinsically interlinked the health of the planet is with our personal wellbeing. Our strategic initiative for a livable climate links our mutual commitment to conservation with actions

that we can take in our own communities. The centerpiece for our education, advocacy and restoration work is embedded in our strategic initiative for a livable climate.

Our strategic initiative features a key environmental justice element for our diversity and inclusiveness program. Underserved communities often experience the negative effects of impoverished ecosystems and barren or toxic regions. Our imperative to reach out to underserved communities drives the twin goals of restoring and protecting high functioning landscapes for birds and for our own health. Our focus on a livable climate helps protect crucial resources that function as both climate sinks and valuable habitat for birds and other wildlife.

It is our responsibility to advocate for birds, people, and the planet. By increasing our youth and adult education programs, offering scholarships for those most in need to come learn with us, and encouraging new voices into our mix, we will better serve our local community. Our inclusive message increases diversity and inclusion in our staff, generates new revenue streams, and advances new technologies that build bridges to more neighborhoods.

Our Strategic Plan activates our focus on Engagement. Wonder. Action. Advocacy. Your support and commitment inspire and drive our GGAS achievements! Please, encourage those you know to visit our website and learn more about us. Stay tuned to our informative communications that promise more details and updates. Please invite underserved communities to collaborate with us! We will achieve success together on behalf of the birds and people (and our very planet!) that we all love.

NEWS BRIEF

The 2019 Oakland Christmas Bird Count

The 2019 Oakland CBC had much to celebrate! The 254 field observers and 34 yard watchers detected a record-high 186 species. Since 2014, Oakland has had more field observers than any other Christmas count in the world. Altogether, observers recorded 105,594 individual birds, some ten percent more than recent average, and sprinkled among them were a number of notable species. Among those 186 species found on count day, three were new to the count: a Tufted Puffin, Tropical Kingbird, and Hooded Oriole! For the full article on our Oakland CBC, please go to goldengateaudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2019-Oakland-CBC-Report.pdf.

The 2019 San Francisco Christmas Bird Count

This year's count was notable for a number of terrific new area leaders! Some uncommon species that seem to be becoming annuals were Tropical Kingbird, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Western Tanager and Orchard Oriole. Total birds counted were 50,572 with 191 species reported including rarities like the Northern Fulmar, Red-footed Booby, and Summer Tanager! Many thanks to the 138 observers who made this count possible, and to report compilers David Assmann, Siobhan Ruck, Dan Murphy, and Alan Hopkins! For more information, visit goldengateaudubon.org/blog-posts/rarities-and-sunshine-at-2019-sf-cbc.



Views of Lake Merced at left and bottom; Ruddy Duck, above.
Photos courtesy Angie Geiger.

LAKE MERCED: BIRDING HOTSPOT

BY ANGIE GEIGER

LOCATION

Skyline Blvd
& Harding Rd,
San Francisco

*You never
know what
you'll
encounter
here!*

Located in the southwest corner of San Francisco, Lake Merced is one of only three remaining freshwater lakes in the city. At 267 species, Lake Merced is the number two hotspot in San Francisco, according to eBird, and is home to breeding birds and is an important resting stop for many migrants.

While it is possible to see birds anywhere around Lake Merced, the three most commonly birded areas are “the concrete bridge”, Sunset Circle, and Harding Park. All are directly on the lake and offer excellent views of waterfowl, as well as lots of songbird activity surrounding the lake.

If Gull identification is one of your avocations, Lake Merced is the place to practice in the winter! Gulls of all ages are often on land or perched on the railings of the park. Most common are Western, California, Mew and Glaucous-winged, with the odd Herring and Iceland Gull sometimes in the mix. Some years, Bonaparte's Gulls have been spotted foraging on the lake in winter. There are also many species of Ducks and Grebes in among the Coots on the water. You will spot begging offspring throughout the Spring and Summer. In addition to the Waterfowl, this area is also fairly reliable for

Sora and Virginia Rail, more often heard than seen.

Summer is a great time to practice your Swallow identification skills – six Swallow species can reliably be seen over the lake. Trees often attract Warblers and other insect-gleaners and are a good place to check for rarities, such as Chestnut-sided Warbler. The park is frequented by Sparrows, such as White-crowned and Fox in Winter, and Song Sparrows all year round. Other past sightings include Northern Waterthrush, Swamp Sparrow, Tropical Kingbird and Osprey.

Just beyond the entrance of Harding Park, there is a mixed breeding colony of Double-crested Cormorants and Great Blue Herons in the Spring and early Summer. The nests fill the trees and are easily observed with binoculars. San Francisco Rec & Parks will begin an improvement project around Lake Merced in 2020. The project includes removal of hazardous trees and pruning of the remaining trees; trail surface improvements, among others. For more information on the park visit the SF Parks Alliance website: www.sfparksalliance.org/our-parks/parks/lake-merced

Keep your eyes and ears wide open—you never know what you'll encounter here!

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



Anna's Hummingbird.

GARDEN AS IF LIFE DEPENDS ON IT: HOW THE BRINGING BACK THE NATIVES GARDEN TOUR CAN HELP

KATHY KRAMER

You may have heard about the thirty percent decline in bird populations, and the insect apocalypse. Come learn how you can help reverse these trends in your own garden, and find out how the Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour can help you transform your garden into a place that provides food, shelter, and nesting areas for wildlife.

Kathy Kramer has been developing programs that educate Bay Area residents on local environmental issues for over thirty years. The programs developed under Ms. Kramer's leadership have received local, state, and national awards. Ms. Kramer currently runs the "Bringing Back the Natives Garden Tour," a Bay Area based environmental conservation program. Kathy's profound love for gardening came after she and her husband remodeled their home garden and witnessed the tangible, positive impacts of native plants on local wildlife. Her hope is to inspire people to cultivate a healthy and beautiful landscape where all life can benefit.

San Francisco: New transit-friendly venue! San Francisco State University Downtown Campus, 835 Market Street, 6th Floor (Westfield Shopping Center). Directions: cob.sfsu.edu/contact/visiting-downtown-campus.

Berkeley: Northbrae Community Church, 941 The Alameda (between Solano and Marin). Directions: Visit northbrae.org/contact--find-us.html.

LOCATION / DATE

Berkeley
Thursday, April 16
6:30 p.m. refreshments
7 p.m. program

PIER 94 RESTORATION

MIKE PERLMUTTER

Please note new San Francisco venue at S.F. State's Downtown Campus.

Since 1997 GGAS has partnered with the Port of San Francisco to enhance shoreline wildlife habitat at Pier 94. Through creative partnerships and modest funding, GGAS mobilized materials, equipment, and people to transform barren shoreline rubble and road into a viable place for native plants and wildlife. This project is a model for using clean local "waste" sediment from mining, dredging, and excavation projects for habitat enhancement rather than disposal.

Mike Perlmutter is the Environmental Stewardship Team Supervisor for the City of Oakland Public Works Environmental Services Division. Mike holds a Bachelor's of Science from Tufts University, and a Master's of Environmental Management from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. Mike has worked in San Francisco Bay Area environmental conservation since 1998.

LOCATION / DATE

San Francisco
Thursday, May 21
6:30 p.m. refreshments,
7 p.m. program



Mike Perlmutter

SAND DUNES AND SALT FLATS: A GGAS TRIP TO NAMIBIA, AFRICA

BOB LEWIS

Namibia the largest sand dunes in the world, and it hasn't rained for over 10 years in parts of the Namib Desert. The desert hosts birds and animals that have learned to survive in this arid place. We spent some time in Cape Town with GGAS friends! We'll show you many of the desert creatures we saw on our tour.

Bob trained as a chemist, but his second career is very avian. He's served on the GGAS board where he led the Adult Education Committee. He's an award-winning photographer and world traveler, and frequent public speaker on avian topics at libraries and Audubon Societies. He has co-taught Master Birding, Avian Evolution and Bay Area Birds for GGAS, and his bird life list stands at 5037.

LOCATION / DATE

Berkeley
Thursday, June 18
6:30 p.m. refreshments
7 p.m. program



Bob Lewis

MASTER BIRDER CONTINUED from page 1

2020 marks the 7th year that GGAS and Cal Academy have offered this challenging class. It's remarkable in producing not just expert birders but community leaders—people with the skills and confidence to become field trip leaders, birding instructors, conservation activists, and board members.

"It opened me up to leading bird walks, something I otherwise wouldn't have done," said Bleier, who took the class in 2016 and now leads monthly walks for GGAS at Hill-top Lake in Richmond.

"I don't think we really understood at the beginning how valuable the class would be in providing a pot full of prospective board members and volunteers," said Bob Lewis, who launched the Master Birder class in 2013 with Eddie Bartley and Jack Dumbacher.

The class grew out of discussions about how to offer birding education that went deeper than GGAS's usual six-week classes.

"Eddie was very focused on, 'We need to train more people because nobody in the Christmas Bird Count can recognize bird songs,'" Lewis recalled.

Then Jack Dumbacher—Curator of Ornithology at Cal Academy—joined the GGAS board and provided the ignition spark.

Lewis, Dumbacher, and Bartley designed a class that would last for a full year, continuing through all seasons of bird activity. Monthly lectures at Cal Academy address topics such as taxonomy, migration



Jeff Kniffin

Ridgway's Rail.

The program has graduated about 120 people. Alumni can be found in leading roles throughout the Bay Area birding community.

theories, and flight mechanics, while giving students hands-on access to the Academy's outstanding collection of taxidermied birds. Weekend field trips let them apply their newfound knowledge outdoors.

But the core of the class is the students' own work. Along with the species profile, they each deliver an oral report on a topic in ornithology and submit a short written paper with scientific citations.

Each student chooses a birding "patch" and visits it at least twice a month throughout the year, recording what they see and conducting a breeding bird survey there.

They're taught how to file rare bird reports and lead field trips, and each student is responsible for organizing and leading a trip on their own by the end of the year.

The class also has a service component: Everyone must do 100 hours of community science or conservation-focused volunteer work.

"There were times when it felt like a total information overload," said Jankowski, who took the class in 2018. "Biology isn't simple, and more research is being done all the

time. It was great to have Jack Dumbacher, who knows all the recent research."

Since its start in 2013, the program has graduated about 120 people. Alumni can be found in leading roles throughout the Bay Area birding community.

Master Birders Linda Carloni, Eric Schroeder, Whitney Grover, and Alex Smolanskaya joined the GGAS board of directors. Dawn Lemoine will take over the role of co-compiler of Oakland's Christmas Bird Count this year. Grads such as Cathy Bleier, Miya Lucas, and Wendy Beers are now frequent field trip leaders, while others such as Megan Jankowski stepped up to become area leaders in the Christmas Bird Count.

"It's exceeded our expectations," Bartley said. "We're super-pleased to see Master Birders join boards and become field trip leaders. Some have even gone on to become professional biologists."

"I gained a deeper understanding of birds," Lemoine said. "But I also gained a recognition that there are all kinds of birders, with different skills, and we all bring something to birding."



Aurora Santiago

Anna's Hummingbird.

Thank you for joining our donor community.

Donations from December 1, 2019 through February 29, 2020.

With gratitude to every individual, business, and organization who made a recent donation. We are especially appreciative of all Birdathon 2020 donations and are grateful for the trip leaders and corporate sponsors who have contributed to GGAS. Large or small, the gifts you send support our conservation, education, and member programs, and directly benefit the birds you love.

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MISSION STATEMENT

Golden Gate Audubon Society engages people to experience the wonder of birds and to translate that wonder into actions which protect native bird populations and their habitats.

ABOUT GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY

The Golden Gate Audubon Society was founded January 25, 1917. Golden Gate Audubon Supporting Membership is \$35 per year. You can join or renew on the website or through our Berkeley office.

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Learn about upcoming Golden Gate Audubon events every month! Send your name and email address to mramos@goldengateaudubon.org to receive our monthly e-newsletters with upcoming events and other news.

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www.goldengateaudubon.org

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

2 Our Strategy For A Livable Climate

How GGAS will help communities learn about climate change—for us and the birds we love.

3 Lake Merritt: Birding Hotspot

Located in the southwest corner of San Francisco, Lake Merced is one of only three remaining freshwater lakes in the city.

4 Speaker Series

This May, come learn about how gardening can help birds and preserve wildlife with renowned specialist Kathy Kramer.

BACKYARD BIRDER



Christopher Lindsey

Nuttall's Woodpecker.

NUTTALL'S WOODPECKER

BY BLAKE EDGAR

Nearly making the short list of avian species with a geographic range bounded by the state's borders, Nuttall's Woodpecker (*Picoides nuttallii*) eludes being a California endemic by extending into Baja California. This bird bears the name of naturalist Thomas Nuttall, who in the 1830s published a two-volume tome about North American birds—considered to be, despite its girth, the first field guide.

Intermediate in size between Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Nuttall's is distinguished by a pattern of alternating black-and-white bars across the back. Adult males and females are of similar size, but males have a crimson crown at the back of the head. Juveniles of either sex also sport red head feathers. Often heard before being seen, Nuttall's can be recognized by a rattling call reminiscent of a referee's whistle.

Occurring throughout much of California west of the Sierra Nevada, Nuttall's Woodpecker depends on oak woodlands as a source of food. The active, agile forager hops along or around tree trunks and branches, probing and prying up bark with its bill in search of beetle larvae, caterpillars, other insects, arthropods, berries, and seeds. It also relies heavily on riparian habitat in order to construct nest cavities in various softwood trees.

To enable their daily activities, Nuttall's and other woodpeckers possess amazing anatomical adaptations. A flexible tongue with a pointed, barbed tip extends to capture food and wraps around the skull when retracted. Spongy bones at the front and rear of the skull absorb the shock of banging into bark, while bill placement perpendicular to a tree directs the force of impact beneath the brain. Thick membranes shield the eyes from wood chips and protect the ears from the vibration and volume of hammering.

A shallow keel on the sternum brings the bird's body closer to a tree, and a flattened pygostyle (a bone formed of fused tail vertebrae) helps tail feathers prop against the trunk for vertical stability. The foot has two toes each pointing forward and backward (known as zygodactyl), which provides a stronger grip on a branch or trunk. From head to toe, Nuttall's Woodpecker is worthy of both admiration and observation.