

THE GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY // VOL. 100 NO. 3 SUMMER 2015



PROTECTING THE HERONS OF DOWNTOWN OAKLAND

BY ILANA DEBARE

The first thing you notice is the sound, a cacophany of squawks, clicks, and chirrups that rises above the normal city din of horns and engines. Then you see movement in the trees—a flash of white, a hint of beak amid the dense foliage, and suddenly a heron or egret shooting out into flight.

Welcome to downtown Oakland's nesting colony of Black-crowned Night-Herons and Snowy Egrets.

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Golden Gate Audubon volunteers and East Bay Regional Park rangers join Cindy Margulis to install a white fishing line recycling box at Martin Luther King Jr. Shoreline Park.

“BIRD BRAINS” PROVIDE CREATIVE PROTECTION FOR WILDLIFE

BY CINDY MARGULIS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Whoever thinks that being a “bird brain” is an insult has never encountered the creativity and initiative of our Audubon chapter members.

This spring, Golden Gate Audubon Society undertook a number of crucial efforts to protect local birds. Sometimes these efforts get a lot of attention, like our multi-faceted Night-Heron project. (See this month’s cover story.) Other times, important projects don’t gain as much media coverage.

One project was born when we were appalled to learn definitively that more than 47 percent of all pelicans brought in

to International Bird Rescue’s California centers suffer from injuries associated with fishing line!

Determined to prevent such suffering, GGAS rallied volunteers to build specialized line-recycling bins for fishing areas. We reached out to multiple agencies and landowners to install these specialized containers and commit to recycling the monofilament.

The collected monofilament will be melted down and transformed into artificial reef-like structures (called “fish hab”) that revitalize degraded fishing spots. Instead of

killing birds, it will help restore fisheries on which both wildlife and people depend.

We’re preventing this nearly invisible, treacherous hazard from injuring and killing many local species, such as pelicans, grebes, terns, diving ducks, and Ospreys.

Relying on a single small grant, GGAS will *double* the number of monofilament recycling sites in all of Alameda County! In addition, GGAS’s commitment inspired the City of Alameda to build a bunch of its own bins and initiate even more line-recycling on the island.

Ingenuous “bird brains” benefit other species too, not just birds. Earlier this year, GGAS teamed up with other wildlife fans to protect a pod of harbor seals that had been hauling out for over a decade on a derelict East Bay dock. When a public development project threatened the seals’ secret siesta spot, GGAS spoke out.

We advised the developer to fund an alternate platform to be designed in consultation with a reputable harbor seal biologist—and the developer listened. Within days, they deposited \$100,000 in an escrow account for a floating haulout visible from the Bay Trail, and within weeks an active “seal working group” including GGAS and other citizen scientists began conferring on design specs and scouting location sites. With a little luck, current and future generations will get to rejoice at the sight of shy harbor seals loafing comfortably in quiet East Bay waters.

Even the tiniest bird brain contains tremendous innate and acquired wisdom. As lovers of wildlife, we must strive to be as resourceful as our favorite creatures are!

NEWS BRIEFS

International Bird Rescue wins 2015 Elsie Roemer Award

Golden Gate Audubon awarded its highest conservation honor to International Bird Rescue, the Fairfield-based nonprofit that responds to oil spills threatening birds throughout the globe. When “mystery goo” started killing birds in San Francisco Bay in January, IBR treated 323 contaminated water birds and successfully released 165 back into the wild. The source of the “goo” still has not been identified.

Elsie Roemer (1893–1991) was an educator and activist who successfully worked to protect wetlands in Alameda. The Elsie Roemer Bird Sanctuary there is named in her honor.

Herb and Randi Long win 2015 Paul Covel Award

Herb and Randi Long—pillars of Golden Gate Audubon’s award-winning Eco-Education program—were awarded the 2015 Paul Covel Conservation Education Award. Herb and Randi have volunteered with Eco-Ed since 2009. Their kind, gentle spirit has inspired both students and other volunteers. They are generous with their time and also with their optics!

Paul Covel (1909–1990) was a park naturalist and educator who inspired many children and adults through his pioneering interpretive programs at Lake Merritt. He was a recipient of the 1989 Elsie Roemer Conservation Award.



Charles Benton

HERON'S HEAD PARK: BIRDING HOTSPOT

BY DOMINIK MOSUR

LOCATION

Jennings Street
at Cargo Way,
San Francisco

*An hour
of careful
observation
can yield 30
species or
more.*

Imagine salt, brackish and freshwater marshes and associated upland covering hundreds of thousands of acres. Then imagine that reduced by 90 percent, with the lost areas converted into modern humans' idea of development. This is the story of San Francisco Bay.

Visitors to Heron's Head Park in southeastern San Francisco can—with a little patience and focus—transport themselves back a few hundred years in the past and observe a tiny slice of what would have once been all around us.

Heron's Head Park had its genesis in the early 1970s, when the Port of San Francisco started trucking landfill to India Basin for a new shipping terminal. The terminal was never built. But in the meantime, aquatic plants took root and grew into a vibrant salt marsh. In 1993, Golden Gate Audubon successfully petitioned the Port to preserve and enhance the area as a wetland.

In 1999, the area officially became 23-acre Heron's Head Park, named for its shape when viewed from above. The resulting tidal marsh and upland has matured into one of the prime bird habitats in the city of San Francisco—a hidden oasis within the surrounding industrial area.

Heron's Head is the only site in the city of San Fran-



Bob Gunderson

(Left) Heron's Head Park viewed from an aerial kite camera. Note the "beak" shape! (Above) Spotted Sandpiper at Heron's Head Park. (Below) The LEED-certified EcoCenter.

cisco to host nesting Bryant's Savannah Sparrows, a state Species of Special Concern. Two Ridgway's Rail chicks were found there in summer 2011, although now only a single Ridgway's Rail is thought to remain in the park. American Avocets have nested continuously since 2009.

An hour of careful observation can yield a minimum of 30 species almost year round. The park is best birded from the clearly marked main trail, which covers less than a mile. My typical pattern is to walk out to the point on the main trail and return via the side trail, which splits off to the south and allows a closer peek into the inner marsh.

While visiting Heron's Head, stop at the EcoCenter, which provides environmental education programs and is a LEED platinum-certified green building. It's open from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Wednesdays through Saturdays, with family science programs on most Saturdays.

As with any urban birding, it's safest to bird with a friend and make sure you don't leave any valuables in your car.

For more about Heron's Head Park, see our blog at goldengateaudubon.org/categories/hotspots.



Bob Gunderson

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



Red-headed Barbet

A BIRD'S RAINBOW

BOB LEWIS

Many birds are brightly colored, while others use patterned feathers for camouflage. How do these colors originate? What's the difference between colors from pigments and physical colors? From Yellow Warblers to Anna's Hummingbirds, from Snow Geese to Brewer's Blackbirds, each species makes unique use of the feather colors it possesses. What do the colors indicate to other birds? And do birds see the same colors we do? Bob Lewis will unravel some of the mysteries of color in birds with a little chemistry, a bit of physics, and a lot of brightly colored slides.

Bob Lewis trained as a chemist and worked for Chevron for 33 years. He's taught birding classes in the Bay Area for over 20 years, and is chair of Golden Gate Audubon's Adult Education Committee. Currently he's co-teaching a popular Master Birding class at the California Academy of Sciences with Jack Dumbacher and Eddie Bartley. He loves to travel and photograph birds, and has just returned from a trip to Southeast Asia, chasing the brightly colored birds of that area.

San Francisco: First Unitarian Universalist Church and Center, 1187 Franklin Street (at Geary). Public transit, street parking, and parking in a lot for a fee are available. Directions: Visit www.uusf.org/visitors_faq.html, and use the Map It! link on the left.

Berkeley: Northbrae Community Church, 941 The Alameda (between Solano and Marin). Directions: www.northbrae.org/directions.html.

PLUMAGE COLOR AND BIRDS OF PREY

ELIZABETH WOMMACK

LOCATION / DATE

San Francisco
Thursday, August 20
7:00 p.m. refreshments
7:30 p.m. program

Birds of prey display highly varied color and patterns of plumage. From Gyrfalcons in the Arctic to Black Sparrowhawks in Africa, diversification in plumage is a common feature for many hawks, falcons, and owls. Come explore the range of plumage variation across these groups, delve into research on color variability in raptors, and learn about local highly variable species.

Elizabeth Wommack is Staff Curator and Manager of Vertebrates for the University of Wyoming Museum of Vertebrates. She received her PhD at U.C. Berkeley, where she wrote her dissertation on the range and use of plumage variation in the American Kestrel.



American Kestrel

Elizabeth Wommack

BIRDING IN CUBA

ALVARO JARAMILLO

LOCATION / DATE

Berkeley
Thursday, September 17
7:00 p.m. refreshments
7:30 p.m. program

As travel to Cuba opens up, Americans are gaining access to a fantastic birding destination. Cuba is safe, birdy, with much protected habitat, and much to be discovered. In fact it may be the place where the Ivory-billed Woodpecker still lives! Alvaro Jaramillo will share some of Cuba's gorgeous bird life and wildlife biology, as well as its culture.

Born in Chile, Alvaro Jaramillo was trained in ecology with a focus on bird behavior. He writes the *Identify Yourself* column in *Bird Watcher's Digest*, runs Alvaro's Adventures birding tour company, and has birded in Cuba on six different occasions.



Cuban Tody

Alvaro Jaramillo

2015 GGAS ANNUAL MEETING

You Are Invited!

Golden Gate Audubon Society will hold our annual membership meeting on Thursday, July 16, at 6:30 p.m., immediately prior to the Speaker Series in Berkeley. Join us to hear the latest on our conservation activities and our plans for the coming year. Share your ideas. Enjoy some snacks. Then stay for Bob Lewis's talk.

OAKLAND HERONS CONTINUED from page 1

The herons made national news in 2014 when a tree trimming incident at the U.S. Postal Service left several young birds injured and homeless.

In the wake of that incident—and the viral media frenzy it provoked—Golden Gate Audubon launched a multifaceted campaign to protect nesting birds. Like many debacles, the attention offered some golden opportunities, including a teachable moment to connect people of all ages and backgrounds with the marvel and vulnerability of wildlife in our communities.

We started with the need to educate tree care professionals about nesting birds. We produced brochures on “Healthy Trees, Healthy Birds” in both English and Spanish, then organized a series of trainings for professional arborists in conjunction with the Western Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture.

This spring, as heron nesting began, we mounted a campaign to teach Oaklanders about their herons and how to help downed birds. We placed durable posters in prominent places such as the Metropolitan Oakland Chamber of Commerce, as well as Chinese-language versions in Oakland’s Chinatown, adjacent to the nesting colony.

We led free public bird walks of the heron colony, in partnership with the City of Oakland and Oakland Public Library. We organized guided tours for nearby schools and civic groups. And we marshaled a pilot



Ilana DeBare

Heron artist at work during the Eco-Art Flash Mob in April.

Black-crowned Night-Herons are a fitting symbol for the city of Oakland.

team of docents to monitor the heronry and teach passersby about the birds.

One of the most exciting moments was our very first Eco-Art Flash Mob in April. We convened local artists at daybreak to create big sidewalk chalk drawings of the herons. The images were fabulous, but equally fabulous were the conversations they sparked with people passing by on their way to work or school. (View a short video of the Art Flash Mob at vimeo.com/ggaudubon.)

All this education and outreach has made a big difference in awareness and appreciation of Oakland’s herons. Yet the downtown rookery continues to experience high mortality when chicks fall from the nest onto concrete or fledglings wander into traffic. It’s a bit daunting to protect such a sizable colony in a downtown environment.

GGAS hoped to follow the lead of Madrone Audubon, which faced a similar challenge with an urban rookery in Santa Rosa. Officials there cordoned off the nest trees and placed straw underneath to provide a soft, safe, and contained landing area for young birds who tumble from the trees.

Oakland officials declined to replicate that proven solution, claiming it was too

complicated and costly. But this isn’t the end of the story. The educational work we did this spring is cultivating a constituency to protect the herons during future nesting seasons.

In the coming year, we plan to mobilize more volunteers for Oakland’s herons and expand our tree care educational initiatives too.

Oakland’s nesting herons present an inspiring story of nature’s persistence even in a gritty urban core. Such large and fascinating birds make terrific ambassadors for connecting everyone with wildlife. They are a fitting symbol for Oakland itself—dramatic and beautiful birds, different species living together in harmony, overcoming adversity to launch the next generation. In addition, Black-crowned Night-Herons are found on every continent except Antarctica. No matter where Oakland’s diverse residents come from, there is most likely a heron in their cultural heritage.

They are such a fitting symbol of Oakland that perhaps they should be named the city’s official bird!

Want to help protect and educate about the Oakland herons next spring? Contact GGAS at ggas@goldengateaudubon.org.



Marissa Ortega-Welch

A school tour of the nesting trees.

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Thank you to both our general donors and supporters of Birdathon 2015!

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Fall Classes Coming Soon

Improve your skills through our fall classes in Beginning and Advanced Beginning Birding, Birding By Ear, Birds of the Bay Area, Water Birds, and—new—a class on “treasure hunting” for migrants. Don't forget Joe Morlan's class at City College! Details at goldengateaudubon.org/education/classes.

Volunteer Training in September

Become a Burrowing Owl docent or an Eco-education volunteer, and learn by teaching others. Our annual owl docent training will take place on September 26, and Eco-ed volunteer trainings will take place on other dates in September. For more information, contact nweeden@goldengateaudubon.org.

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Coastal Cleanup Year-round

Join GGAS on Coastal Cleanup Day—Saturday, September 19—to restore shoreline habitat at MLK Jr. Park in Oakland. Or volunteer with us to restore habitat throughout the year! We host several volunteer days each month in San Francisco and the East Bay. See goldengateaudubon.org/volunteer.

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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA BIRD BOX

Report your unusual bird sightings: 415.681.7422

The Golden Gate Audubon Society was founded January 25, 1917, and became a chapter of National Audubon in 1948. Golden Gate Audubon Supporting Membership is \$35 per year. Renewals should be sent to the Golden Gate Audubon office. The board of directors meets six times per year (schedule can be obtained from the office).

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2 "Bird Brains" to the Rescue!

GGAS members help Alameda harbor seals, as well as birds threatened by fishing line.

3 Bay Area Hotspot: Heron's Head Park

Get a glimpse of the bay before urban development in this southeastern San Francisco park.

4 Speaker Series

A Bob Lewis presentation on color in birds, plus talks on variation in raptor plumage and birding in Cuba.



Ilana DeBare

Birdathon 2015 field trip to Año Nuevo State Park.

BIRDATHON 2015 HITS GOAL— THANKS TO YOU!

Birdathon 2015 not only hit its goal of raising \$50,000. We soared past it and raised slightly over \$60,000!

Along the way, Golden Gate Audubon members and friends had some memorable wildlife experiences—from witnessing hummingbird banding at Point Blue's field station in Bolinas, to sighting California Condors along the Big Sur coast, to meeting the Oakland Zoo veterinarian in charge of treating condors for lead poisoning.

A quick summary of Birdathon 2015 by the numbers: 25 guided birding trips; 200+ trip participants; 600+ donations; 63 participants who raised money from friends; 11 participants who raised

over \$1,000; and over \$60,000 raised for GGAS's conservation and environmental education programs!

That total includes donations we made to some of our partner conservation groups that co-hosted Birdathon trips—Ventana Wildlife Society, East Bay Regional Park District, Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, and Point Blue.

This year's top Birdathon awards went to:

Most Species in Six Hours: Glen Tepke, whose team found 104 species in Oakland in pouring rain, and renamed themselves the Soggy Sloggers.

Most Species in 24 Hours: Bob Power, who with Eli Gross found 159 species in Alameda County.

Best Bird: Alan Hopkins, for a Harlequin Duck in San Francisco, during his self-guided "Big Walk" aimed at finding 100 species within walking distance of his home. (Alan's Birdathon quest got written up in the *San Francisco Chronicle*! Read the story at <http://tinyurl.com/ov8spnj>.)

Fundraising Awards

1st place: Dan Harris (\$2,526 — from 67 separate donors!)

2nd place: Anne Leong (\$2,125)

3rd place: Chris and Gary Bard (\$2,075)

4th place: Jane Hart (\$1,700)

5th place: Carolyn McMillan (\$1,550)

6th place: Daryl Anne Goldman and Jeannette Nichols (\$1,350)

None of the trips, fun, or fundraising of Birdathon 2015 would have been possible without *you*...donors, trip participants, fundraisers, field trip leaders, corporate sponsors, and Birdathon organizers/volunteers.

We thank you. And, more importantly, the birds of the Bay Area thank you.

Got ideas for Birdathon 2016? We'll start planning next year's events in the fall. Email Ilana at idebare@goldengateaudubon.org.