

THE GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY // VOL. 104 NO. 1 WINTER 2020



2019: A YEAR OF WINNING LOCALLY

BY ILANA DEBARE

This past year was not a good one for wildlife and our planet. Withdrawal from the Paris climate accords, rain forests burning in Brazil, longstanding environmental laws being hollowed out by the Trump Administration...the list is enough to make you want to pull the shades and go to bed. But walk by Lake Merritt and listen to the raucous calls of Black-crowned Night-Herons, the new City Bird of Oakland. Or visit Golden Gate Park and spot young Western Bluebirds that fledged from nest boxes monitored by Golden Gate Audubon Society members.

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Western Bluebird at the Bison Paddock,
Golden Gate Park.
Bob Gunderson



Dave Quady and Bob Lewis with the Claremont Canyon team during the 2015 Oakland Christmas Bird Count.

THE ENERGY OF WINTER

BY PAM YOUNG, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Winter in the natural world is a time of quietude. Many plants drop their leaves and enter a dormant state; some wildlife species hibernate until spring. For birds, winter's arrival is signaled by the mass exodus of one suite of species and the nearly instantaneous arrival of another. After a mysterious internal alarm chimes, Swainson's Thrushes depart *en masse* and Golden-crowned Sparrows magically flutter into view—mainly quiet but for a few bellicose songsters.

Winter birds survive through an elegant adaptation of interdependence. For example, Red-breasted Sapsuckers excavate sap

wells that feed wintering wildlife such as Anna's Hummingbirds. They also excavate shelters for other birds. The sapsuckers are like no-bid contractors who are singularly driven to ready homes for their spring-season customers—including bluebirds, kestrels, flickers, House Wrens, and other cavity-nesting birds.

Like the sapsuckers, Golden Gate Audubon Society members also have a singular winter focus. We celebrate the return of hundreds of thousands of wintering birds with our annual Oakland and San Francisco Christmas Bird Counts.

In several recent years, our Oakland

count put more participants in the field than any other count group in the world. This winter's CBC was the last one to be led by co-compilers Bob Lewis and Dave Quady, who have organized the Oakland count since 2003.

Recruiting team leaders. Getting permissions to access private property. Considering the individual preferences and skills of over 250 participants when making team assignments. MCing the post-count tally dinner. Verifying rarities, making sense of the results, and filling out the considerable paperwork for National Audubon....Bob and Dave managed all this with diligence, patience, humor(!), and a warm, welcoming inclusivity.

Their hard work and volunteer spirit—like that of our dedicated San Francisco count compilers Alan Hopkins and Siobhan Ruck—are at the heart of Golden Gate Audubon. More than many organizations, our 103-year history has been fueled by volunteers like the compilers, team leaders, and participants in the CBC.

The 2019 count is now over, but our San Francisco and Oakland compilers are still busy verifying and reporting the results. Bob and Dave are working closely with next year's Oakland compiler, Dawn Lemoine, to ensure a seamless transition. And our members are engaged in a stunning array of other volunteer efforts, as you can see from the year's summary in our cover story.

Thank you, Bob and Dave, for all those wonderful Oakland counts. And thank you to all our other member-volunteers who generously share their love of birds and who work so hard to protect them both during the winter and throughout the year.

NEWS BRIEF

Roemer Award: Dan Richman

Our 2019 Elsie Roemer Conservation Award went to Dan Richman, a longtime member of our S.F. Conservation Committee who uses his contracting skills to build nest boxes, including some at Stow Lake. Dan has also written for GGAS publications, including our gardening for wildlife brochure.

Covel Award: Eileen Richey

Our 2019 Paul Covel Environmental Education Award was given to Eileen Richey, who for ten years has been training Audubon volunteers to use Cornell's nest watch protocols and collect data on the Tree Swallow and Western Bluebird nest boxes in Golden Gate Park. This year saw successful broods of both species.

Pier 94 Wins Major Grant

Golden Gate Audubon has been awarded \$50,000 by the National Fish and Wildlife Federation for continued habitat restoration at Pier 94. This grant will fund native oyster and eelgrass research in partnership with biologists, and help implement the site's terrestrial and wetland vegetation management plan.

New Brochure on Lake Merritt Birds

GGAS volunteer docents are handing out a new brochure with photos and names of all the common water birds at Lake Merritt. Designed by Adult Education Committee chair Maureen Lahiff, this is a terrific resource for people who don't (yet!) own a field guide.



From left: San Leandro Reservoir in early spring, courtesy of Roy McCandless; Nuttall's Woodpecker at Valle Vista Staging Area, courtesy of Bob Lewis.

VALLE VISTA STAGING AREA: BIRDING HOTSPOT

BY MAUREEN LAHIFF

LOCATION

Canyon Road,
Moraga

Valle Vista offers an amazing array of habitats.

This area—accessible with a recreation permit from the East Bay Municipal Utility District—is sometimes known as Upper San Leandro Reservoir, but the reservoir is just part of the experience. What makes Valle Vista Staging Area a birding hotspot is an amazing array of habitats: grassland, chaparral, riparian willows and alders, redwoods and pines, mixed-forest deciduous trees, and fruit trees left behind by former residents. Oh, and lots of poison oak, whose berries are enjoyed by over 50 species of birds.

Now managed by EBMUD for watershed protection, the land bears traces of past uses. There are bedrock mortars used by native Jalquin inhabitants for pounding acorns along Kaiser Creek. The Gold Rush caused a brief East Bay logging boom that removed most of the nearby redwoods. Widespread planting of eucalyptus began in 1910, and a 1926 dam created Upper San Leandro Reservoir.

Wildlife include coyote, bobcat, deer, raccoons, skunks, and snakes. And birds, both resident and migrants who visit for half the year. There are Wood Duck boxes on the trees, and boxes for cavity nesters.

The parking lot birding is great: Acorn Woodpeckers, American Kestrels, sparrows on the ground, swallows on

the wire, sapsucker holes on a tree by the sign-in kiosk.

Most birders use part of the Kings Canyon Trail. After signing in, I like to head off uphill to the right, then turn onto a wide trail through scrub habitat. One of the delights of this stretch is the whiny/wheezy call of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher.

Coming down the hill, there are remains of a brick stairway to the right. The trail continues through scrub/chaparral, the best stretch for California Thrasher. Then it's into the woods, where the somewhat narrow trail is heavily used by runners and dogs on walks.

Approaching the Kaiser Creek bridge, quiet walkers may be rewarded with a glimpse of the elusive Wood Ducks in the creek.

The trail passes a grassy hillside, a perfect place for raptors and Western Bluebirds.

Finally, the head of the reservoir comes into view. Scopes are helpful for good views here. Most birders turn around at this point. The trail continues; see the EBMUD South Watershed Trail Map.

To visit Valle Vista, join one of our monthly field trips there: See goldengateaudubon.org/fieldtrips. Or purchase a permit (day pass or yearly permit) from EBMUD at ebmud.com/recreation.

Read more about this and other birding hotspots at goldengateaudubon.org/hotspots.

BAY AREA BIRDS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

BY ILANA DEBARE

Chickadees. Juncos. Woodpeckers...These familiar Bay Area backyard birds are all at risk from climate change, according to a detailed report released in October by the National Audubon Society.

Common local species such as Dark-eyed Juncos, Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Acorn Woodpeckers, and White-crowned Sparrows are among the 47 percent of California bird populations that will decline or even vanish if nothing is done to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

“What’s shocking is that the birds at risk are not just rare or endangered species, but our most beloved neighborhood birds,” said Pam Young, Executive Director of Golden Gate Audubon Society. “These birds provide a warning of how climate change threatens all of our communities, lives, and health.”

The National Audubon report—which examined 604 North American bird species using 140 million bird records, including Christmas Bird Count data—is the most detailed study so far of how climate change will affect birds, both nationally and locally.

Along with the report, NAS rolled out an online Climate Change Visualizer tool that allows people to view the expected impact of climate change on birds in their local area.

In Alameda County, 66 out of 172 species studied are projected to lose more than half of their current nationwide range. In San Francisco, 60 out of 152 species will lose more than half of their nationwide range.

The specific threats vary by species but include higher temperatures, drought, wildfires, and sea level rise. Changes in the timing of seasons can deprive migratory birds of food sources like insects, while extreme springtime temperatures can disrupt breeding and kill nestlings.

Faced with these broad climate-related threats, it’s more important than ever that we provide a hospitable environment for our resident and migratory birds. Along with reducing our personal carbon footprint and supporting policies to limit carbon emissions, we can:



White-crowned Sparrows.

- Restore Bay wetlands to provide habitat, serve as carbon storage banks, and protect shoreline communities from sea level rise.
- Landscape with native plants that offer food and shelter to birds.
- Increase housing density in urban cores, so there is less development pressure on open fields and woodlands.
- Monitor wind and solar energy projects to ensure they’re implemented in ways that don’t jeopardize birds.
- Support other measures to protect birds such as bird-safe building practices, keeping cats indoors, and avoiding rodenticides that cause secondary poisoning of raptors.

Although these measures are not directly climate-related, they can make a life-or-death difference for species in trouble due to climate change...including the chickadees, juncos, and woodpeckers that we love.

Check out National Audubon’s *Climate Change Visualizer* and *climate report* at audubon.org/climate/survivalbydegrees.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Birdathon 2020

March 15 through mid-May 2020

Coming soon—Birdathon 2020, our most fun fundraiser! Choose from over two dozen special field trips to sites like Elkhorn Slough, Condors at the Pinnacles, and a Sage-Grouse lek in Lassen National Park. Check the GGAS web site for details in early February.

Great Backyard Bird Count

February 14–17

Join 160,000 bird observers across the country for this four-day community-science project. Spend as little as 15 minutes documenting the birds in your yard, park, or neighborhood and contribute to our understanding of bird populations. For details, see gbbc.birdcount.org.

Travel with GGAS

Throughout 2020 and 2021

See the birds of the world with us! Our 2020 birding tours that still have openings include Baja, southeastern Arizona, Ohio for spring migration, Australia, and Brazil. For 2021, we’ve so far calendared Bhutan and Alaska, with more to come. Details at goldengateaudubon.org/travel.

Restore Habitat for Wildlife

Whatever your schedule, we’ve got opportunities for you to help restore habitat for birds and wildlife. Adults and kids welcome; no experience needed. First Saturdays of each month at Pier 94 in S.F., third Saturdays at MLK Jr. Shoreline in Oakland, plus more. See goldengateaudubon.org/volunteer.

2019 CONTINUED from page 1

Amidst national and global setbacks, Golden Gate Audubon Society achieved an encouraging number of wins for local birds and for our shared Bay Area environment in 2019.

Bird-safe Building Standards

Berkeley and Emeryville took major steps towards adopting ordinances to reduce bird-window collisions, following in the path of San Francisco, Oakland, Richmond, and Alameda. We expect those two cities to finalize their bird-safe building laws in early 2020. Golden Gate Audubon's work—especially the decade-long effort by Volunteer Director Noreen Weeden—has put the Bay Area in the forefront of U.S. metropolitan areas on the issue of bird-safe buildings.

Oakland City Bird

Lobbied by elementary school students, with the support of GGAS, the Oakland City Council chose the city's first official bird—the Black-crowned Night-Heron. Meanwhile, GGAS worked with developers and scientists to identify alternate nest sites when night-heron rookery trees were threatened by downtown development.

Pier 94

In 2019, over 900 GGAS volunteers removed 285 bags of weeds and 35 bags of trash/recyclables from this former dump site, now a flourishing wetland, owned by the Port of San Francisco. We planted 116 native plants to nourish wildlife and launched research on whether ceramic tiles can be used to foster the growth of native



Pier 94 volunteers.



An Audubon volunteer helps Eco-Education students identify birds.

Amidst national and global setbacks, Golden Gate Audubon Society achieved an encouraging number of wins for local birds and for our shared Bay Area environment in 2019.

oysters. Our Pier 94 work was named Outstanding Environmental Project of 2019 by Friends of the SF Estuary.

GGAS volunteers also restored habitat at six other public sites, including Golden Gate Park, where the nest boxes we monitor saw successful broods of Tree Swallows and Western Bluebirds.

Eco-Education

Our Eco-Education program served 400 students at seven Title 1 (low-income) elementary schools in San Francisco, Oakland, and Richmond, inspiring them to be positive stewards of the environment. With the help of GGAS volunteers and support from Salesforce, we were able to give each student a nature journal and a “plants for birds” gift pouch that included a trowel, gloves, and seeds of native plants.

Adult Education

GGAS enrolled 326 adults in 28 birding classes, in addition to our year-long Master Birding class co-sponsored with California Academy of Sciences. We launched a new series of classes targeted at non-birders at Lake Merritt's Rotary Nature Center. Our volunteer field trip leaders led 202 bird

walks (nearly all free), along with 30 Birdathon fundraising trips.

Osprey Cam

Thousands of viewers watched with delight as three Osprey chicks hatched and fledged before our Osprey nest cam (sfbayospreys.org) along the Richmond shoreline. This was the third year of this educational outreach project, giving people a personal connection to a local raptor species and highlighting its reliance on clean and healthy Bay waters.

Conservation Advocacy

GGAS conservation committees worked on a range of issues, such as reducing raptor deaths from the Altamont Pass wind turbines, protecting endangered Ridgway's Rails from the hazards of plant removal, and creating roosting habitat for terns and shorebirds at the Middle Harbor Enhancement Area in Oakland. GGAS members joined in Audubon California Advocacy Day in Sacramento, helping win a state law to replace important bird protections rolled back by the Trump Administration.

Thank you to all our members, donors, and volunteers—that's you—who contributed to local progress at a time of global adversity!



Heermann's Gull.

HEERMANN'S GULLS NESTING IN CALIFORNIA

BYRON AND JOANNA CHIN

LOCATION / DATE

San Francisco
Thursday, January 16
6:30 p.m. refreshments
7 p.m. program

Please note new transit-friendly venue! San Francisco State University Downtown Campus, 835 Market Street, 6th Floor.

Heermann's Gulls were thought to breed exclusively on small islands in the Gulf of California and off the Mexican coast, where their numbers are declining due to warming seas and overfishing. But in 1999, a few nested on a man-made island on Roberts Lake in Seaside, California—the only known nesting colony of Heermann's Gulls in the United States. Learn about the natural history of Heermann's Gulls, the Seaside colony's growth to 100 individuals, its environmental challenges, and efforts by Monterey Audubon and others to help the colony by monitoring and deployment of a floating nesting island.

Byron and Joanna Chin have been avid birders for over a decade, with a particular love for gulls and other seabirds. They've spent the last two years studying the Heermann's Gull colony in Seaside and have worked closely with Monterey Audubon to conserve them. When not involved in bird-related pursuits, Byron is a patent litigator and Joanna is a pediatrician.

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.

RODENTICIDES: THE NEW DDT?

LISA OWENS VIANI

LOCATION / DATE

Berkeley
Thursday, February 20
6:30 p.m. refreshments,
7 p.m. program

Are anticoagulant rat poisons the new DDT? Lisa Owens Viani will describe the epidemic of wildlife mortality caused by these poisons. She'll explain their impacts on birds of prey such as hawks and owls, among many other animals. She'll summarize proposed legislation to reduce the use of dangerous rodenticides, and what we can do to help beneficial predators thrive and provide us with their free, natural pest control services.

Environmental writer Lisa Owens Viani co-founded Raptors Are The Solution, which educates people about the ecological role of raptors and the danger to wildlife from widespread use of anticoagulant rat poisons.



Arvind Agrawal



Bob Gunderson

CREATING URBAN BIRD HABITAT

AMBER HASSELBRING

LOCATION / DATE

San Francisco
Thursday, March 12
6:30 p.m. refreshments,
7 p.m. program

Please note new transit-friendly venue! San Francisco State University Downtown Campus, 835 Market Street, 6th Floor.

Birds need native plants and the insects that feed on them, but how to provide native habitat in our urban backyards and public open spaces? Nature in the City's Backyard Natives Nursery enlists volunteers to grow native plants in their own yards. Learn how these volunteers engage with each other to harvest seed, clone plants from cuttings, and coordinate large-scale habitat restoration...and how your own backyard birds can benefit from this collaborative effort.

Amber Hasselbring is Executive Director of Nature in the City, whose mission to connect everyone in San Francisco to nature by cultivating and conserving local habitats.

DONATIONS

Thank you for joining our donor community.

Donations from September 1, 2019 through November 30, 2019

With gratitude to every individual, business, and organization who made a recent donation. Large or small, your gifts support our conservation, education, and member programs and benefit the birds you love.

Donations

GOLDEN EAGLE (\$1000 and above)

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(\$500 to \$999)

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pyoung@goldengateaudubon.org

Director of Volunteer Programs

Noreen Weeden, 510.301.0570
nweeden@goldengateaudubon.org

Youth Programs Manager

Clayton Anderson, 510.843.2222 ext. 1005
canderson@goldengateaudubon.org

Office Manager

Meshay Turner, 510.843.2222 ext. 1001
ggas@goldengateaudubon.org

VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP

Adult Education Chair

Maureen Lahiff, mlahiff@aol.com

Field Trip Coordinator

Steve Lombardi, Hotrock175@gmail.com

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Dawn Lemoine, Daryl Goldman, and Eric Schroeder
travelprogram@goldengateaudubon.org

MISSION STATEMENT

Golden Gate Audubon 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

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.

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*.

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

Golden Gate Audubon Society

2530 San Pablo Avenue, Suite G
Berkeley, CA 94702
Office hours: Monday, Wednesday and Thursday
9 a.m.–noon, and other hours by appointment
Telephone 510.843.2222
goldengateaudubon.org
ggas@goldengateaudubon.org

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3 Valle Vista: Birding Hotspot

Grasslands, woodlands, creek, and lake—this East Bay spot offers an exciting variety of habitats and birds.

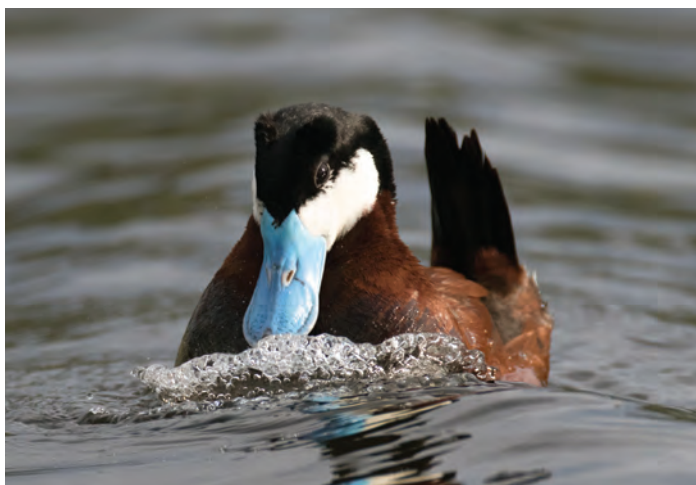
4 Bay Area Birds and Climate Change

Climate change jeopardizes not just exotic rarities but common Bay Area species like Chestnut-Backed Chickadees.

6 Speaker Series

A new, transit-friendly location for our S.F. Speaker Series launches in January with a talk on Heermann's Gulls.

BACKYARD BIRDER



Bob Lewis

Male Ruddy Duck in breeding plumage, engaged in its bubbling display.

RUDDY DUCK

BY BLAKE EDGAR

The approach of winter brings flotillas of a diminutive duck to local water bodies like Oakland's Lake Merritt. Distinguished by a large head and short neck on a compact body, with steeply cocked tail feathers, the Ruddy Duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*) may remind you of the kind of duck more commonly seen in bathtubs. But it's actually the only North American representative of the stifftails, a mostly tropical tribe of ducks named for long,

stiff-shafted rectrices (tail feathers).

A white cheek patch below the eye, crossed by a curving brown stripe in females, provides a useful field mark for this species. Only in spring and summer breeding plumage does the male resemble the duck's common name with rich chestnut body feathers. Breeding males also sport a sky-blue bill—the color caused by the scattering of light from keratin rather than by chemical pigmentation.

Stifftail ducks engage in a variety of courtship and signaling displays, but one is unique to the Ruddy Duck. Its bubbling display begins when a male lifts his head and holds the tail upright. As he beats his bill rapidly against the inflated neck, air forced from the breast feathers forms bubbles in front of his body. Generally performed by males for females, bubble displays can be made by members of either sex—even by ducklings—when startled.

Ruddy Ducks breed from British Columbia and Manitoba in Canada south to central Mexico, using permanent wetlands and prairie potholes to construct nests concealed in emergent vegetation for clutches of around eight eggs. Ruddy females also place eggs in the nests of other ducks, including Redhead, Common Mallard, and Northern Pintail.

In fall, Ruddy Ducks may migrate from interior North America to the Pacific, Atlantic, or Gulf coasts. The Pacific flyway supports more than half of the total wintering population, with San Francisco Bay being a popular place to overwinter.

This adept diver propels itself with large feet to the bottom of ponds and marshes, where the bird's bill probes for seeds, insect larvae, and mollusks among other plant and animal food. Without reliance on vision, the Ruddy Duck can forage effectively at night.