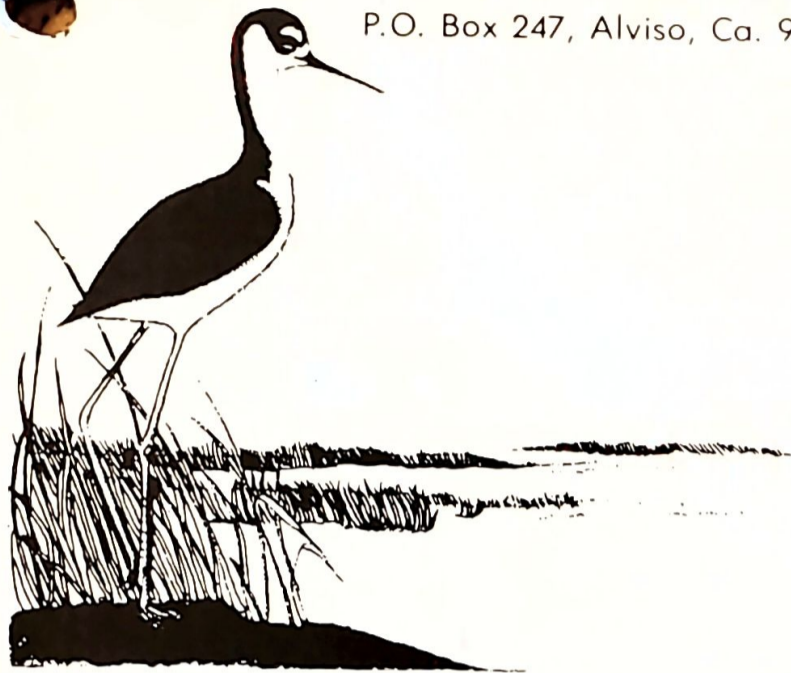


# SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY NEWSLETTER

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## HELLO YELLOWTHROATS - I'M BACK! - AND I'VE BROUGHT FRIENDS!

Marti Foster Wolfe

The Salt Marsh Yellowthroat study has been an important project of the observatory for the last year. I have been particularly pleased to be involved in the current research since the original study, which I conducted in 1976-77, was the basis for my master's thesis at San Jose State, and I have retained an interest in these appealing birds ever since.

The Yellowthroat project really began in the early seventies, when prospects for the Bay and its natural habitats and their inhabitants seemed most dismal. The San Francisco Bay had, by that time, lost 90% of its fresh water marsh and at least 60% of its brackish water marsh. The small amount of marsh habitat that remained formed islands or strips isolated from each other and further threatened by continued

development. In 1973 Richard Mewaldt and Howard Shellhammer proposed that the Salt Marsh Yellowthroat be considered for inclusion on the Rare and Endangered Species list and I began the study in 1975, when the funds were made available.

I searched for yellowthroats on foot and by boat for the next three years, first poring over maps and aerial photos to locate marsh habitat. I drove from the northern end of Marin County to the Northern end of Santa Cruz County and from the coast east to Carquinez. I paddled my kayak up creeks and down sloughs. I put 30,000 miles on my truck and big muscles on my arms! Sometimes a friend would accompany me, but usually I went alone. The work was enjoyable-marshes at dawn are quiet, lovely places- but often not very



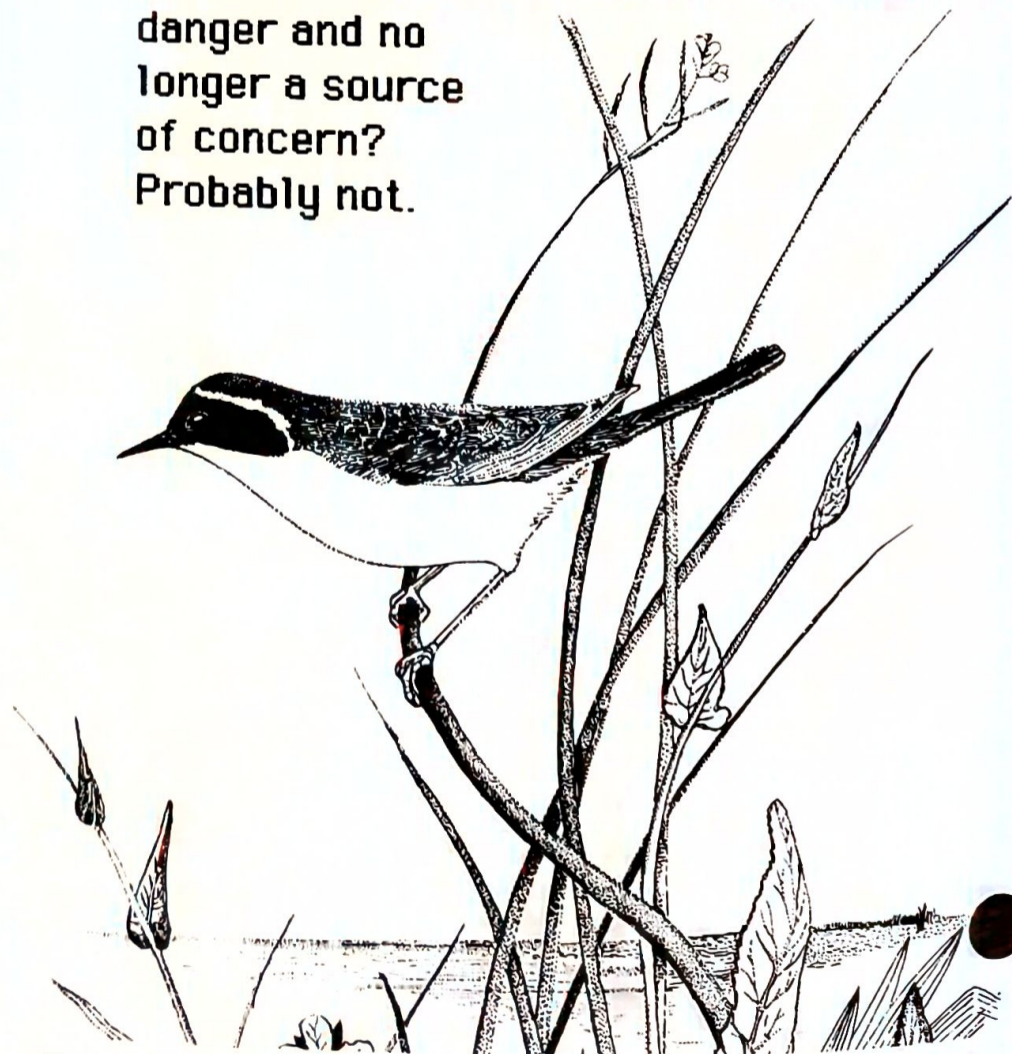
rewarding in terms of yellowthroat discoveries. The years 1975-78, you may recall, were a period of severe drought. Creeks that usually ran all summer had dried completely by spring, and sloughs that normally contained a mix of fresh and salt water were receiving only water from the bay. The marsh vegetation became dominated by the more salt tolerant species while levee and creek embankments lost their dense covering of damp, tangled herbaceous plants and grasses. This, of course, is just the sort of habitat that yellowthroats regard as most desirable for raising their families. I found only 166 breeding pairs in the seasons that I searched, and the greatest concentrations were in areas where fresh water input was artificially supported, such as sewage treatment outfalls and flood control ponding.

We were sure that the drought had had a significant impact on the reduction of yellowthroat numbers, but there was no way to separate the impact of the drought from the general decline of marsh habitat available. Therefore, the Fish and Wildlife Service decided not to adopt my management recommendations which included giving Rare and Endangered Species status to the Salt Marsh Yellowthroat, preferring to postpone action until data could be collected under more normal conditions. In 1984, they proposed that the study be resumed.

Peter Perrine was the principal investigator of the new study; I was happy to participate on a part-time basis. The changes in the marsh since

1977 were dramatic. Areas of fresh water marsh were both more extensive and more densely vegetated. Good spring rains left streams flowing well into summer and thick rank weeds buzzing with insects covered banks and levees. Brackish quality with more abundant fresh water input. Twenty-seven study participants set out looking for that black-masked face and listening for "che-witchy, che-witchy". Our efforts in this healthier marshland were rewarded with the discovery of 569 breeding pairs of Salt Marsh Yellowthroats.

How shall we regard this greater than three-fold increase in yellowthroat abundance? Shall we be jubilant over a successful recovery? Absolutely! Shall we rejoice that some marsh areas are now more extensive than in 1977? You bet! And shall we conclude that the Salt Marsh Yellowthroat is out of danger and no longer a source of concern? Probably not.





Several sobering realities must temper our pleasure at finding increased yellowthroat numbers. First, and most important is the recognition that all bay marshlands are under continuing threat from development. Few areas are under protection and those that are, are not managed primarily as wildlife habitat. Increases in the marsh area at Coyote Hills, for instance, have resulted from increased runoff from nearby "boom" development zones in Fremont and Newark into the flood control ponds. Changes in management policy by public works authorities could as easily divert or reduce this supply and degrade or destroy marsh habitat. Public agencies controlling areas of Salt Marsh Yellowthroat habitat must be made aware that they are host to a sensitive species and encouraged to manage with its needs in mind.

Areas in which yellowthroats do not usually breed may be important as dispersion corridors from breeding to wintering grounds and from one wintering area to another. These upland grassy areas may provide breeding sites as well, in heavy flood years when more typical marsh sites remain inundated. These upland areas are the most vulnerable to development.

Current Salt Marsh Yellowthroat numbers, while larger than 1977, are still drastically reduced from historic abundance. I estimated, using a few records which contained quantitative data, that the population in our study areas under pristine conditions was about 2000 pairs.

Both drought and flood are natural features of California ecosystems. In order to survive either extreme, a species must have sufficient habitat available to meet its requirements for breeding, for wintering and for movement between the two. Awarding the Salt Marsh Yellowthroat Rare and Endangered Status would greatly improve our chances of protecting its marsh home and assuring that it will be looking back at us from behind its black mask for years to come.

The following people participated in the field work for this study: Fred Botti, Phyllis Browning, Jules Evens, Carter Faust, Leora Feeney, Margaret Foster, Cal Hampy, Roger Harris, Terry Hart, Kathy Hobson, Garv Hoefler, Joan Humphrey, David Jensen, Bill Kirsher, Armando Martinez, Paul Noble, Peter Perrine, Ed Roberts, Paul Rosenberg, Dave Shuford, Rich Stallcup, Don Starks, Michael Stahler, David Suddjian, Gil Thompson, Anne Wilson and Peg Woodin.

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**LOOK AT YOUR NEWSLETTER  
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SFBBO depends on your continued support to carry out its many projects and studies. As a reminder when your membership renewal is due, check your newsletter mailing label for a clue. If it says, "Thank you for your support!" that's great. If it says, "Your Dues are Due", won't you please continue your support?



## DIPPER

By Ed Roberts

Water Ouzel is the name I knew the bird by. A couple of Years ago, a friend said, "No, dummy! Only an Englishman calls it a Water Ouzel. Around here they are American Dippers." I keep trying to remember to call them Dippers, but whenever I see one I get excited, and forget, and say, "Look! There's an Ouzel!"

Some might say that Dippers don't look exciting -- they look like chubby, short-tailed mockingbirds that have been rolled in soot. But I think they look elegant; rather like a six-inches-tall, stout wren dressed in a charcoal business suit. If you look closely you'll be able to see that they have white eyelids. What is exciting about Dippers is their behavior.

Take, for example, the family of Dippers we watched, on an August afternoon, in an alpine meadow stream at 10,000 feet elevation. The stream was rocky and shallow, seldom exceeding four inches in depth. The Dippers flitted from rock to rock, sometimes with a single hop, but more often with a quick fluttering of their stubby wings. They would wade into the water, periodically pecking an aquatic insect larvae from the crevices of the rocks. The Dippers moved so quickly that they appeared to be walking on the surface of the water, waterskiing along, propelled by rapid wingbeats.

The most spectacular feat of the

Dipper, occurs when they are feeding in deeper water. A dipper will be standing on a rock and then suddenly step off into the rushing stream. A Couple of times, I have been able to see a bird as it moved along the stream bottom. It gave the impression of simply strolling along, with its wings partially spread for balance, bending to snatch an insect from the bottom of the stream. I've also seen Dippers fly along, just skimming the surface of the creek, then dive under the surface. The bird would disappear for a couple of minutes, then pop up onto a rock, somewhere downstream, and to perform the activity which, surely, must be the basis for its name.

Once atop the rock, after its watery walk, the Dipper performs a series of quick deep knee bends, dipping its body in a pumping action. I suppose that the dipping action is to shed water from its feathers, which are made water repellent by special oil glands and careful preening. If you have ever tried swimming in one of those icy mountain streams which are fed directly from melting snowfields, you may, find it easy to imagine that the poor bird is simply trying to get the circulation going in its body. That's the amazing





thing about Dippers. The water in those high-country creeks is so cold that I've been known to dip my fingers in it and say, "To heck with it! I'll take a bath some other time." The Dipper inundates itself, repeatedly, in that bone-chilling water and doesn't seem to be bothered by it. I guess that it's a matter of eating habits. If I ate my dinner directly from the bottom of the creek, perhaps I would get accustomed to that cold water, too.

John Muir, in The Mountains of California, wrote of the Dipper (or Ouzel, as he, too, called it): "Among all the countless waterfalls I have met in the course of ten years' exploration in the Sierra, whether among the icy peaks, or warm foot-hills, or in the profound yosemitic canyons of the middle region, not one was found without its Ouzel. No canyon is too cold for this little bird, none too lonely, provided it be rich in falling water. Find a fall, or cascade, or rushing rapid, anywhere upon a clear stream, and there you will surely find its complementary Ouzel, flitting about in the spray, diving in foaming eddies, whirling like a leaf among beaten foam-bells; ever vigorous and enthusiastic, yet self-contained, and neither seeking nor shunning your company... He is the mountain streams' own darling, the hummingbird of blooming waters, loving rocky rippleslopes and sheets of foam as a bee loves flowers, as a lark loves sunshine and meadows."

In winter, American Dippers leave the mountains, coming down to the lowland streams. I've seen them along Alameda

Creek, in Sunol Regional Park. Perhaps you have encountered them as well. In any event, this is a bird which entertains and fascinates, and which reminds us of the incredible diversity of lifestyles that make up the ornithological world.

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### **WILDLIFE REHAB CONFERENCE**

From January 31 thru February 2 the Wildlife Rehabilitation Council will hold its 1986 Wildlife Rehabilitation Conference in Burlingame, CA. "Basics to State of the Art" is the theme of this conference which will cover a diverse range of topics from basic baby bird care to diagnosis of mammalian diseases to the newest advancements in reptile medicine. The purpose of this IWRC Conference is to provide both professionals and volunteers with knowledge which can be used in every aspect of their wildlife rehabilitation work. For registration forms or more information, write IWRC Conference, c/o Lisa Hoefler, P.O. Box 943, Carmel Valley, CA 93924 or call 408-372-7466.

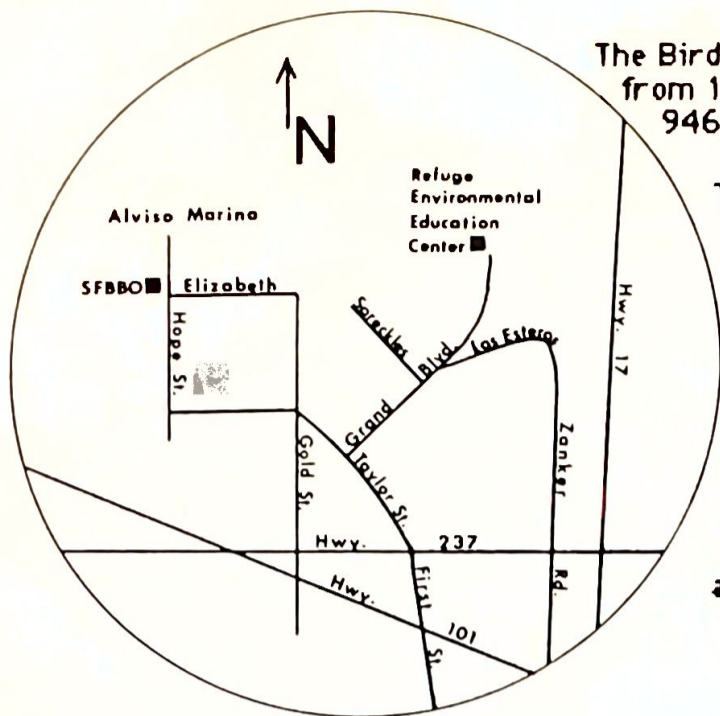
### **WESTERN FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS**

The 11th annual meeting of the Western Field Ornithologists will be held February 7-9 in Sacramento. This meeting should have something for everyone -- workshops on field identification problems and standardization of breeding bird atlas efforts; talks on avian ecology, distribution, conservation, and other aspects of field ornithology; and field trips to a wide range of habitats from the Butte Sink to the Sierran foothills to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. For more information and registration forms, write: Tim Manolis, 3532 Winston Way, Carmichael, CA 95608.

### **REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE**

The Raptor Migration Observatory of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area is a group of bird banders, hawkwatchers, and biologists committed to studying the movement of raptors through the Marin Headland each fall. In the spring of 1986 we will begin censusing and banding Red-tailed Hawks in Marin and San Francisco Counties. If you know of any presently active or past Red-tailed nests in these areas, please contact Allen Fish at 415-331-5246, or write to the Raptor Migration Observatory, GGRNA, Bldg. 201, Fort Mason, San Francisco, CA 94123.





The Bird Observatory office is located at 1290 Hope St. in Alviso. The office is open from 1-5 pm weekdays and some weekends. But before stopping in, call (408) 946-6548 and check the schedule.

The General Membership meetings are held on the first Thursday of the month at 7:30 pm at the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Education Center in Alviso. (see map) The Board meetings are open to the membership and are held monthly. Call the Observatory for dates and times.

The newsletter deadline is the first Monday of the month. Send contributions to the editor: Susie Formenti, 16675 Buckskin Ct., Morgan Hill, CA 95037.

**The San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory is a non-profit corporation under IRS statute 501(c)3. All memberships and contributions are tax deductible.**

## GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Thursday, February 6, 1986

Refuge Environmental Education Center  
in Alviso

7:30 pm

**FEATURED SPEAKER:** Mark Silberstein, Program Coordinator & Newsletter Editor for the Elkhorn Slough Foundation, will talk about recent developments of Elkhorn Slough.

Editor, Susie Formenti

Assistant Editor, Dave Nauer

**DONATIONS.** . . . Thanks to Terry Hart, Nancy Norvell, Pat Dubois, Peg Woodin, Phyllis Swanson and Elsie Richey for the refreshments for the December & January General Meetings.

**CONTRIBUTIONS.** . . . The Bird Observatory greatly appreciates **Cecil Poole's** donations of a pair of AMC 10x50 binoculars, Vol. 15 of Western Birds, Vol. 97 of the Wilson Bulletin, Vol. 102 of the Auk, Vol. 87 of the Condor and 3 issues of the Living Bird.

**THANKS.** . . . To Sandy Kinchen, Membership secretary, for her work on the membership and to Jean Dubois for his help with membership renewals.

The Editor of this newsletter would like to thank Aileen Brodsky, Pat & Jean Dubois, Barbara Cox and Jean Young for their help with folding, labeling and sorting the newsletters each month.

More volunteers are always needed. If you would like to volunteer to help out in the office, Please call the Bird Observatory office.



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