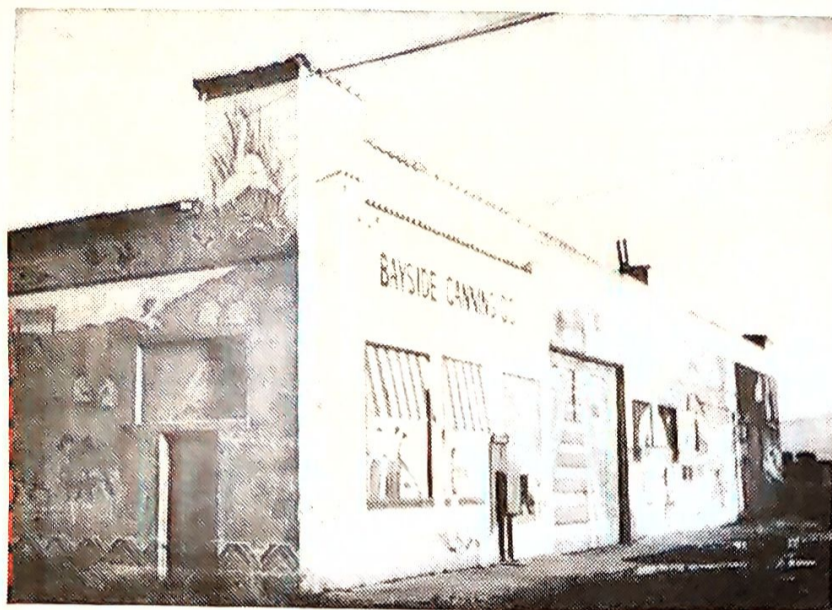


• San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory • Newsletter



Newsletter No. 1

Winter 1982-83

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THE EVOLUTION OF A BIRD OBSERVATORY Michael Rigney

So much has happened within the past year that we frequently have to step back and ponder how far we have come. It might be appropriate in this first newsletter to trace the evolution of the SFBBO since the beginning. Perhaps our new members can then appreciate the excitement and sense of achievement the early members feel who worked hard to get this organization "off the ground".

Approximately eight years ago a group of students in an adult education course studying California birds became tired of only classwork. After repeating the class several times this group decided to study bird populations and behavior in their own neighborhoods and pool the information. From this a loose-knit organization called the South Bay Institute for Avian Studies was formed. Annual dues were a modest \$1.00 a year. There were no formal officers, no official headquarters, and no particular goals except the noble pronouncement at the bottom of our stationary: "Dedicated to the study, preservation and enjoyment of our native avifauna."

There were many informal principles guiding our activities, however. We felt that "amateurs" were capable of performing much needed wildlife studies. As we began to examine what was known about our native birds, we soon discovered wide gaps in our understanding of the Bay ecosystem. Our first formal study was on the interrelation of birds and salt ponds in the south San Francisco Bay. From our year-long study came a realization of the great importance these ponds have to resident and migratory birds.

After developing sufficient knowledge of the salt pond-salt marsh environment, we were given contracts to study different aspects of this area by the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge and more recently by the California Department of Fish and Game. Several wildlife management reports have resulted from this work of Institute volunteers.

It soon became apparent that additional equipment, people and funds were needed to continue the work of the Institute. In October, 1981, the South Bay Institute for Avian Studies became a non-profit organization.

Sympathizing with our need for permanent quarters where we could hold meetings, file information for research papers and store equipment, the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge offered us the use of the historic Bayside Cannery building in Alviso. Its lively history and proximity to the salt pond and marsh habitats make it an ideal home, a center for research, educational programs and observing local wildlife.

In September, 1982, the Board of Directors of the South Bay Institute for Avian Studies adopted a new name--The San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory. Since that time our numbers have grown to 130 and the response of the community has been enthusiastic. The San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory should have an exciting future.

ARTESIAN SLOUGH-COYOTE CREEK
WATERFOWL BOTULISM STUDY
Peggy Woodin

The South Bay Institute for Avian Studies (SFBBO) entered into an agreement for Oceanographic Services with Kinnetic Laboratory, Inc./Larry Walker Associates and the California Department of Fish and Game on 1 August 1982. The objective was to monitor for the presence of Clostridium Botulinum, Type C toxin in Artesian Slough and Coyote Creek in an attempt to determine cause of the annual summer illness and death of local waterfowl. The presence or absence of this toxin was to be verified by volunteers testing invertebrates collected at five stations located in the area north and east of the town of Alviso. Approximately 620 volunteer hours were spent in this study: 470 in field work, 150 in laboratory work.

Samples were collected twice weekly during August through October and once a week in November along with water quality data (i.e. salinity, temperature, dissolved oxygen and turbidity). Waterfowl use and mortality in the study area was monitored by on-site observation.

Thirty-one SFBBO members conducted the water quality tests, collected benthic samples and helped remove sick and dead waterfowl and other wildlife carcasses from the water and tide flats. With the help of Wildlife Rescue (Kathy Hobson, "D.J." Johnson, et al), eighty-two of the one hundred twenty rescued (captured) sick birds recovered and were released. Traveling these waterways gave some of us quite a bit of experience in navigating outboard motorboats and one well-used airboat, but those who braved the tidal mudflats were well-rewarded by seeing the wildlife and the beauty of this part of South San Francisco Bay.

This was an on-going learning process for the 14 SFBBO members who volunteered their time in the laboratory. While some sat for hours on-end sorting through mud samples identifying small "critters" with the aid of dissecting microscopes, others withdrew blood from sick ducks and injected mice to determine the presence of botulism toxin.

Of one hundred four tests only five came up positive for the toxin, four from duck blood-serum, and one from maggots found in carcasses of two Snowy Egrets. All of the invertebrate test samples were negative. The carcass removal and the rescue and capture of sick birds probably had a significant effect on limiting the extent of the 1982 botulism outbreak and may have prevented the loss of many more birds.

THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER
Tom Rountree

Today with the publication of its first news letter, the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory marks another milestone in its rather short history. Although brief, its existence has been anything but dull or uneventful. Already the Bird Observatory, with generous help from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, has renovated and moved into its new headquarters--the historic Old Bayside Cannery in Alviso. It is currently engaged in six research projects and planning many more. It has begun an ambitious banding program that promises to contribute much to information being gathered by other bird banders. It has embarked on a very exciting educational program and is now actively collecting a fine library on ornithology in general and the ecology of the San Francisco Bay area in particular.

Although much has been done, it is only a beginning. If the coming year mirrors the achievements of the past, the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory will move toward its goal of "wildlife protection through research and education". Your continuing support will help make that goal become a reality.



CALIFORNIA GULLS FIND A HOME IN ALVISO

Theresa Rigney

The summer of 1982 was a good year for the Alviso California Gull colony. The number of breeding pairs climbed dramatically from 32 pairs in 1981 to a whopping 206 pairs this year. The Alviso colony is unusual because it is the only known breeding site for California Gulls west of the Sierras and the only colony associated with an estuarine environment. These peculiarities have caused researchers of the SFBBO to consider some interesting questions. "Does this represent a true breeding range expansion?" "Are these birds coming from the failing Mono Lake Colony?" "Does this indicate a shift in preferred nesting habitat or is this a transitional phase for an isolated segment?" Challenged by the situation, members of the SFBBO set out to find some of the answers to these intriguing questions.

Keeping tabs on how well the colony was doing was difficult. Every fifth day during May through July, a fearless group of Observatory volunteers clad with headlamps and waders met at dusk near the dump in Alviso. Actual work within the colony took place after dark to prevent predation of chicks and eggs by marauding gulls. After driving four miles on rough and dusty levee roads, the last leg of the journey to the colony was by styrofoam raft (a vessel similar to something Tom Sawyer might have built had styrofoam been available). Once on the nesting islands, researchers combed the ground by flashlight for nests, eggs and chicks. Despite the unusual conditions, consistent and important data were gathered on what may be the most unique species nesting in the San Francisco Bay.

Among the 206 active nests, many empty scrapes were observed throughout the nesting season. These may have been the result of sexually immature birds or tentative nest building by adults incompletely attached to the colony. The first eggs were probably laid between 15 and 21 April. There was an average clutch size of 2.2 eggs per nest (there were 2 four egg clutches). By the second week in May many nests contained newly hatched chicks. As soon as their legs would hold bands each chick was supplied with a stainless steel United States Fish and Wildlife Service band and a red celluloid color-band.

By the end of the breeding season a total of 453 eggs had been counted and 275 young Alviso gulls had been banded (60.7%). Observed mortality of eggs and young was fairly low (8%).

These are some of the statistics which we have extracted from the 1,785 individual nest records accumulated during 1982. These records have been entered onto a computer system by dedicated volunteers. Yet, with all

the data we have on hand, the original questions have not been answered.

Two graduate students, Jim Stamm from San Jose State University and Paul Jones from San Francisco State, and members of the SFBBO plan to closely follow the fourth breeding season of the Alviso colony. Already plans are being made for the coming year's studies. The California Gull study is a unique and exciting project; to participate and to find out more details contact Theresa Rigney (408-867-3791) or Vicki Silvas-Young (408-293-7124), project coordinators.



PALO ALTO AIRPORT STUDY
Julie Klingman

The San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory's Palo Alto Baylands avian study will begin in January. The Observatory has a contract with the Santa Clara County Transportation Agency for a one year study of the interaction between the Palo Alto Airport and the avian species in the Palo Alto Baylands.

A census of the avian species and populations within the defined area will be made six times during the year. We will survey the various habitats within the area and attempt to determine the numbers and species of resident, migratory and breeding birds of each area. We will investigate the impact that the airport facility has on the feeding, roosting, breeding and flight of the local birds and try to determine potential environmental impact of the proposed airport expansion.

Four pairs of project leaders will work with volunteers in the field and will write the final report. These leaders are: Peggy Woodin and Suzie Formenti, Kathy Hobson and Dorothy Johnson, Ginny Becchine and Tim Gates, Steve Shugars and Vicki Silvas-Young.

Since many people are concerned with the results of this project, the SFBBO will cooperate with various conservation groups in the area. People who wish to participate in this study may contact the Observatory (408-946-6548).

BAND A BIRD--KNOW IT BETTER
L. Richard Mewaldt

One of the more useful tools in the field study of animals is the placement of a marker on the individual so that it may be identified at a later time. With birds, an individually numbered metal band placed around the leg has proved the most useful and least disruptive (to the bird) technique. For example, knowledge that at least some of the Caspian Terns and Snowy Egrets fledged in the San Francisco Bay area spend part of their year in Mexico is the result of banding.

Soon after the Observatory was founded we made application to the United States Bird Banding Laboratory, Laurel, Maryland, for a Master-station Bird Banding Permit which was issued on 19 October 1982. We have initiated a series of workshops to qualify volunteers as Field Assistants and Sub-permittees. Persons so qualified may then use bands issued to SFBBO for Observatory projects as well as on cooperative projects with San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. On 22 November, we received our initial shipment of SFBBO bands which included sizes for birds from Bushtits and Kinglets to Canada Geese and White Pelicans.

In addition to new and continuing projects on the San Francisco Bay, we anticipate one or more land-bird stations on the margins of the Bay and the valleys and mountains which surround it. These stations will be established to study local breeding birds, local wintering birds and migrants.

We are especially concerned with the effects of industrialization and urbanization; we are aware that growth will continue. However, we can better understand the consequences of our management of the environment by comparing the lives of individual birds and marked bird populations with human populations. Perhaps future selective management can be made to please us and those who follow.

The regular meeting of the SFBBO is the first Thursday of each month at 7:30. The next three meetings will feature slide programs by members of the Observatory. Please call 946-6548 for location. Please come!

As part of the educational program of the SFBBO we will be sponsoring bird walks along Alviso Slough and the adjacent salt ponds on the second and last Saturday of each month. Meet at Alviso headquarters at 8:00 a.m.

DONATIONS

Four-drawer file cabinet - - - - -	Ginny Becchine
Two clinical centrifuges - - - - -	Dr. Lois Lindberg
Desk-top copier- - - - -	Dr. David Walworth
Refrigerator - - - - -	Doug Franklin
Wildlife Journals- - - - -	Mr. Vern Yadon
Parabolic microphone and ornithological journals - - - - -	Mrs. Elgin Hurlbert (from the estate of Capt. "Oxy" Hurlbert)
Labor involved in developing logo- and silk screening t-shirts - - - - -	Jean Collins

Because the Observatory is a new organization, we have constantly changing needs. If you have equipment that you do not need, please give us a call (408-946-6548).

SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY
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Alviso, California 95002

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