

The Stilt

Summer 2006

SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY NEWSLETTER

DIRECTOR'S CORNER

The Bird Observatory's Citizen Scientists

“Wanted: Volunteers to help band California Gulls; must wear hardhat with headlamp,” read the 1989 advertisement. Who could resist such an opportunity tinged with just the right amount of danger? It was the first time I ever heard of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory. While I never made it out to band gulls at night, I did become an active volunteer, logging many hours of field observations to help with the Bird Observatory's waterbird program.

The new buzzword for this volunteerism is “citizen science,” which may have first originated with astronomy as backyard stargazers made discoveries worthy of publication. These days, this increasingly popular term refers to any partnership between scientists and the public to gather information or test hypotheses that can only be addressed with the help of large numbers of data collectors. Birding fits this ticket perfectly.

For birders, citizen science provides a fun and satisfying method of putting birding skills to practical use in the conservation of birds. You observe and record data, not only for your own list or pleasure, but as a contribution to a process that leads to knowledgeable management of bird habitats and subsequently, bird populations. That it invariably produces great birding stories is simply a side benefit.

For the researcher, citizen science provides the means to gather large amounts of data over large areas and long periods of time—a monumental task that would otherwise be impossible. This scope of data enables researchers to investigate big-picture questions: What are the trends in bird populations? What are the effects of large-scale changes on birds?

There are also cases where a very special species is spread thinly over a large area, such as our local breeding population of Western Snowy Plovers. Our 40 volunteer field assistants watch over more than 15,000 acres of potential habitat, a significant amount of eyeball time in all the right places that highly magnifies the effort and intent of a single staff scientist.

The Bird Observatory has always been in the business of citizen science since its early days of waterbird surveys right up to the present. We currently have more than 100 trained volunteers. Some, especially those



Volunteers Leslie Tucci and Tom Stewart wearing bicycle helmets for the May 13th gull survey.

PHOTO BY ROD GOLDEN



VICKI JENNINGS

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MONICA LUNDY

The San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of birds and their habitats through research, monitoring and educational activities.



San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory
P.O. Box 247 1290 Hope Street Alviso, CA 95002

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My Colony

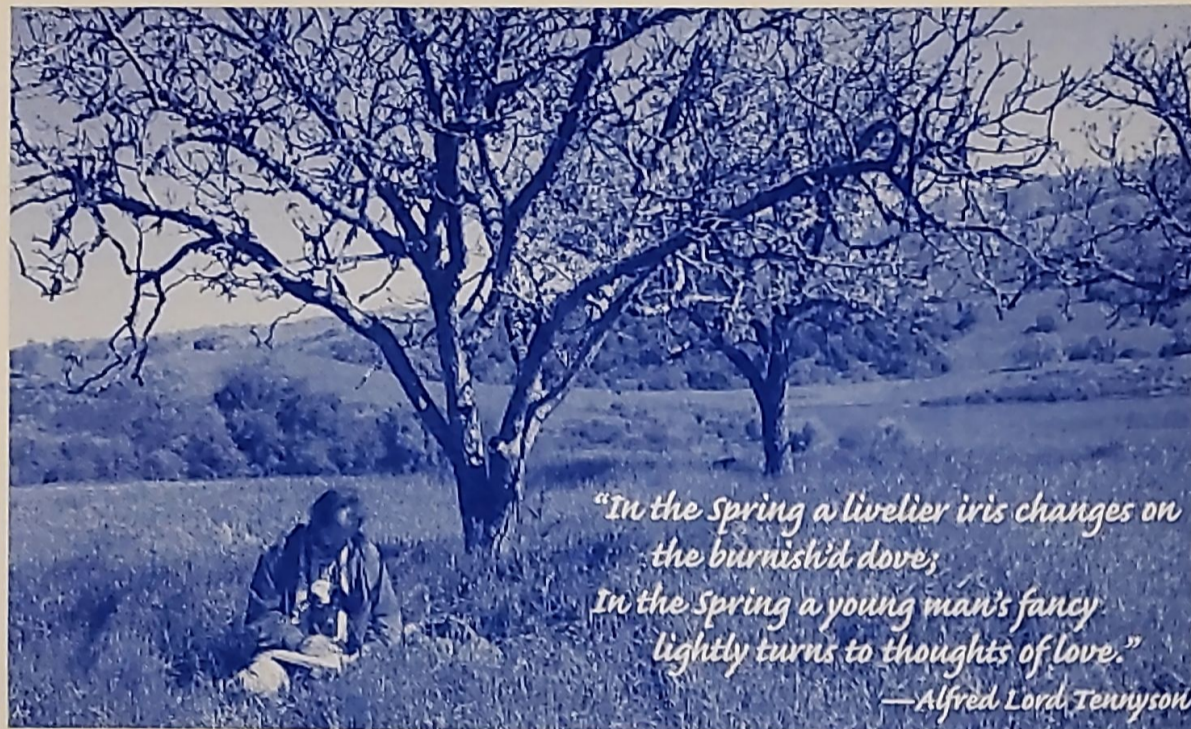


PHOTO BY KAREN DENELLO

Jan Hintermeister surveys the heron colony at Grant County Park.

Standing in an open field in April, I watch as herons with "thoughts of love" come together to create a new generation at Joseph D. Grant County Park. As the herons incubate their eggs and raise their chicks, waves of migratory birds surge through. Each visit reveals new arrivals: Bullock's Orioles, Western Kingbirds, Lazuli Buntings, and my favorite, the Grasshopper Sparrows that sing from low perches in the grassland bordering the colony.

Dragonflies hatch out in the sluggish waters of Grant Lake. The air is filled with bird song; Pied-billed Grebes call from the lake and Red-shouldered Hawks scream insistently.

As a volunteer for the Bird Observatory's Colonial Waterbird Monitoring Project, I witness and document this spectacle each year. In redwood forests and eucalyptus stands, at power towers, in urban and rural parks, and in wetlands dotting the Bay Area, Bird Observatory volunteers count nests and chicks and document the nesting progress of our local

colonial nesting waterbirds, including herons and egrets, double-crested cormorants, California Gulls and terns. Each volunteer takes responsibility for one or more nesting sites.

My Great Blue Heron colony congregates every spring in the majestic eucalyptus stand at the intersection of Quimby and Mt. Hamilton Road just west of the Grant County Park entrance. The colony is relatively small, with typically 2 to 4 nests each spring, producing 2 to 4 chicks each. While cars and bicycles pass underneath unaware, the Great Blue Herons go about their business of building nests and raising young.

During my heron colony visits, Northern California changes from spring to summer. Like the herons, other plant and animal species follow the dictates of the seasonal change. The grasslands in Grant Park change from vibrant green to summer brown. Repeated visits to the same location give me a sense of familiarity. Each year I look forward to seeing the Western Bluebirds and Tree Swallows

move into the nest boxes on the oaks around Grant Lake.

The still hours spent watching the colony also give me the opportunity to see other more unusual events like the Osprey flying high over the lake, a California Toad escaping to its burrow, and Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks nesting in the same eucalyptus stand.

In the midst of this wildlife spectacle, I observe the changes that have been introduced by European contact—the non-native annual grasses, the teasel and eucalyptus surrounding the heron colony, the introduced wild pigs that forage around the artificial lake, and the American Bullfrog that dominates the shoreline of Grant Lake.

Monitoring the status of the Grant Lake heron colony provides one data point on the health of the Bay Area environment. Providing a small part of that data is rewarding in itself, but most rewarding to me is the opportunity I have to sit quietly in a familiar place and experience firsthand the flow of life in the natural world.

By Jan Hintermeister.

Jan has served on the Bird Observatory's board of directors and is also a longtime volunteer. He previously wrote "A Mirrored Forest" in the Summer 2004 issue of "The Stilt."



PHOTO BY KAREN DENELLO

A Great Blue Heron in the eucalyptus trees.

Great Gull Count

Bird Observatory biologists and volunteers took a step—or a paddle—into dangerous territory this past May for the annual gull breeding surveys in the South Bay. Equipped with bicycle helmets and handheld tally clickers, they walked through colonies of screaming, pooping, and pecking California Gulls in order to count nests and eggs or chicks.

At the Alviso ponds, Biologists Cheryl Strong, Cynthia Padula, and Ann Murphy, along with volunteer field assistants Rod Golden, Donna Nicoletti, Tom Stewart, Leslie Tucci, and Biologist Gina Barton kicked off the Great Gull Count of 2006.

Altogether, the teams surveyed five gull colonies ringing the South Bay on salt pond levees and islands. They tallied up nests by the number of eggs they contained, or by the combination of a number of chicks and eggs, noting the occasional empty nest or abandoned or depredated egg. Amidst the chaos of alarmed birds hovering overhead, the teams collected valuable data that continues the Bird Observatory's long-term study of more than twenty years.



PHOTO BY CHERYL STRONG

Donna Nicoletti with a gull chick.

GULLS AND LANDFILLS

Waterbird colonies do change and shift over the years. Some of these colonies have recurred in the same places for many years, but last year, the California Gulls surprised everyone by setting up a brand new colony at the Coyote Hills salt ponds, with 2685 nests in 2005, and over 3700 nests this year. Since last year, each of the colonies surveyed has increased by at least one thousand nests, and the most populous colony increased by 1200 nests.

This is part of a larger trend since the first Bird Observatory data in 1982

when the entire South Bay was home to only one small colony of less than 100 nests. At the recent South Bay Science Symposium on June 6th, an audience member asked Biologist Cheryl Strong whether the explosion of gull colonies in the South Bay was related to landfill activity.

"It's a definite possibility," Strong said. "There have been landfills around the South Bay for a really long time, and most of them are closed. It would be an interesting correlation [between landfill activities and gull nesting success]." Recently she has been tracking gull use of landfill sites to explore that correlation further.

SCAVENGING AND NESTING

During the gull surveys, teams also found nesting colonies of Double-crested Cormorants and Caspian Terns in the midst of hundreds of gulls. In Coyote Hills, the Caspian Tern colony of the last two years is a return to a breeding site that had not been used since the 1990s. The Double-crested Cormorant colony in Alviso is also a fairly recent phenomenon, having appeared in the last decade.

Continued on page 5

*Coming soon to
your county or backyard!*

The 10th Annual California Fall Challenge

**September 16th through
October 15th**

30 days of birds and fun!

Watch your mailbox for CFC news:

Guided birding trips to join
Workshops to help you win
Prizes to inspire your birding!



PHOTO BY JANET HANSON

The 2006 CFC Committee. Front row (left to right): Shirley Wodtke, Bonnie Bedford-White. Back row (left to right): Joelle Buffa, Jan Hintermeister (Chair), Gerry Ellis

**NEED SOME TIPS ON HOW
TO FUNDRAISE FOR CFC?**

FUNDRAISING WORKSHOPS

with Bonnie Bedford-White

**Wednesday, July 19
Wednesday, August 16
Tuesday, September 12**

Save the dates! More details and
how to sign up coming soon!

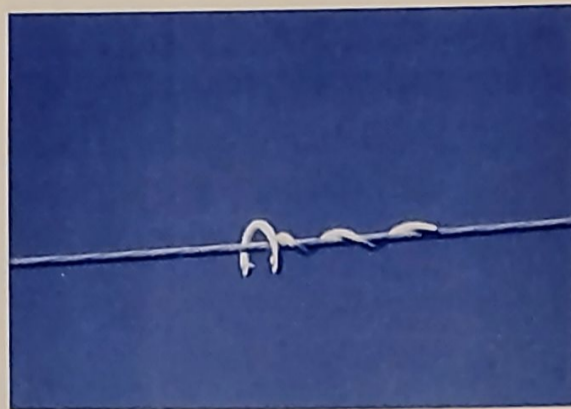
TRACKING BIRDS AND POWER LINES

After two years of data collection, the Bird Observatory is collecting the last year of data for the Power Line Study before beginning the long process of analyzing the data. This project will measure the effectiveness of markers on power lines in deterring bird collisions and how these collisions may affect bird populations.

Since urban development continues to spring up around us, increasing the need for power, it is exciting to conduct a study that will measure the impact of these structures on birds and test possibilities that may be able to lessen the impact.

WHAT ARE THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY?

1. We will determine the effectiveness of markers in deterring bird strikes, and determine the species or groups of birds that either strike or narrowly avoid striking the power lines.
2. We will identify the power line segments with the most bird traffic.
3. We will compare bird community composition at the line segments, which run adjacent to the Coyote Creek Field Station (CCFS) and the restoration pond north of CCFS, for pre- and post- transmission line establishment.



A power line equipped with a marker to deter birds.

HOW WILL WE ANSWER THESE OBJECTIVES?

OBJECTIVE 1: We are conducting carcass searches and behavior surveys.

Carcass searching involves scanning the ground for evidence of a potential bird kill. The carcasses or feather spots tell us which power line segment (whether marked or unmarked) may be implicated and the possible cause of death if the bird is not too decomposed or eaten by predators. We send the intact birds for a necropsy, also known as an autopsy, to determine probable cause of death and other health conditions of the bird (such as the presence of West Nile Virus and Avian Influenza).

Behavior surveys involve scanning a power line segment for half an hour to look for birds flying around the

lines. This will tell us what species are flying over, the heights of their flight, and their reactions to the lines. Reactions can range from none, flying up and over, turning and leaving, flying down and under, and faltering while flying through. We've taken data at dawn and dusk and before dawn and after dusk, utilizing night vision optics.

OBJECTIVE 2: In order to identify high-risk power line segments, we are utilizing radar to capture passage rates over each segment, as well as the heights of the birds flying over.

OBJECTIVE 3: Placing the data in context with the local bird community, we will utilize data from both CCFS and the restoration pond, which is north of CCFS, to compare bird composition before and after the installation of the power lines.

Thanks to all of our volunteers who have helped collect data since the project's beginning in April 2004, and to all of the field assistants who have been vital in the details of this data collection!

by Gina Barton,
Landbird Biologist

LEARN MORE

Join the Bird Observatory on a "Science of Birds" walk in October to see the power lines in question and explore the study site at the Coyote Creek Field Station. See the "Calendar of Events" for more details.

VOLUNTEER

There's still time if you'd like to be a part of this study. Check the Bird Observatory's "Volunteer & Intern" web page at www.sfbbo.org for more information.



Field Biologist Caitlin Robinson scanning the night skies for birds at a behavior survey.

HIGH TECH BIRDING

Using Radars to Track Flight Patterns

To the naked eye the night sky seems dark and empty except for stars and the moon, but in fact many birds are active at night either on migratory flights or foraging and flying with the tides. In the past, people have studied nighttime activities of birds by observing their silhouettes as they flew across the illuminated disk of the moon or by counting birds as they passed through the beams of powerful spotlights aimed skyward. More recently, biologists have used different types of radars to look at birds moving over a larger area.

So, while most people are asleep in bed, the crew from ABR, Inc. is out watching birds. To study nocturnal bird movements, we use: 1) lots of coffee and candy bars to stay up late, and 2) a van-mounted x-band radar unit.

The radar unit transmits energy in the form of waves that bounce back when they encounter an object like a bird or bat or even a large insect. The returning waves are received and processed to appear as targets on a television monitor. By recording these data points, we are able to count how many birds are passing through an area over a given time (passage rates), and determine flight speeds, flight directions, and target altitudes.

Recently, I collaborated with the Bird Observatory to study bird movements near a power line corridor. The purpose of the study is to compare ABR, Inc. radar data with power line collision data that the Bird Observatory has collected in order to determine if there are any high-risk areas for birds and to evaluate the effectiveness of markers to deter bird collisions. The radar unit used for the Bird Observatory's Power Line Study allows us to track bird movements over an area 3 kilometers in diameter and record bird altitudes up to 1500 meters above ground level.

Each night I visited three different sites and collected data along the power line corridor. After 10 months of work, with over 100 nights in the van, we are now starting to analyze the data and write up the results. The information will contribute to our knowledge of nocturnal bird migration and activity, and may help to prevent or decrease the number of bird kills in the future.

by Peter Sanzenbacher,
ABR, Inc.

WISH LIST

HELP US FIND A NEW HOME!

The Bird Observatory may need to leave the cannery property soon and is looking for office space in the South Bay. Please contact Executive Director Janet Hanson, jthanson@sfbbo.org, with any information.

Check out the Wish List for more needed donation items at www.sfbbo.org/WishList.htm.



Great Gull Count

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Gulls are notorious scavengers, and will not hesitate to eat each other's chicks. Because of this, extra precaution had to be taken to protect the Caspian Tern and Double-crested Cormorant colonies during the surveys. While it is uncertain what prompted these birds to nest among gulls, it is possible that being surrounded by gull nests actually protects cormorant and tern chicks from predation by mammals.

A CASE OF KLEPTOMANIA?

The California Gull's indiscriminate scavenging habits also causes odd materials to show up in their nests. Do you like fried chicken? California Gulls do – the scraps supply them not only with food, but also with bones to line their nests.



Tennis ball egg?

In a rather astounding observation at the most largest gull colony, some California Gulls chose to roll or carry tennis balls into their nests. It is unclear whether the tennis balls were a case of mistaken identity (another round, greenish object to incubate) or simply a new decorative fad (a hypothesis supported by previous observations of Barbie dolls in nests). Further research may be needed to explain this behavior!

by Ann Murphy,
Birds of the Baylands Biologist

Migrations



New Field Biologists Cynthia Padula (left) and Ann Murphy (right).

ANN MURPHY

Ann Murphy joins the Bird Observatory's Birds of the Baylands program as a biologist. She became a full-fledged bird nerd while working for the U.S.G.S. South Bay Salt Ponds Project as an intern in April 2005. The Chicago, Illinois native was inspired to become a biologist after collecting slugs to test for a deer flu virus on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington. Ann has also worked in the salamander-wrangling fields of Maine and Long Island, NY. She looks forward to continuing the Cargill salt pond bird and water quality surveys and rescuing waterbirds from avian botulism this summer.

CYNTHIA PADULA

Cynthia Padula's interest and curiosity in nature began when she was a

child in Argentina. Since then, she has had amazing fieldwork adventures in both the United States and Latin America. Cynthia has studied kleptoparasitism by Kelp Gulls on Royal and Cayenne Terns in Patagonia, Argentina. She has five summers of experience banding migratory passerines in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and also gained valuable field experience at a tropical biology program in Costa Rica where she was able to serve as a link between local people and non-Spanish speakers. Cynthia joins the Birds of the Baylands program as both a biologist and volunteer coordinator.

JULIANA CHOW

Juliana Chow joins the Bird Observatory team as the new Outreach Specialist where she has gamely taken on tabling events, writing and editing "Wingbeat" and "The Stilt," and coordinating outreach projects. Prior to coming to the Bird Observatory, Juliana interned as the environmental advocate for the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society where she worked on the



Outreach Specialist
Juliana Chow

Coyote Valley and Endangered Species campaign. A native resident of the Bay Area, Juliana's love of nature and exploring the world can be traced back to childhood wanderings at the Don Edwards National Wildlife Refuge.

FLIGHT DEPARTURES

Former Outreach Specialist Sharon Miyako left the Bird Observatory in December 2005 for a temporary interpretive post at Yosemite. Since then, she has had an incredible time doing ranger walks for sixty people at a time, chatting with visitors at the visitor center, and chasing bears out of campgrounds (while educating people about bears and food storage). In the fall, she is off to more adventures in Chapel Hill, North Carolina where her husband will be attending a two-year MBA program.



Sharon Miyako, nature interpreter extraordinaire, at Yosemite.

Director's Corner

Continued from page 1

who band birds, are highly skilled and participate in several workshops a year to maintain and even expand their repertoire. Others handle bay-side observations for our Snowy Plover Recovery and Colonial Waterbird Monitoring projects. Most of the work involves early weekend mornings on levees, scoping ponds and wetlands for signs of breeding birds. On occasion, these intrepid individuals also accompany our sci-

ence staff on carefully planned surveys into the very colonies they've been spying on from the distance. This additional assistance allows faster data collection that keeps disturbance to a minimum.

Citizen science is a good thing for the birds and for extending the reach and effectiveness of our science staff. And is it a good thing for the citizen scientists themselves. Spike Marlowe, one

of our 2005 Outstanding Volunteers, says: "I'm looking forward to many more years of the same-including slogging through the mud at 5 a.m. and getting attacked by enraged flocks of terns and avocets. Wouldn't trade it for anything. The other old guys can have their golf; I'll take the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory."

by Janet Hanson,
Executive Director

OUR THANKS TO THESE SUPPORTERS OF THE OBSERVATORY...

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We wish to recognize our partners for their generous gifts to SFBBO during the first quarter of 2006.

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The Bird Observatory is located at 1290 Hope Street in Alviso, behind the historic Bayside Canning Co. building. If you would like to visit the office or our Coyote Creek Field Station, please call in advance.

Board meetings are held monthly and are open to the Membership. Call the Observatory for dates and times.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Expert-guided monthly walks on the Bay Trail, at the Coyote Creek Field Station, and to our other research sites! Sign up for these walks by calling the Bird Observatory office at 408-946-6548 or e-mailing jchow@sfbbo.org. Space is limited to 15 - 20 people. All events are free for members and \$10 for non-members.

SCIENCE OF BIRDS

"Science of Birds" is a new walk series highlighting conservation science. Learn about current research and fieldwork from Bird Observatory biologists and do a little birding on the way! Each walk will focus on a specific Bird Observatory project in the salt ponds, parks, or open spaces of the Bay Area.

■ SCIENCE OF BIRDS: SALT PONDS, TERNS, AND THE BAY

Sunday, July 9, 8 - 10 a.m.
SITE: Alviso Don Edwards Wildlife Refuge

Salt ponds of the South Bay have produced salt for over 150 years and are also important habitat for a variety of shorebirds. Join Biologist Ann Murphy and Field Assistant Eli French on a walk along the sloughs of the Alviso ponds. Learn how the Bird Observatory's work contributes to the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project and to the study of how contaminants in the Bay affect terns.

■ BIRD BANDING AT COYOTE CREEK

Saturday, August 5, 8:30 a.m. - 10:30 a.m.
SITE: CCFS

Meet at the Borders bookstore parking lot in McCarthy Ranch, Milpitas. Please remember to RSVP on the Friday before the tour. In the event of rain, the tour is cancelled. For more information, e-mail Education Specialist Laura Weiss.

■ BIRDING THE BAY TRAIL WITH NOREEN WEEDEN AND EDDIE BARTLEY

Sunday, August 13, 8 - 10 a.m.
SITE: Presidio

Join "Nature Trip" guides Noreen Weeden and Eddie Bartley on a bird walk at the Presidio starting at the Crissy Field Center in San Francisco.

BIRDING THE BAY TRAIL

Participate in our "Birding the Bay Trail" walk series! Join various leaders as we explore the sixteen best birding locations along the Bay Trail. Go to www.sfbbo.org to get your own free copy of the "Birding the Bay Trail" guide.

BIRD BANDING AT COYOTE CREEK

Visit the Bird Observatory's field station and experience conservation science in action. Tour mist nets, watch a bird banding demonstration, and explore a restored riparian habitat. Coyote Creek Field Station (CCFS) is a wildlife haven in the middle of Silicon Valley.

■ BIRDING THE BAY TRAIL WITH LISA MYERS

Saturday, September 9, 8 a.m. - 12 p.m.
SITE: Lake Merritt

Join "Let's Go Birding" guide and Bird Observatory Board member Lisa Myers on a bird walk at Lake Merritt as migrants return to the Bay Area. Beginners encouraged to attend!

■ SCIENCE OF BIRDS: POWER LINES AND BIRDS

Saturday, October 7, 8 - 10 a.m.
SITE: CCFS

Bird collisions with power lines, wind turbines, and towers have been well documented, but what is being done to prevent them here in Silicon Valley? Join Bird Observatory Field Assistants Cailin Robinson and Corina Jung on a walk along power lines around Coyote Creek as they explain a project studying the use of markers to deter birds from power lines.

■ CALIFORNIA FALL CHALLENGE AND THE BIRD OBSERVATORY'S ANNUAL MEETING!

SAVE THE DATE:

September 16 - October 15

SITES: All over the Bay Area and beyond

Participate in the 10th annual "California Fall Challenge" bird-a-thon that culminates in prizes and celebrations to mark the Bird Observatory's 25th anniversary! Mark your calendars now so that you won't miss the birding and the party. The annual meeting will take place at the end of October after Fall Challenge results are collected. More details to follow soon.

INTERESTED IN CARPOOLING? We've started a mail list group to make carpooling to San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory events easier. Join the group by going to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/BirdObsCarpool/>.



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