

# The Stilt

The Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory

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Summer 1996



Vicki R. Jennings

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Bird Observatory**  
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## Spring in the Baylands Tracking the Bay's Birds

by Janet T. Hanson

After nearly continuous days of rain this past winter, Observatory staff and volunteers hit the ground running this spring. Migration and breeding activity among the Bay's birds took off briskly with the return of warmer weather and our observers were all too happy for a reason to grab binoculars and scopes and get back out-of-doors.

### 1996 Spring Shorebird Count

On Sunday, April 14, 53 volunteers were out in force to tally all shorebirds utilizing the south San Francisco Bay marshes and pond systems as a migration stopover point on their way to their northern breeding grounds. We achieved nearly complete coverage of the shoreline south of the San Mateo Bridge, plus several areas immediately north of either end.

Our observers documented some fairly spectacular flocks of shorebirds, particularly Western Sandpipers, who are at their migratory peak. On the peninsula, the Peninsula Open Space Trust's Ravenswood Preserve was once again a highly favored roosting site during this high tide survey. Observers Mark Strasberger and Peter Metropulos counted 17,600 westerns, 2580

*Continued on Page 2*

## Radio Telemetry and Western Sandpipers

For several days in April, I was pleased to help Sarah and Nils Warnock with their research on Western Sandpiper migration along the Pacific Flyway. For the 3rd year, the Warnocks and other cooperators have placed radio transmitters on a small number of Westerns and tracked their movement up the coast to their breeding grounds in western Alaska and Siberia. The study will help provide documentation of sandpiper use of wetlands along the flyway, particularly important for the smaller, less-known areas north of the Bay. It also will increase understanding of their migration strategy, i.e. the short-hop method vs. the non-stop flight.

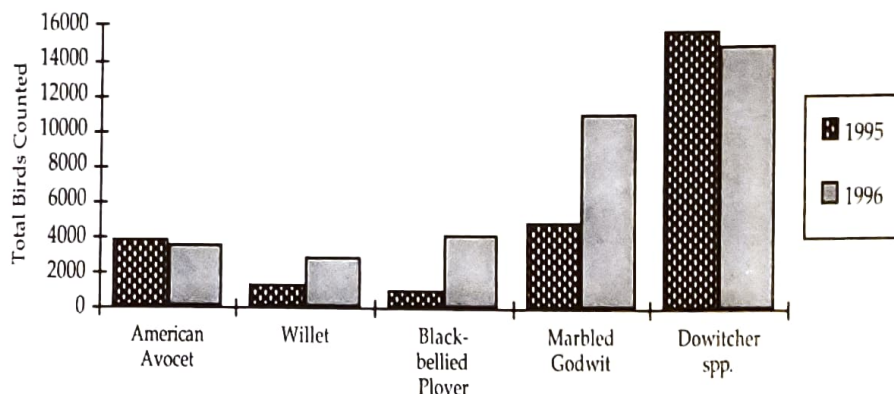
After mistnetting the birds on the marsh near Refuge headquarters in Newark, the birds were weighed, measured and banded. An

*Continued on Page 3*



A Western Sandpiper with newly attached radio. Note the trailing wire antennae.

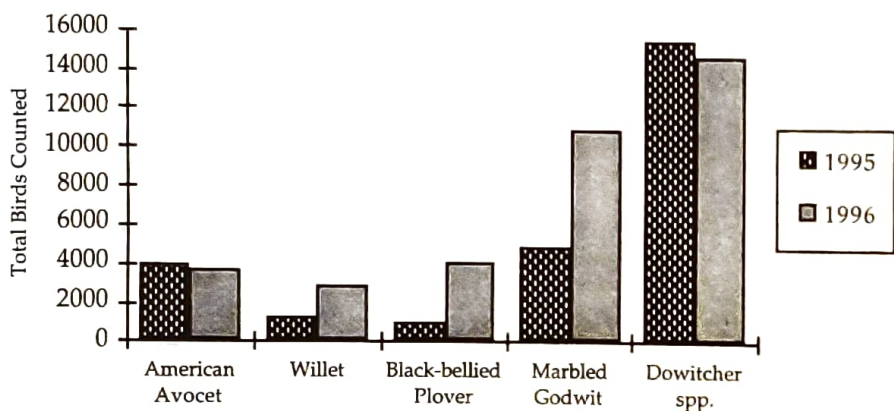
Chart 1  
1995 and 1996 Totals of Small Sandpipers Counted



dowitchers, 546 Black-bellied Plovers, 531 Semipalmated Plovers (about 75% of the total seen), and a Peregrine Falcon, possibly the same one seen by Jan Hintermeister and Alan Lyons in the Mountain View area.

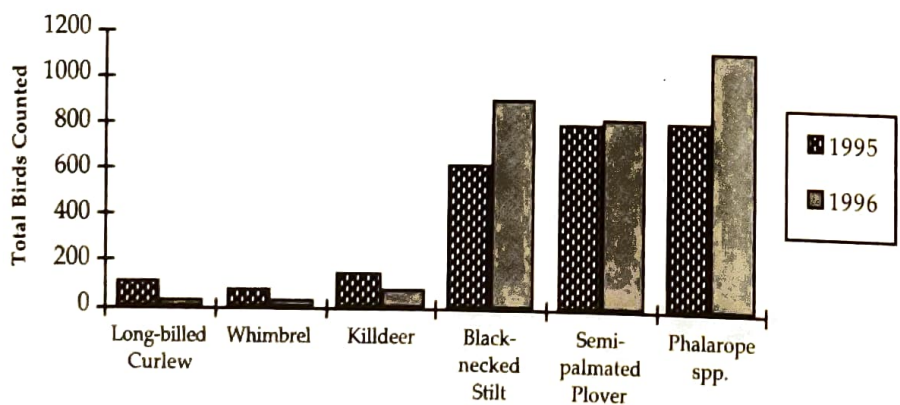
On the east bay shoreline, high numbers were tallied by Janice and Frank Delfino on a drained salt pond: 55,000 peeps and dowitchers were huddled so closely that even estimation with a scope was difficult. We can only sigh with relief that observers with the experience and knowledge the Delfinos possess were the ones to encounter a gathering of this size.

Chart 2  
1995 and 1996 Total Shorebirds Counted > 1000



Our first spring count in 1995 tallied 167,399 birds; this year we counted 170,326. Our goal is to coincide with the peak of Western Sandpiper migration, as this species is the most abundant shorebird here on the bay. Last year, we counted 74,856 westerns (see Chart 1) and only 20,971 this year. But observers have the option of lumping small shorebirds together if they are too far away to identify. Apparently not many aggregates were thought to be only Least/Western mixed flocks, as this total was half of last year's. But the "peep" category jumped to 100,789 from 37,649 last year. Much of this can be accounted for by the huge flock the Delfinos encountered. Dunlin numbers also dropped significantly from last year: this may have been due to grouping with "peeps". The overall total of small sandpipers counted dropped slightly from 138,113 to 130,989.

Chart 3  
1995 and 1996 Total Shorebirds Counted < 1000



In shorebirds numbering more than 1,000, there was little change in numbers of American Avocet and the dowitcher species, yet we counted significantly more Willet, Black-bellied Plover and Marbled Godwit (see Chart 2). We also found more Black-necked Stilt, Semi-palmated Plover and phalaropes, but fewer Long-billed Curlew, Whimbrel and Killdeer (Chart 3). We found 28 Snowy Plovers last year, and only 13 this year. Many variables could account for these differences, including the weather, timing of migration among the different species, natural population fluctua-

tions, and so on. However, there are many things we control that determine the validity of our data: the thoroughness of our coverage (i.e. finding all the high tide roosting areas), the timing of the count, the expertise of our observers, etc. We are constantly addressing these factors through workshops, classes, upgrading our maps and consulting our science advisory board.

Our study area here in the south bay is a complex pattern of salt ponds, marshes, levee roads, channels and some complicated access routes. It is helpful to visit an area several times with a guide and map in hand before tackling it independently. During this survey, several areas of low importance were missed due to substitution problems. Like any good team, we need more depth at different positions. We are privileged to work with the best birders and volunteers we could ask for; we will be making a greater effort to get even more familiar with more places. You can help with this process: if you routinely survey a particular site, invite others to join you on the next survey (but please make sure they have completed the necessary permission forms with us).

Soon we will have good back-ups to call on, if our first-string player happens to go to Costa Rica or someplace else in mid-August.

Regardless of level of expertise, all our volunteers are greatly appreciated for the contributions they make to the study. Please save the morning of August 25 for the fall count and thanks to you all! Jim Armstrong and Debbie Lee, Michelle Burt, Terry Coddington, Howard Cogswell, Charles and Joan Coston, Kathleen and Derek Currall, Robin Dakin, Jim Danzenbaker, Janice and Frank Delfino, Gretchen Flohr, Russ and Marilyn Fowler, Christina Garcia and Marcelino Madrigal, Cam Godecke, Leda Beth Gray and Dave Drake, Jennifer Green, Jan Hintermeister, M. Horn, Lance Hull, Amy Hutzel, Rosemary and Bjorn Jorde, Ron Lindeman, Alan and Arthur Lyons, Sue Macias, Peter Metropulos, Barbara and Kevin Monahan, Anne Moser, Paul Noble, Chris Overington, Doug Padley, Susan Sandstrom, Robin Smith, Kappy Sprenger and Frank Metzger, Paul Stevens, Karlene and Terry Stoker, Susan Stout, Mark Strasburger, Jesse Suckow Crowell, Ruth and Gene Troetschler.



*Long-billed or short-billed? This dowitcher was inadvertently netted while radiotagging Western Sandpipers. With barred sides and no white on the belly, we called it a Long-billed.*

## Radio telemetry *Cont.*

estimation of the bird's fat reserves is made. Then the back feathers above the tail were clipped and the radio glued on with a special epoxy. An adult Western Sandpiper weighs around 25g, somewhat less than 1 ounce. The radio transmitter, with battery, weighs .8g and has a life of about 6 weeks. It falls off when the bird next molts post-breeding. The receiver is then tuned to that particular frequency to make sure the radio is transmitting well, and the bird is released. Tracking is accomplished from an antennae-equipped truck or plane.

Westerns in the hand can be sexed by bill length and it was fascinating to observe that nearly all the birds caught early in the month were males, since they head north first to establish territories. Over a single weekend in mid-April, the ratio abruptly swung toward females. According to Nils, there is some evidence that wintering flocks of Westerns are predominantly one sex or the other, giving new meaning to the term "separate vacations".

Thirty birds were radio-tagged here in San Francisco Bay, with 20 more done at Honey Lake and 20 more at Gray's Harbor in Washington. The project also tagged 20 Pacific Golden Plovers in Oahu, Hawaii for comparison of this long non-migration to that of the typical Western. Three birds tagged here were detected at the Stikine River Delta in Alaska only one week later. By mid-May, one of our birds was already on the breeding grounds on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. And by May 22, no birds could be detected at the major stopover, the Copper River Delta, indicating that most all westerns were already on breeding territory.

Most of the evidence gathered so far supports the short-hop hypothesis for westerns. Yet in 1992, one bird was found at the Copper River Delta only 42 hours after departure from San Francisco Bay, nearly 2000 miles in under 2 days. All Westerns make use of tail winds by varying their flight altitude, up to 10,000 feet above sea level, and this one made exceptional use of the resource. The more our knowledge of shorebirds grows, the more we admire the abilities of these tiny travelers.

### Reference

Iverson, G.C., et al. 1996. Spring migration of Western Sandpipers along the Pacific Coast of North America: a telemetry study. *The Condor* 98(1): 10-21.

## SFBBO Updates

### Wetlands Ecosystem Goals Project

We continue to attend meetings on this project to provide biological information to be used in the management and restoration of wetlands throughout the bay area. Administered by the San Francisco Estuary Institute, the project includes experts in all aspects of wetlands biology. Several of the specialty groups have made use of the Cannery's classroom prior to south bay field trips and enjoyed our ambiance.

### International Migratory Bird Day

This was our first year of official co-sponsorship of this event, organized in cooperation with the Refuge, Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society and Coyote Creek Riparian Station. Observatory volunteers led a shorebird walk for beginners at CCRS and our staff gave a slide presentation on shorebird migration and identification at the Environmental Education Center.

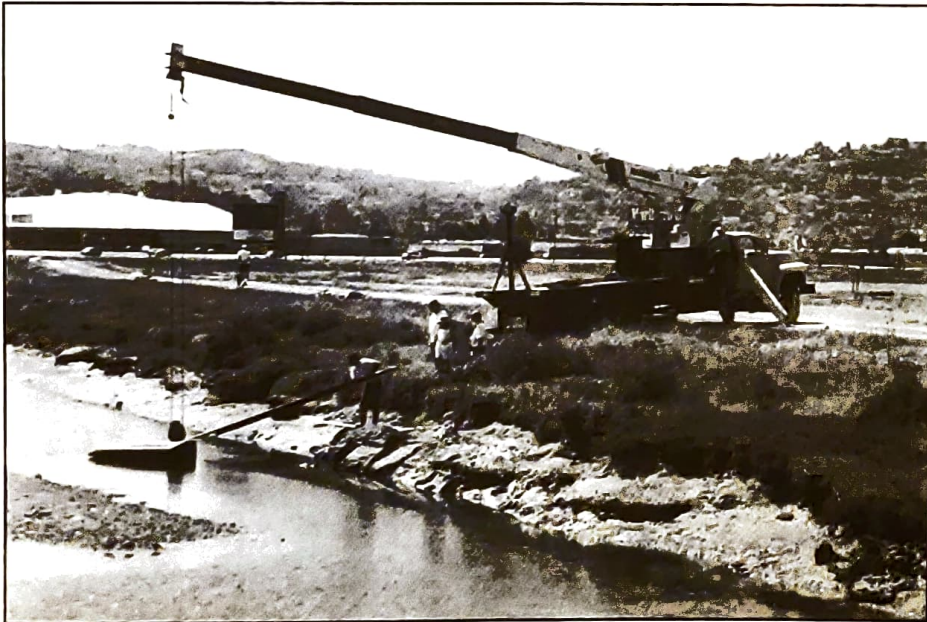
### Spring Clean-up - Redwood Creek and Inner Bair Island

SFBBO was one of several co-sponsors of this wetland clean-up coordinated by

Board Member Mike Spence and the Redwood City Pride and Beautification Committee, on Saturday, April 27. Volunteers worked from the end of Whipple Road and from the theater complex parking lot. The city provided a crane and trucks to haul off the junk, including old cigarette vending machines, large electrical boxes and a huge (2 ton?) old iron ship's winch.

### Shorebird Sister Schools Project

This project, originated by volunteers in conjunction with the Homer Shorebird Festival in Alaska is now managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service. With the advent of a Web page and a listserv, many more schools and researchers were able to share news of their local shorebird populations and migration observations. SFBBO participated in on-line discussions, gave slide presentations and led field trips for several local schools, including the Delphi Academy of Palo Alto and Nativity School of Menlo Park. We also hosted visitors to the Cannery building, including students from George Mayne Elementary here in Alviso.



*It takes heavy equipment to haul heavy junk out of Redwood Creek. Photo courtesy of M. Spence.*

## Black Skimmer Sightings

In the summer of 1995, Black Skimmers nested on San Francisco Bay for the second consecutive year. In the Winter 1995 edition of *The Stilt*, we described our banding the chicks to learn more about their dispersal patterns. We placed both the aluminum bands of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and color bands - white with black numerals - on the chicks, produced by two pairs, one in the Hayward Shoreline area and the other in Mountain View. And we have learned more: one of the Hayward youngsters has been spotted twice, once in Santa Barbara and again further south in Long Beach.

Black Skimmers have again been spotted this spring, in the same vicinities as last year's nests. Look for news of their 1996 breeding attempts in future additions of *The Stilt*.

## Costa Rica .... in August?

Almost every birder knows that prime time for Costa Rica is the dry season in January. But veteran trip leader Dan Keller has discovered a second "mini" dry season in August. In addition to the weather, one outstanding advantage of an off-peak trip is the absence of many of the common North American migrants, allowing for concentration on the specialities Costa Rica is famous for. Dan sets a leisurely pace with several days at each lodge. Sites to be visited include: Rancho Naturalista, Chacon's, Gavilan, LaSelva Reserve, Solimar, Tarcol and the Carara Reserve. Price includes 3 class nights in preparation, all meals, ground transportation, commemorative T-shirt and complete trip lists.

Dates: August 14-31, 1996

Maximum group size: 12

Price: \$2475\* (\$250 is a tax-deductible contribution to SFBBO)

\*excludes airfare, to be arranged by the Tour at an estimated cost of \$750.

*There is some room left on this special SFBBO-sponsored trip. Dan will be happy to answer any questions you may have. He also has an excellent video (by Rich Kuehn) that he will gladly share with you. Please call the Observatory for more information.*

# 1996 Spring Classes Revisited

This last spring, SFBBO reactivated our long-term tradition of offering classes on advanced birding techniques and other topics related to increasing knowledge and appreciation of the bay and its wildlife. We were happy to welcome the return of Don Starks, well known as the best teacher of gull identification in the bay area. Paul Noble also returned to teach a well-received class on owl identification, which included an evening of owling in the Santa Cruz Mountains. And finally, we were thrilled when our President, Dr. Howard Cogswell, agreed to teach a class entitled "Shorebirds of the Pacific Flyway". Howard had a record 20 people in attendance, drawn no doubt by his legendary expertise on the subject and by a growing awareness and appreciation of these ephemeral birds. One highlight of their field trips was coming upon an interpretative sign along the Hayward Shoreline trail introducing the reader to the recently restored Cogswell Marsh!



Howard L. Cogswell (third from right) guiding his students in the art and science of shorebird identification. Photo courtesy of M. Spence.

## And upcoming this fall.....

All classes are held at our Alviso Headquarters in the Bayside Cannery Building unless otherwise specified. Please call the office for more information.

### Pelagic Birds of Monterey Bay - Debbie Shearwater

If you have been thinking of venturing out on a pelagic trip on Monterey Bay, preview the species you may see and their field marks. Debbie will present slides and videos of previous trips and offer a special discount to participants on future boat trips by Shearwater Journeys. Wednesday, September 18 and 25: 7:30- 9:30 pm.  
\$30 member/\$45 Nonmember (includes one year membership)

### Shaded Pencil Drawing - Chuck Stasek

Chuck, who holds a Ph.D. in zoology from U.C. Berkeley, is one of the most popular instructors with Pt. Reyes Field Seminars, with many returning students. This class will help beginners (any kind, not just birders) get started and more advanced students improve their skills. Saturday, October 5, 9 am - 5 pm (bring a lunch)  
\$45 Member/\$60 Nonmember (includes one year membership)

### HawkWatch: the Fall Migration - Allen Fish

Here in the bay, we have access to one the west coast's premiere raptor migration observation spots, at Hawk Hill at the Marin Headlands. Allen, who is Director of the Golden Gate Raptor Observatory, will help us understand raptor i.d., migration ecology and conservation, then lead us on a trip to the Hill during the height of fall migration. Monday, September 30 and October 7, 7:30 - 9:30 pm  
Field trip: Sunday, October 13; 10 am - 2 pm (bring a lunch)  
\$40 Member/\$55 Nonmember (includes one year membership)

*In cooperation with Wildlife Rescue of Palo Alto*

## SFBBO's 1996 Donation Drawing

For the 4th year in a row, SFBBO is co-sponsoring a donation drawing with Wildlife Rescue of Palo Alto. Grand prize this year: a week in Cabo San Lucas!! Plus many other wonderful assorted prizes. Watch your mail for a complete list and for your tickets! And remember, when you receive your tickets through the Observatory, half goes to support our waterbird and shorebird programs, while the other half helps support Wildlife Rescue's excellent network of volunteer rehabilitation specialists. Now that's two good causes for the price of one!

## Special Thanks

We wished earlier for a bigger better Macintosh on which to produce our newsletter and manage our membership database and this time, our wish came true. SFBBO member and volunteer Ed Pandolfino arranged for donation of a MacIsi with a color monitor from his company, Guidant Corporation of Menlo Park. It needed some work to be operational, provided by Jay Hanson, Visioneer Corporation of Palo Alto. It is in daily use and with pleasure, we thank Ed and Jay for their efforts on our behalf.

In the process of producing a new brochure for SFBBO, we have received much professional advice from Nancy DeStefanis, Susan Rosso, SDR Communications of Pleasanton, and Mike Spence, Local Birds, Inc. Thanks to all three for your expertise and energy!

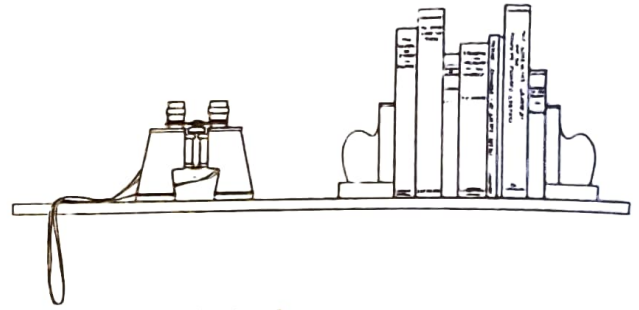
## Matching Funds Gift

Does your employer offer a matching funds program or have a corporate giving program? If so, please contact the Observatory for more information on corporate partnerships.

## Book Review

# *The Stokes Field Guide to Birds, Western Edition*

by Steve Shunk



While many east coast birders anxiously await Roger Tory Peterson's latest edition of *Eastern Birds*, a new player has entered the field guide market for both halves of the country. *Stokes Field Guide to Birds* is now on the shelves of your local nature shop and bookstore, with both an Eastern and Western Edition. Donald and Lillian Stokes maintain a stellar reputation for their previous books and other contributions to birding education, so this birding field guide series is a nice addition to their repertoire.

The Stokes Guide is also a nice edition to any birder's collection of resources. It may be the most comprehensive "field guide" available, with a number of unique features in each species profile. These include nesting behavior such as population status, key threats, and bird count records; and other detailed behavior tips such as flocking and feeding habits. The Stokes Guide also features some very helpful identification guides. Colored tabs give quick reference to common bird groupings, and the Quick Alphabetical Indexes on the covers provide more detailed page listings of bird families.

The Stokes' series covers all the most basic features in a good field guide, but they require some comparison with the other key field guides on the shelf. Like the Audubon series, the Stokes' guides use photographs instead of drawings for each species account. The photos are of excellent quality and accuracy, but still provide the same old challenges for actual field identification. Some of the pictures are extremely close-up, giving unrealistic sizing comparisons with similar species. Also, the angle of pose may not highlight the key field marks, where drawings can

do this consistently and accurately. Another key element of any field guide is each species' range map. The Stokes Guide joins the ranks of National Geographic by placing small range maps on the same page as their respective species. This eliminates the need to flip through the back of the book (like Peterson's), but requires the obvious eye strain needed to detect the extent of certain ranges, particularly when those ranges are limited.

The Stokes Guide compares to Peterson's by breaking up the species accounts into distinctive sections, such as identification, feeding, nesting, habitat, etc. This is a key feature for everyday use, particularly for the less experienced observer. Information is simply easier to find than when the info is presented in a single paragraph, like in the National Geographic guide.

A key challenge presented with the Stokes Guide is the dedication of only one species to each page (except for some appropriate exceptions, such as tiny and difficult empidonax flycatchers). This requires the observer to flip through a number of pages to compare different species, often wasting valuable time in the field as the subject flits out of sight. In this observer's humble opinion, this limitation removes the Stokes guide from my choice of actual "field" guides. It simply becomes too difficult to provide on-the-spot field IDs, and is more valuable at home where one can compare field notes and drawings, field guides and other home references to make an identification. This feature does, however, make the Stokes Guide a perfect backyard field guide, where birds often stay around longer for the luxury of feeders and

birdbaths.

Finally, one additional feature provided in the Stokes' Guide is the concept of "Learning Pages." These multi-page spreads provide a more detailed look at certain difficult groupings of birds, including hawks, shorebirds, gulls, flycatchers, warblers and sparrows. Some general information exists about the grouping and its distinctions, as well as a breakdown of the different types of birds within the grouping. The Learning Pages are helpful, but they also have their limitations. Again, since the Stokes use photos, the cropping of the photos into the white page is challenging to the eye. Also, the varied poses of the birds make group comparisons difficult. Much of the information in these sections is incomplete concerning migratory occurrences, plumage variation and flight patterns, but a decent attempt is made to familiarize the reader with the challenge at hand.

Despite its limitations, *Stokes Field Guide to Birds* should be added to your birding library. It provides quality information at your fingertips and is well written, photographed and documented. If you venture beyond the backyard, you will surely need one of the other key field guides by your side, but you will want this one at home when you return. Happy breeding season!

*Steve Shunk is a local naturalist teaching beginning birding classes in the south bay. He is a Board Member with the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society and a volunteer observer for SFBBO. You can reach Steve by calling Paradise Birding at 408/293-1778, or emailing him at paradisaea@aol.com.*

## Magazine and Book Contributions

Do you have a closet full of birding magazines with photos too beautiful to throw out? Do you have a shelf of dusty biology or birding books that someone else might enjoy? Here's your chance to clean house, recycle, and help the Observatory. Due to the popularity of the

magazine exchange table at our 1995 Annual Meeting, we plan to expand the offerings. We are now accepting donations of birding magazines and relevant books for inclusion in our library or for a sale table at the annual meeting. (no newsletters, please). This may help the

Observatory obtain a more comprehensive library, or some other worthy friend, and will help you to a tidier environment at home! To arrange for drop-off or pick-up, give us a call at 408/946-6548.

## Our thanks to these supporters of the Observatory . . . .

### Memberships

We welcome the following new and returning members of SFBBO (February through April 1996):

Sabrina Amin, Paul and Joan Armer, Richard Baird, Barbara Borthwick, Kim Briones, Michel Buerner, Robert Card, Terry and Zoe Coddington, Jean Cohn, Nicholas Coiro, Kathleen and Derek Currall, Alan DeMartini, Joan DeWitt, Cliff Drowley, Arthur and Rose Feinstein, Dave and Susie Formenti, Charles Franklin, Christina Garcia and Marcelino Madrigal, Quentin Goodrich, Marie Gordon, Ralph and Terry Hart Lee, Pat Hauswald, Sue Hunt, June Hymas, Judy Irving, Paul Jones, Sohail Malik, Lester and Mary Manson, Mari Matsueda and

Larry St. Regis, Diana Matthiesen, Thomas Moore, John and Ruth Moore, Neil Multack, Bess Nericcio, Ellen Noble, Carol Oda, Phyllis Pansegrau, Laurel and Lou Pavesi, Ben Pless, Peter Radcliff, Susan Ramos, Jacquelyn Russum, Marilyn and Phil Scowcroft, Kendric and Marion Smith, Philip Smith, Sandy Spakoff, Scott and Gayle Spencer, Paul Stevens, Sara Timby, Richard and Vivian Van Dijk, Judith Wagner, PhD, Janet Wessel, Anna Wilcox, Virginia Willcox, Ardyth Woodbury

### Contributions

We thank the following individuals for their contributions to SFBBO (February through April 1996):

Sabrina Amin, Ronald and Viola Barklow, Kim Briones, Michel Buerner, Cam Godecke, Terry Hart Lee, Jan Hintermeister, John Jay, Valerie Layne, Fran and Leroy Nelson, Carol Oda, Ed Pandolfino, Susan Ramos, Dave Riensche, Susan Rosso, Jacquelyn Russum, Sandra Skolnik, Philip Smith, Sandy Spakoff, Mike Spence, Scott and Gayle Spencer, Ruth Troetschler



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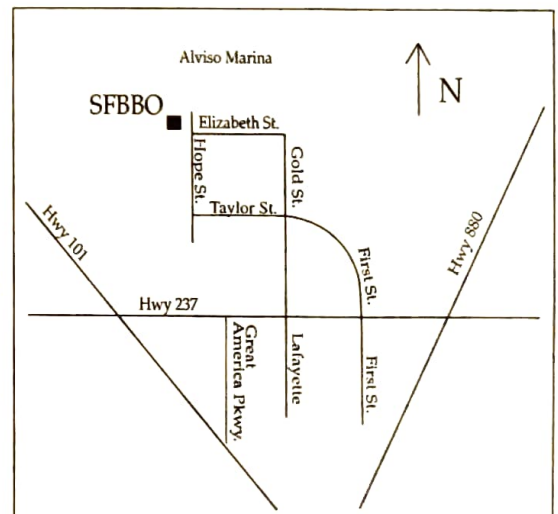
The Bird Observatory is located at 1290 Hope St. in Alviso. The office is open weekdays and some weekends, but specific hours vary with our field schedule. Before stopping in, call (408) 946-6548 and check when we will be available.

The Board meetings are open to the membership. Call the Observatory office for dates and times.

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The San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory is a non-profit (501-C-3) corporation. All memberships and contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law. Annual memberships are as follows:

|                            |                             |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Patron: \$2,000</i>     | <i>Associate: \$50</i>      |
| <i>Life: \$400</i>         | <i>Family: \$35</i>         |
| <i>Sustaining: \$200</i>   | <i>Individual: \$25</i>     |
| <i>Contributing: \$100</i> | <i>Student/Senior: \$15</i> |



## Mark your calendars!!



Saturday, September 14, 1996  
3:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

*SFBBO's 15th Anniversary!!  
Annual meeting and barbecue  
at the Old Bayside Cannery,  
Alviso*

Come join SFBBO Staff, Board of Directors, members and friends for an afternoon of local birding field trips, birding magazine and book sale, raffle and door prizes, the 1996 volunteer awards, special recognition of SFBBO's Founders, a sumptuous barbecued chicken feast, the return of the Gospel Accordion to Women, and...

Special guest speaker

*Dave Shuford*

of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory,  
Author of the Marin County Breeding Bird Atlas

See the summer edition of *The Stilt* for more details —  
and see you there!!

## Calendar of Member Events

**June 7 - June 10**

Colonial Waterbird Monitoring Program. If you are a volunteer observer, please check your colony during this 4-day window.

**June 15, 23, 30**

Avian botulism monitoring begins. This project involves periodic surveys of several south bay slough channels for signs of avian botulism. Led by Biologist Valerie Layne. Limited numbers of volunteers needed. Please contact the Observatory.

**June 21 - June 24**

Colonial Waterbird Monitoring Program. If you are a volunteer observer, please check your colony during this 4-day window.

**August 25, Sunday, 8 - 11 am.**

South Bay shorebird census. Fall migration count.

### *San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory*

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