

The Stilt

Vol. 17 No. 3

Fall 1998

The Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory



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Radio-tagged Rails

By Danielle Lefer

SFBBO is now tracking rails! Our study assesses the impact on the rail population created by the removal of bulrush vegetation from a flood control channel in a Sunnyvale marsh. The Santa Clara Valley Water District will clear the vegetation in mid-September.

We are looking at the response of two shy and little-studied species, the Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) and the Sora (*Porzana carolina*) to this disturbance. How large is the population out there right now? Where will the displaced rails go? Will they have an impact on rails in other areas?

Rails will be monitored at 4 study sites: The disturbed site (Sunnyvale East); a site within one km of the disturbed site, where the rails are likely to disperse (Guadalupe South); and two sites located over 2 km from Sunnyvale (Mallard Slough and Alviso Marina).

The first phase of the study is in progress, with the help of our volunteers. Pre-disturbance call counts will establish the initial population numbers at the study sites. We play a tape of rail calls and listen for responses, recording the location of the bird on a map. We listen for the following vocalizations: the Sora's whinney (whee-hee-hee-hee-hee) and two note call (ker-wee or per-weep or ter-ee) and the Virginia Rail's grunt, tick-it and kid kid kidick kidick. This information allows us to estimate the number of rails at each site as well as any changes in numbers after the disturbance. In our call counts we have heard up to 6 Virginia Rails and 1 Sora in Guadalupe Slough, 4 Virginia Rails, 1 Sora and 3 Common Moorhens at Sunnyvale marsh, 8 Virginia Rails and 1 Sora at Mallard Slough and 4 Virginia Rails at Alviso Marina. Since this method underestimates the actual number of rails in the area, we're hoping that there are many more rails out there.



Danielle holds the first radio-tagged Virginia Rail. Note the thin trailing antennae wire. (Ed. Note: one month later, this rail continues to move around the study area). Photo by mud-loving volunteer Lee Franks.



San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory

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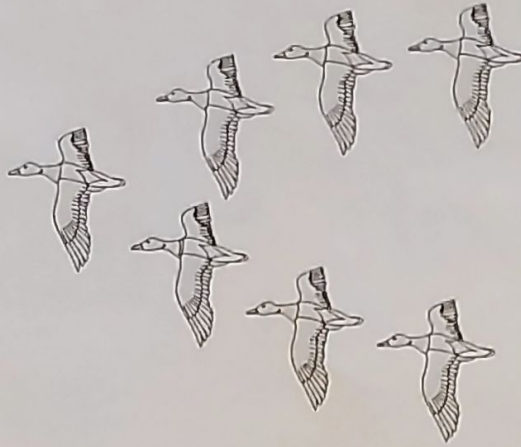
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Radio-tagged Rails

Continued from page 1

In order to determine where the rails disperse to after the disturbance, we are trapping rails and equipping them with radio transmitters. We've been placing 13 traps baited with tasty kippered herring and waiting a few hours for the birds to discover this treat. We caught our first Virginia Rail August 9, weighing in at over 100grams. He gets to be the first one on the block with this fancy set-up, and seemed to be doing well. We can now begin tracking its movements.

If you like to play in the mud, come join us for one of our trapping or tracking sessions. Call our office for more details and an updated schedule.



Report from the High Sierras Field Trip

August 8-9, 1998

By Tom Ryan

We began our trip along Highway 108 at Pinecrest at 7 AM on Saturday August 8. From Pinecrest we traveled to Niagara Creek campground. Along the road to the campground we observed Red-breasted Sapsucker, Hairy Woodpecker, White-headed Woodpecker, Hammond's Flycatcher, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, House Wren, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Warbling Vireo, Nashville Warbler, Western Tanager, Chipping Sparrow, and Fox Sparrow. Continuing to Columns of the Giants, we added White-throated Swift, Dusky Flycatcher, Macgillivray's Warbler, and Green-tailed Towhee. In the vicinity of Sonora Pass we observed Williamson's Sapsucker, Clark's Nutcracker (feeding young), Lincoln's Sparrow, (mountain) White-crowned Sparrow, Cassin's Finch, and Red Crossbill.

From here we continued to Lee Vining, a Black-billed Magpie was observed near Sonora Bridge. While setting up camp at Aspen Grove I observed a Townsend's Solitaire. That afternoon we went to the north shore of Mono Lake. We found Common Nighthawk, Osprey, Sora, Greater Yellowlegs, Yellow-headed Blackbird at Dechambeau Ponds. Along the shoreline we found Wilson's Phalarope, Red-necked Phalarope, Spotted Sandpiper, Brewer's Sparrow and Northern Harrier. In the juniper forest at

the intersection of Highway 167 and Cemetery Road we observed Pinyon Jay and Bushtit.

On Sunday, 9 August, we birded Yosemite following Highway 120. Crowds were large and the birding was ok, but the skies were clear and blue, and the park was spectacular. We did manage to find Osprey, Clark's Nutcracker and Western Bluebird near Tioga Pass, Cassin's Finch and Green-tailed Towhee at Dana Meadows. At Tenaya Lake we ran into a spectacular warbler flock consisting of Orange-crowned Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Hermit Warbler. At White Wolf Lodge we found Pine Siskin, Cassin's Finch, another great warbler flock which included Nashville Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Hermit Warbler.

In all we totaled 91 species on the trip. In addition to the birds, the flowers on the high meadows and in the sub-alpine zone were blooming. The botanists in our group were having a great time identifying the large variety flowers.

Highway 108 provides excellent birding through a variety of life zones, without the crowds and traffic of Yosemite. We highly recommend it, although the road over Sonora Pass is much windier and steeper than Tioga Pass.

1998 Slate of Board Members

Harriet Gerson

When asked for an occupation, Harriet listed "world traveler" but "professional volunteer" may be more appropriate. As an early member of SFBBO, active birder and long-time resident of Santa Clara, Harriet knows our study area and issues very well. She also knows the value of volunteerism through hours of first-hand experience and can contribute knowledgeably to the expansion of SFBBO's own fundraising and volunteer programs.

Jan Hintermeister

Jan joined our Board as an appointee last year and is leading the effort to update our Bylaws. He is a long-time Observatory member and supporter, in addition to contributing hours of volunteer effort to Golden Gate Raptor Observatory and Coyote Creek Riparian Station. He is a systems analyst at Deskin, Inc. in Sunnyvale and has an M.S. in Operations Research from Stanford University.

George Oetzel

George also appointed to our Board earlier this year and has done a wonderful job getting our website up and running, no small task, indeed! As a research engineer at SRI, he understands the importance of strong science as a basis of the Observatory's work. As an experienced birder, backpacker and bicyclist, George is well qualified for some of more rigorous field work we undertake.

Lou Young

Yes, he's back and we are glad of it! Long-time SFBBO member Lou Young is again eligible for Board Membership and already contributing to our fundraising and research efforts. Lou is a retired Lockheed engineer and spends many hours running model airplane events. His years of valuable board experience and his enthusiasm for SFBBO "now that things are getting interesting" make a great combination of traits.

Brooks Island's Caspian Tern Colony

By Kiera Freeman, 1998 Colonial Waterbird Intern

This was the first season SFBBO had the enthusiasm and resources, such as dedicated volunteers, to expand its Colonial Waterbird Monitoring Program to the Caspian Tern colony of Brooks Island. Brooks Island is a highly protected part of the East Bay Regional Parks District. Special permission is required before anyone can set foot onto the island.

Brooks Island lies one kilometer off the coast of Richmond within the San Francisco Bay. The Caspian Tern colony of Brooks Island is well established and, according to EBRP, has been there for many years. The island is also home to a colony of Western Gulls.

The Colonial Waterbird Research Program consists of two parts. Phase one is an incubation survey, which measures different reproductive parameters. Teams of biologists and volunteers carefully make their way through the colony, counting nest scrapes and numbers of eggs in the clutches. In selected nests, they measure the length, width, and weight of each egg. The stage of development of each egg is determined by briefly floating the egg in fresh water. From this collected data, we were able to calculate the best time to return to the island to band the most chicks at the optimum age for banding.

We returned to Brooks Island on Thursday June 27th for phase two, the measuring and banding of the chicks. It was an unusually bright, warm and clear day, a welcome exception from our extended rainy season. On a rising tide, two of SFBBO's inflatable boats were launched from Richmond Harbor to carry ten people, including biologists and trained volunteers over to Brooks Island. After a Normandy style landing, we unloaded equipment and gathered around project leader Tom Ryan, to confirm our strategy.

Once in the colony, time is of the essence and to some degree, our plan of action was predetermined. The time within a colony is strictly monitored so that there is minimal disturbance to the birds. This amount of time varies in each situation, as we observe the colony's degree of

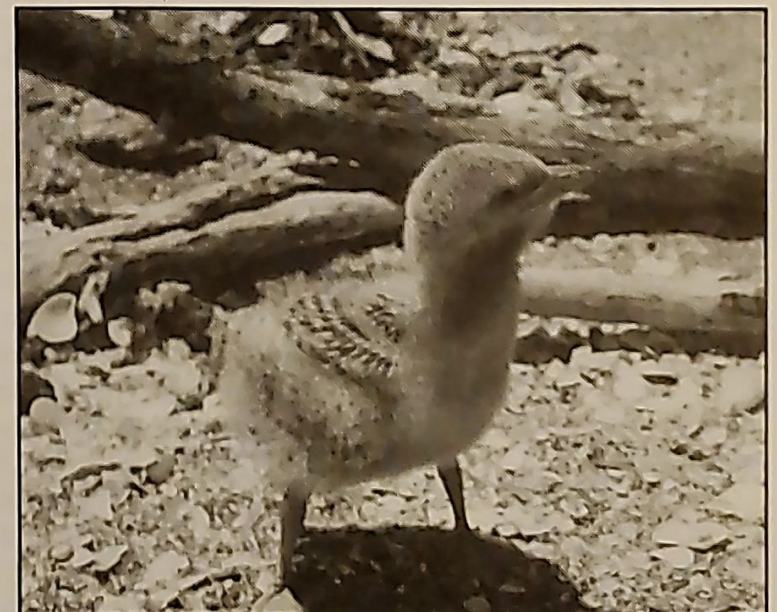


A Caspian Tern chick gives Adrian del Nevo and Janet Hanson his opinion of the proceedings on Brooks Island. (Sue Macias)

reaction to our presence. Generally, the time frame, under ideal conditions, is approximately 45 minutes to an hour.

We quickly regrouped into three banding teams consisting of Tom Ryan, Lou Young, and Cheryl Millett; Adrian del Nevo and Janet Hanson; Jennifer Parkin, Lee Franks, and myself. Sue Macias and Charles Coston were assigned to capture and return any chicks that charged for the water. Lou was also able to videotape the events for use in future volunteer training sessions. They also kept a close eye on the neighboring Western Gull colony. Our efforts were completed within an hour. When we were finished an astonishing 65 Caspian tern chicks had been weighed, measured and banded, a very successful day's total. It was an extremely gratifying and memorable day for everyone involved. Relaxing after the effort, we boated back to the Marina and had the pleasure of watching a flight show of around twenty soaring American White Pelicans.

From personal experience, this was one of the most enjoyable days of the season. Thank you to everyone involved in this and all other operations through out this field season. It could never be accomplished without the help of our volunteers.



A still downy Caspian Tern chick with scapulars about to emerge. (Sue Macias)

The Dredge and the Egrets

By Janet Hanson

By July, the heronry at Mallard (also known as Artesian) Slough, Santa Clara County is usually in its waning moments. Most of the year's young have fledged and only return to the colony to roost. Five species of ardeids nest in its dense stands of California Bulrush: Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Black-crowned Night Heron, Cattle Egret and Little Blue Heron. It is the second largest mixed ardeid colony in California, second only to the Salton Sea. SFBBO staff and volunteers have been observing and recording data on the colony since 1982.

Mallard Slough is surrounded by levees that define the neighboring salt ponds. Cargill Salt Division is currently reinforcing many of their south bay levees, by dredging muds from within the ponds and depositing them on top to dry. Late this summer, their dredge, *The Mallard* (a popular name!) was working in the salt pond neighboring the heronry and was forced to stop work to prevent disturbance to the nesting birds.

A three-way cooperative effort was proposed: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists agreed to allow Cargill to continue their work adjacent to the heronry, with the provision that SFBBO biologists would monitor the effects of dredge's movements on the few remaining active nests of late breeding Snowy Egrets. SFBBO biologists Tom Ryan and Robin Dakin assessed the activity level of the heronry from the levees and by kayak, then went aboard *The Mallard* to observe the birds' reactions to the working dredge. Fortunately, the remaining nests with downy chicks were not within sight of the dredge and the few nests that were close-by held nearly fledged, fully feathered young. The dredge is large but moves very slowly and rhythmically. Through close observation by SFBBO biologists and on-the-spot communication, Cargill's crew was able to complete the work with little or no negative impact on the heronry.

Robin Dakin, SFBBO biologist, writes: We were given the job of monitoring the colony on a weekly basis to determine where the nests were so the dredge could maintain a safe distance. We also determined the age range of the chicks at

the heronry so that the FWS would have the needed information to give the go-ahead to start dredge activity in the location of the heronry. The chicks needed to be old enough to move safely out of the vicinity of the dredge if disturbed. It was determined, by reviewing the literature, that birds needed to be about 4 to 5 weeks of age.

Cargill stalled their operations in the pond area near the heronry until all of the birds in the area were old enough to clamer about easily in the bulrush. Then, they began the job of topping levees along the southern portion of the pond. Concerned that not much was known about how birds would react to such activity and that some younger birds might have gone undetected in the heavy bulrush, we decided an SFBBO biologist should be on board the dredge as work began. So, at 8:00am on a cool July morning, Tom Ryan and I donned hard hats and safety goggles and climbed aboard the dredge for a safety orientation.

The dredge is operated from a control room situated at the front of its upper deck. From this room, the best and safest vantagepoint on the craft, we observed the effects of the work on the nesting herons and egrets. Each observation period lasted between 20 and 40 minutes, during which time both adult and young bird's behavior was carefully monitored for signs of disturbance. Such signs could range from anything as benign as looking up out of the roosting area with an extended neck, to a more disturbing mass flushing of birds from the area. Our preliminary results seem to suggest that the disturbance to the birds was minimal. We plan to further analyze the data and will be generating a full report on our findings. Since studies of this sort are fairly uncommon, we hope that this report will provide valuable information to SFBBO, the refuge and Cargill. We will continue to work with Cargill and other groups in the bay area to minimize the impact of human activity on the San Francisco Bay's birds.



Cargill's dredge, *The Mallard*, at work near Mallard Slough. (Robin Dakin)



What is This???

**Annual Membership Meeting,
98 Field Season Recap,
Volunteer Recognition,
And Barbecue (whew!)**

*Oh Boy!
When is it?*

**Sunday, October 18, 1998
5 PM - 8 PM**

*How does
it work?*

We provide the delicious barbecued chicken and beverages. Please bring a side dish, salad or dessert to share. Don't forget to bring any photos you may have taken as a field volunteer. And any stories to share!

*Sounds yummy!
Where do we show up??*

**Environmental Education Center
Zanker at Grand
Alviso, CA**

Great! We will be there!!

Please RSVP by calling 408/946-6548. Looking forward to seeing you!!

From 101:

Take 237 eastbound towards Milpitas
Take the Zanker Road exit and turn left, toward the Bay
Cross the railroad tracks
Right before the intersection with Grand, make the sharp
right turn onto the ECC's entry road and follow it to
the parking lot.

From 880:

Take 237 westbound towards Mountain View
Take the Zanker Road exit and turn right, toward the Bay
Then same as above . . .

Fall Classes

HawkWatch: the Fall Migration

Here in the Bay Area, we have access to one of the great migration observation spots on the West Coast. The Marin Headlands are the source of the great thermal elevator that southbound raptors ride skyward before crossing the Gate. Joe will help us understand raptor identification, behavior, migration ecology and conservation, then lead us on a trip to the Hill during the height of fall migration.

Instructor: Joe Didonato, Head Naturalist, East Bay Regional Park District.

Class meeting: Thursday, October 1 and 8; 7:30 - 9:30 PM.

Field trip: Sunday, October 11; 10 AM - 2 PM (bring a lunch); location: the Marin Headlands

Cost: Members \$40/Nonmembers \$55

Shorebirds of the Pacific

The class time will cover introduction to our local shorebirds, with emphasis on identification using slides, and on shorebird natural history. John received his Masters under Howard Cogswell and leads field trips to shorebird breeding areas in Alaska.

Instructor: John Luther, Instructor, College of Alameda, Oakland Museum. Field trip leader for Field Guides, Nature Company Betchart Expeditions.

Class meeting: Wednesday, Sept. 30 & October 7, 7-9 PM

Field trip: Sat., Oct. 10, 9 AM-1 PM; Hayward Shoreline

Cost: Members \$50/Nonmembers \$65



SFBBO Updates

Kayak Tour of Bair Island

Join us on these low tide, evening kayak tours of Redwood Creek and the sloughs surrounding Bair Island. Thousands of shorebirds pause on the mudflats of the south bay to refuel on their way south. By special arrangement with Riptides and Rapids Kayaking. No experience necessary. Birding ethics observed. Advanced registration required.

Dates: Sunday, September 20; October 4
Cost: Members \$60/Nonmembers \$75

Bair Island Wildlife Surveys

Accompany two SFBBO biologists on our monthly wildlife surveys of Bair Island. These surveys will be conducted at high tide both on foot and in our 13' powered inflatable boat. Reserve your space soon as each trip is limited to only 4 participants.

Dates: September 19, October 17,
November 17, December 17

Cost: Members \$35/Nonmembers \$35

Klamath and Tule Lake

This repeat of last year's spectacular trip will commence in the shadow of Mt. Shasta for another look for Black-backed Woodpecker. Continuing on to Butte Valley, we expect numerous birds of prey, including Ferruginous and Rough-legged hawks. The day finishes at Lower Klamath NWR for looks at Snow and Ross' geese, plus Tundra Swan and Sandhill Crane. On Sunday, we will check Tule Lake for wintering Bald Eagles, then conclude the trip at Lava Beds National Monument, searching for Pinyon Jays, Mountain Bluebird and Golden Eagle.

Date: November 6-8

Leaders: Tom Ryan and Gjon Hazard

Cost: Members \$60/Nonmembers \$75

Birding Day Trips

Point Reyes

Date: September 26

Leader: TBA

Cost: \$25/35*

Elkhorn Slough/Moss Landing

Date: October 10

Leader: Dick Carlson

Cost: \$20/30*

East Bay Refuges

Date: November 14

Leader: Ed Pandolfino

Cost: \$15/25*

Los Banos NWR

Date: December 5

Leader: TBA

Cost: \$20/30*

* Nonmember cost

Volunteer Opportunities

Our volunteers enjoy learning about the birds of the bay firsthand. Please call SFBBO for more information on any of the following projects:

- ◆ Avian Disease Monitoring Program Weekly boat surveys: 5 June through November
- ◆ Band Reading: 1 July through September
- ◆ Tern Island Stake Removal: Saturday, Sept. 12
- ◆ Gull Colony Enclosure Repair: Sunday, Sept. 27
- ◆ Administrative: ongoing, flexible schedule



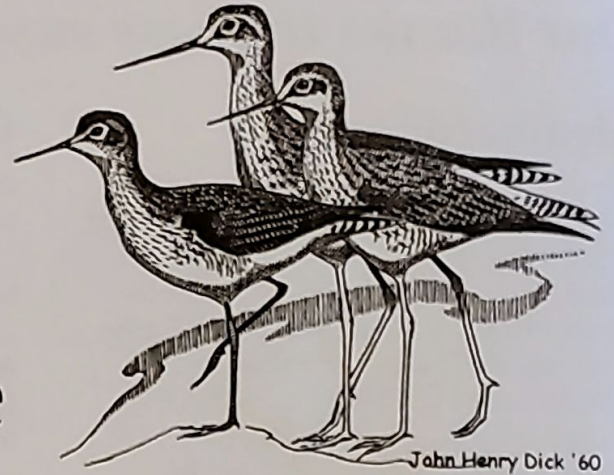
Field volunteer Frances Chen holds a newly banded California Gull chick.



Field work can be really tough: Karlene and Terry Stoker head out for the colony islands in our double kayak.

Picture this....

The abundant natural diversity of California's 58 counties.....
The spectacular fall migration of 400+ species down the Pacific Flyway....
A competition for birders covering the entire Golden State.....
And a fun way to support your Audubon chapter or other favorite non-profit.....



Where will you meet the....

California Fall Challenge

September 18 – October 17, 1998

The California Fall Challenge is a state-wide birding event that allows county teams to show others what their favorite California county has to offer. Here's how it works:

- ◆ Pick one county (or more) in California
- ◆ Form a dream team with your best birding friends
- ◆ Get your employer, friends and neighbors to sponsor your team
- ◆ Do a Big Day between September 18th through October 17th

The Grand Prize, a Leica Spotting Scope, will be awarded to the team with the highest percentage of their county's list. Additional prizes will be awarded for other special efforts, such as the team with the highest overall species count, highest number of vagrants seen, best bird seen, best fundraising effort and more!

*You can pick San Diego County and go for 200 species
or you can bird Alpine and try to set a new county record - or both!*

Register your team now and receive:

- ◆ CFC Rules including complete category and prize list
- ◆ The county list for each county you select to bird
- ◆ A CFC T-shirt for every registered team member
- ◆ A one-year membership in the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory

If you so choose, we will split the proceeds from all your sponsors with your local Audubon or the non-profit of your choice.

Visit our California Fall Challenge homepage at www.sfbbo.com



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