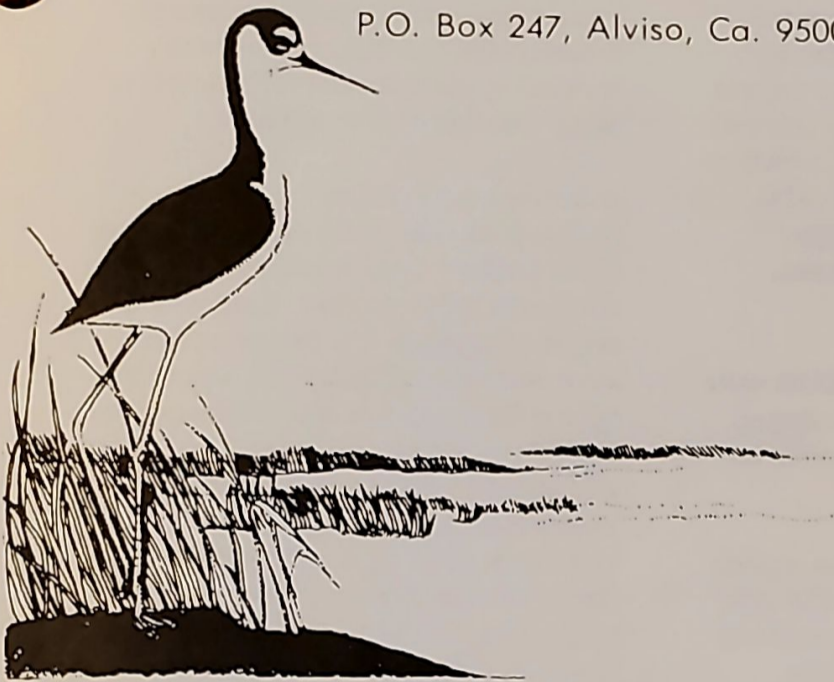


SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY NEWSLETTER

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May/June 1988

Yellow Rail Sighting at the Palo Alto Baylands

Lou Young

At 10 a.m. Sunday, January 17, 1988, the SFBBO rail census went into full swing at the Palo Alto Baylands. The time coincided with a high tide driven by strong winds off the bay. The tide, combined with heavy runoff from an all-night rain, forced the salt marsh creatures out of hiding to seek dry perches wherever they could. Eleven of us took our assignments from Peg Woodin and began looking for rails. The usual thirty or so birders from as far away as San Diego were stationed by the marsh corner where the Black Rails are regularly seen. Many others were stalking the boardwalk and levees.

The entire marsh was flooded -- only the tips of the tallest plants were above the water's surface. The lowest portion of the boardwalk between the Baylands Nature Interpretive Center and the bay was under an inch or so of water. Jean Young and I were assigned to census the boardwalk under the high-tension power lines. Several rails took refuge on, under, and next to the boardwalk. Most of these were unintentionally driven out into the open water by us or the birders. Three rails - a Virginia, a Sora and what I thought was an immature Sora were clinging to the boardwalk or to flotsam alongside the walk. These were soaked, and under leaden skies were approaching extreme exhaustion and hypothermia.

The Virginia seemed to be barely OK. One of the birders moved the "immature Sora" from a crevice in the walk and placed it on a small pickleweed tussock 10 meters from the Interpretive Center building. He returned to his car to look up "Yellow Rail" in his book. All I could see was a nondescript lump of very wet and matted feathers lying on the pickleweed

with its wings outstretched an inch above the water. We were more concerned about its condition than its identification. Jean, who is an experienced and authorized wildlife rehabilitator, picked the bird up and examined it at about 10:30 am. She felt that it was near death from exposure and was going into shock. Exposed to the cold wind and approaching rain, we thought it likely that the small bird would expire or be attacked by predators in a short time. Jean placed the bird inside her coat to begin warming it, and took it to our car. On the way to the car it was tentatively identified by a local birding instructor as an immature Sora. In the car, Jean wrapped it in her new Christmas scarf and placed it in a box.

About 11:00 a.m. another birder approached Jean to ask if she would take care of an adult Sora which had lost consciousness. It was placed in the scarf with the "juvenile" in the warm car. When Jean returned to the boardwalk, she told me that it was in even worse shape than the first bird.

Energized by a bitter wind and concerned for the sick birds, we finished the census as quickly as possible (about 11:45 am) and left for home as the rain started. This was not very quick because we had to move very slowly and cautiously along the boardwalk lest we frighten creatures into the water.

We were especially concerned about the small mice we saw, which we thought might be Salt-marsh Harvest Mice (*Reithrodontomys raviventris*).^{*} They were attempting to hide in the sparse cover afforded by the crevices on the boardwalk. Several of the 11 mice which we saw were drenched and didn't attempt to move, even though they were not well hidden. One

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mouse was perched on a bolt in plain view. Earlier we had seen a Ring-billed Gull pick up and consume a tiny mouse, and so we wished to avoid frightening any mice out into the open. Only one mouse leaped into the water at my approach and he immediately swam back to the boardwalk and climbed up to safety. Several birders and groups of birders came out onto the boardwalk and they seemed unaware of the danger that their presence caused to the mice and birds seeking refuge from the high tide. The exposure risk to the mice was possibly offset by the benefit that our presence provided by frightening predatory gulls, herons, and hawks away.

At home, Jean took the box of rails indoors and discovered that only the adult Sora was nestled in the scarf. I rushed out to the car, and by lying on the floor I was able to see the miraculously recovered and dry "juvenile Sora" sneaking around under the seats. As I moved my hand toward it, it bobbed its head and took off straight up. I caught it easily in my hand. Its head was predominantly brown with a light line over the eye. There was no sign of the Sora's black facial mark. Relieved that it hadn't escaped while we unloaded the car, I carried the bird into the house without further inspection.

Jean placed this bird in a dry aquarium furnished with synthetic turf, a clump of fresh grass in dirt, and a water dish full of tubifex worms. Mealworms were also available. The aquarium was shielded with cloth around three sides. Within a few minutes the immature bird was actively eating tubifex worms. Meanwhile, the adult Sora had not moved and we felt that it was unlikely to survive. It was placed in a covered box half on a heating pad. Within a half hour the Sora was dry and active! It was put into the aquarium with the first bird and was soon feasting on tubifex worms. The aquarium was in our screened porch and we could observe the birds, in dim light, at a distance of 2 meters through our living room door.

Sunday evening and all day Monday the rails were offered tubifex worms, mealworms and tiny seeds. We never saw the birds eat a mealworm, but about 35 worms disappeared. The adult Sora was observed to eat some seeds, but both birds seemed to prefer the tubifex worms. Four to five ounces of tubifex worms were consumed by the birds over the total of approximately 45 hours that they were in the aquarium. The environment was kept quiet. In the

daytime, the mannerisms of the two birds were similar except that the "juvenile" skulked in the grass cover much more than the "adult". Feeding was chicken-like, with quick jabs at the food with the beak. The Audubon Encyclopedia says that Soras eat small mollusks and aquatic insects, but feed heavily (73% by volume) on seeds. The Yellow Rail entry, which might be applicable because of the bill similarities, says "Only food reported: small snails, insects, seeds, grasses, clover leaves."

Monday night Jean decided the birds were in good enough condition to be released. We wanted to return the rails as soon as possible because there is little information on successful rail rehabilitation that we could use as a guide (Dodi Franklin has been successful with a Sora and a Virginia). Tuesday morning she registered the birds with Wildlife Rescue of Palo Alto as two Soras. Tuesday at noon on a beautiful sunny day we had the birds in separate darkened boxes ready for release at the baylands. As we drove, the "juvenile" made soft peeps in his box. Jean told me that, of the hundreds of birds she had worked with, it was the hardest bird to hold now that it had its strength back. I had received a call about a "Yellow Rail", and I had assured the caller that the bird we had was an immature Sora but agreed to take photos for the record. Jean took the suspect out of the box, with the car doors securely closed. She spread the bird's wings in the sunshine for the first photo, and I found myself staring through the macro lens at a perfect crescent of white

feathers at the trailing edge of the inner portion of each wing. The scaly-looking wing shoulders blended into a back that had pronounced streaking and scalloping in an intricate and beautiful pattern of brown, black and buff. I immediately revised my identification to "Yellow Rail" along with some other remarks.

Jean turned the bird so I could get a picture of its side, and in the good light its chest showed a yellowish-buff tinge. The chest was lightly spotted. The leading edges of its wings and its undersides were white like a Black Rail's wings. We got the Sora out of its box and placed the two side by side for pictures. The Sora was about 15 to 20 mm longer than the Yellow Rail, and much grayer in this first look under good lighting conditions. The Sora's bill was definitely heavier and longer and the Yellow Rail's bill and its forehead made a more nearly straight line. The Yellow Rail's bill was yellowish, but not as strongly colored as the Sora's. The Sora's irises were red and the Yellow Rail's eyes appeared to be all dark.

After taking the pictures, we had to wait a half-hour for the tide to be low enough for the release. Although we knew that the best thing for the birds would be to release them quietly away from the crowds, we thought it advisable to have our identification confirmed by some of the experienced birders at the marsh. I asked if anyone could positively identify a Yellow Rail, and several people said they could. We moved away from the crowd

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Yellow Rail (Photo by Lou Young)

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and Mike Mammoser, Rod Norden, and Mark Fenner peeked through the air holes in the carrying box and verified that the bird was a Yellow Rail. They asked if we had made a photo record. I was concerned about our old camera and my skills at photography. We decided that the rail was strong enough to stand a little more stress so we could have Mike Danzenbaker duplicate my photos using his camera. Jean, Mike, and I got into our van, and with at least 10 noses pressed against the windows, Jean reached into the carrying box. This time the rail was ready for us, and wasted no time in making Jean and I look very foolish in front of our peers. It had learned to twist its body and was impossible to hold until it became a little tired. I tried several times to get its legs in a hold, and each time was surprised by strength out of proportion to how fragile it felt. Jean and I both thought that it seemed slippery. Mike finally was able to get two pictures, and Jean returned the rail to its box just as the bird was beginning to show the first signs of handling stress. The bird had also lost a few small body feathers in the struggle.

Inspection of the area near the boardwalk showed little cover which was not still flooded. We decided that we should release the birds in the good cover at the corner of the marsh. We waited for about 15 minutes before attempting to release the birds. The Yellow Rail had calmed down in the dark box and so we allowed several other birders to peek at it through the air holes. The tide was well past peak and was receding rapidly. Good cover was available and there were no predators nearby. The air temperature was about 15°C and there was very little wind. Jean released the Sora first. As soon as the box was opened, close to the ground, the Sora came ripping out, turned sharply up and 180 degrees to the right, and flew over the people to land on the ground in the anise at the far (Palo Alto) side of the channel.

We were concerned that the Yellow Rail might be similarly confused and could even land in the road or the open water. Jean decided to point the Yellow Rail's box directly away from the crowd and toward the marsh center. At about 12:40 pm, the box was held close to the ground and opened just enough to let the bird out. To the whirring and clicking of uncounted cameras, it burst out of the box in full flight and reached an altitude of about 1.5 meters. With its short wings buzzing madly, it turned slightly to the left (toward the levee) but flew in a straight line northward and away from us. About 18 meters out into the marsh, the rail dropped abruptly into the pickleweed and disappeared. The entire flight lasted probably 3 or 4 seconds. We were immensely relieved to have a good release of at least one bird.

The Yellow Rail weighed 38 grams. From descriptions and recordings of Yellow Rail calls, I think this one might have been a female based on the vocalizations it made, which were soft and not very distinctive. None of the bird field guides provides a completely accurate painting of this Rail's markings and coloration. Most seem to emphasize the white wing patches which in this bird were only visible by spreading the wings as in flight.

Please think about joining us for the next rail census. We can't promise a rare sighting, but you will help gather statistics that will be very important in preserving our marshlands.

** Editors Note: Victoria Johnson trapped Salt-marsh Harvest Mice in Mundy Marsh for her masters thesis work at San Jose State University. She found them present in small numbers in this marsh area that surrounds the Lucy Evans Baylands Interpretive Center. Per con Victoria Johnson. ■*

CLAPPER RAIL CENSUS

During the January 17 rail census a total of 67 rails were counted in the Palo Alto Baylands area. SFBBO volunteers observed 56 Clapper Rails, 1 Virginia Rail, 7 Sora Rails, 2 Black Rails and 1 Yellow Rail.

Many thanks to the following volunteers who participated in this census. Phyllis Browning, Barbara Cox, Susie Formenti, Betty Groce, Kathy Hobson, Debra Kleffman, Valerie Layne, Paul Noble, Susan Stout, Peg Woodin, and Jean & Lou Young.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Food availability has been shown to affect the number of off spring gulls can successfully raise. Last summer I started a study of chick diet at the California Gull Colony in Alviso. The primary objective is to determine how chick diet varies between years and with respect to time, tidal cycle and chick age within the breeding season. I am continuing the study for the summer of 1988 and I will need volunteers to help with the field work. If you are interested in helping with this study call me at (408) 476-5042.

Jan Dierks



S C O P E

Warbling, Solitary and Hutton's Vireos

Paul L. Noble

Spring has arrived in our hemisphere and the bird song draws me away from the bay shores and into the hills. This column will focus on the three vireo species that are common in the hills at this time of the year.

Warbling, Solitary, and Hutton's Vireos all breed in the oaks and broadleaf evergreen woodlands of the south bay. The Warbling and Solitary Vireos are neo-tropical migrants, heading south to Central and South America in the fall. Hutton's Vireo is a permanent resident throughout its western range. All three are members of the family *Vireonidae*. Most members of this group are basically greenish-yellow (indeed, Vireo in Latin translates as "I am green") with white or yellow wingbars or eyestripes. As a group, Vireos are chunkier and less active than warblers and a little more deliberate in foraging than warblers.

The Hutton's Vireo (*Vireo Huttoni*) is a plumpish bird which is gray-olive above and buffy-olive below with a white belly. Southwestern subspecies tend more toward the gray while "our" Hutton's are more greenish-olive than gray. It has a white lore and a broken white eyering - the gap being above the eye. It has a medium thick bill - a feature that separates it from the nearly identical, but unrelated Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*). The Kinglet in addition to having a thinner bill, sports a complete eyering and dark lores. The Hutton's Vireo's song is a monotonous note repeated over again and again. The note may be single or double such as "che-weet. . .che-weet. . ." It can vary the pitch and tonal quality of this song as well as the volume. Its call is a buzzy scold. As is typical of permanent residents, the Hutton's Vireo begins singing early, often by mid-February.

The Warbling Vireo (*Vireo gilvus*) falls into the group of vireos which lack wingbars and eyerings. It does, however, possess a bold eye stripe. Overall, the Warbling Vireo has grayish upperparts washed in olive. The underparts are white with a yellow wash on the flanks. It has the above mentioned eyestripe and white eyebrows giving the bird a quizzical look. It too has a bill thicker than that of a warbler. The Warbling Vireo has a loud melodious song which can be interpreted as "Rosita. . .Rosita. . .Rosita. . .Rosy!" with the emphasis

on the last phrase. The male is a persistent singer often continuing all day long, filling the days with a charming simple melody, matching the calm of summer through July and August. It is often the last of the summer residents to be heard singing in September. Like the Hutton's Vireo it has a buzzy scold when agitated.

The Solitary Vireo (*Vireo solitarius*) is the least frequently encountered vireo in the spring, due in part to its retiring habits. This vireo is olive above and whitish below with an olive-yellow wash to the flanks. It exhibits two bold white or yellowish-white wingbars. Most notable on this species is the bold white eyering and white lores which gives the bird a spectacled look. The Solitary Vireo's song is a combination of phrases with pauses between, likened somewhat to "Chree. . . .Cheerio. . . .Cheree. . . .Cheerup." The eastern sub-species has a livelier song more reminiscent of the Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*).

Of the three, the Warbling Vireo is more streamlined while the Hutton's and Solitary Vireos are plumper. Good illustrations can be found in the National Geographic Society's Field Guide to the Birds of North America. Each occurs in relatively the same habitat in the south bay, but oaks of various species are favored for foraging and nesting. To get the best look at these birds find an area where you can look down on the treetops, as this is where these birds spend most of their time. All three should be in full song by now, so get out there and seek out these greenish songsters.

Next time we'll move back to the bay to address the sticky identification problems of the summer: female and eclipse plumaged male ducks. Good birding! ■



SFBBO GENERAL MEETING PROGRAMS FOR 1988

General membership meetings are held on the first Thursday of the month (unless otherwise noted) at 7:30 pm at the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Education Center in Alviso.

- April 7, 1988 **Skip Schwartz**
Audubon Canyon Ranch
Topic: Herons and Egrets of Audubon Canyon Ranch
- May 5, 1988 **Gary Page**
Point Reyes Bird Observatory Biologist
Topic: Breeding Biology and Mating Systems of Shorebirds.
- June 2, 1988 Colonial Bird Census Update and Pot Luck Dinner
Location: Bird Observatory Office
- July 7, 1988 **Dr. Patricia Zenone**
Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group
Topic: Report on current Research Work at SCPBRG
- Aug 11, 1988 * **Paul Matzner**
Nature Sounds Society
Topic: Basic Techniques of Recording Bird Songs
- Sept 8, 1988 * **Peter Pyle**
Topic: Birds of the Pacific, Including the Farallons
- Oct. 7, 1988 **Joe Morlan**
(Friday)
Topic: Field Identification of Warblers
- Nov. 3, 1988 **Harry Ohlendorf**
Topic: Contaminants in San Francisco Bay Wildlife
- Dec. 1, 1988 **Don Roberson**
Topic: Field Identification - Christmas Bird Count Review

* Denotes meeting on the 2nd Thursday of month.

Classes & Trips

Southeast Arizona - May 22 - 31, 1988

Southeast Arizona is a favorite birdwatching area for North American birders. Maryann Danielson and Jean-Marie Spoelman will lead a ten day birding trip to this area, May 22-31. In this varied region, mountain ranges rise like islands above the surrounding grasslands and desert, resulting in an outstanding diversity of birds. Birding areas will include the Chiricahua and Huachuca Mountain areas, Madera Canyon, Patagonia and other good birding spots.

The 1986 trip list numbered 161 species, including such birds as the Mississippi Kites, Elf and Whiskered Owls, Rose-throated Becard, Thick-billed Kingbird, Buff-breasted Flycatcher, Red faced, Olive and Grace's Warblers, Elegant Trogon and eight hummingbird species. The trip fee of \$600 includes nine nights in motels and leaders fees. Food and air transportation to Tucson are not included. Van rental and gasoline expenses will be shared by the participants. For a detailed itinerary or additional information call Maryann Danielson at (415) 325-9349. The trip is limited to 10 participants.

.....If you can't make the above trip there's still more.....

Southeast Arizona Field Trip - August

Join Don Starks for a week long birding trip through the hot spots of Arizona during the first week of August. Don has been a birder for 20 years with extensive experience with Arizona birds. He has organized and led field trips for SFBBO. He will lead you through the Santa Rita, Santa Catalina, Huachuca, and Chiricahua Mountains. You'll spend two nights at the Santa Rita Lodge and bird the Madera Canyon, Patagonia, Aravaipa Canyon, Mt. Lemmon, the Sonora desert, and Ramsey Canyon.

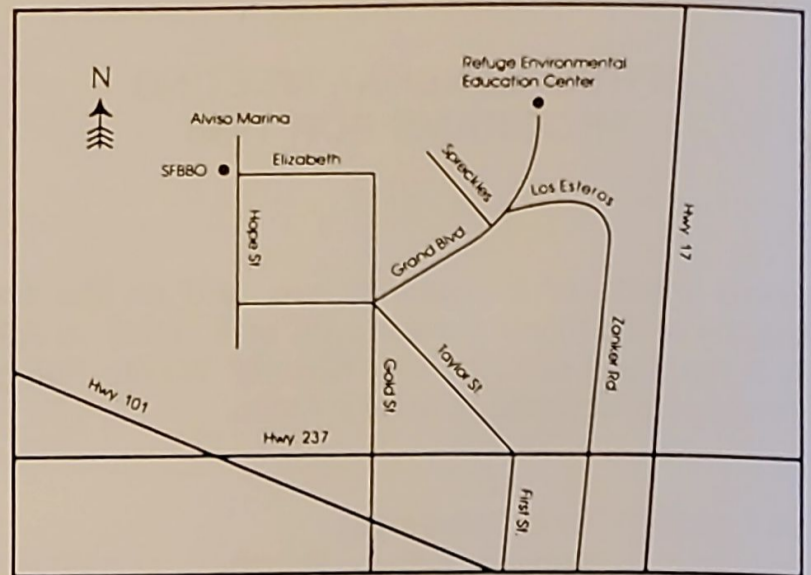
Round trip flight from San Jose is included along with all lodging and transportation. Meals are not included, but some lunches and refreshments will be provided. For more information call Don Starks at (408) 371-9720 or write him at 2076 Foxworthy Ave., San Jose, CA. 95124.

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.



EDITOR, Susie Formenti

GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS

GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Thursday, May 5, 1988

Refuge Environmental Education Center
in Alviso

7:30 p.m.

FEATURED SPEAKER: Gary Page, Point Reyes
Bird Observatory Biologist.

TOPIC: Breeding Biology and Mating Systems of
Shorebirds.

GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Saturday, June 2, 1988

SFBBO Office
1290 Hope St., Alviso
6:30 p.m.

TOPIC: Colonial Breeding Bird Census Update and
Pot Luck Dinner.

Join the Colonial Bird Census team for an update on colonial nesting birds around the bay. If you plan to attend this Pot Luck dinner, please bring a dish of your choice to pass. Beverages and table service will be provided.



P.O. Box 247
Alviso, CA 95002
(408) 946-6548

I would like to join Renew my membership in the
San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory.

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Make checks payable to SFBBO. Your gift membership is
tax deductible.

Student/Senior	\$10
Regular	\$15
Family	\$20
Associate	\$50
Contributing	\$100
Sustaining	\$200
Life	\$400*
Patron	\$2000*
Corporation	\$500+

* Single payment becomes part
of an endowment fund.