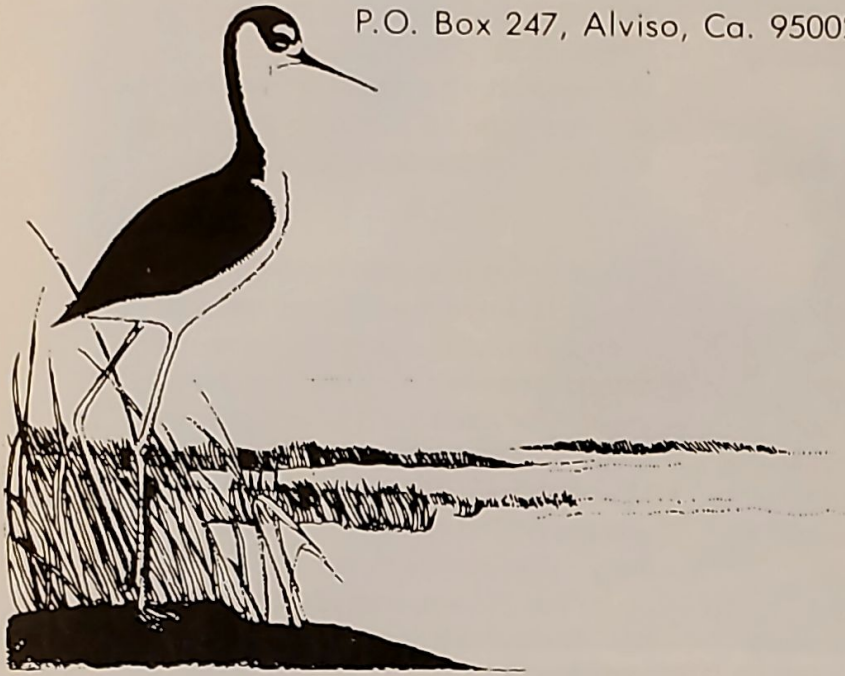


SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY NEWSLETTER

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July/August 1988

BIG DAY 1988

by Paul L. Noble

Excuses come to mind first. "Last year we got 181 species -- what happened this year?" "It was cold. It was windy. It rained." All these were true enough this year, but for a 'Big Day', luck plays the biggest part. Weather and planning aside, if Lady Luck is not shining upon you, you will lose out. So with all that aside, I will tell you about the day that Dave and Roberta Seals, Grant Hoyt, and I had on April 16, 1988.

Out of the house at 3:45 a.m., I met Dave, Roberta, and Grant at the Page Mill Road Park 'n' Ride lot in Palo Alto. Our first stop of many that day was Monte Bello Open Space Preserve. Here we would seek out owls. The first birds we tallied were a Virginia Rail calling from a sag pond, and a Song Sparrow singing at 4:10 a.m.! As I stated before, the weather was lousy. A low ceiling shrouded the coastal hills in a gray, damp curtain. Visibility was down to fifty feet. A breeze was blowing and the fog dampened our clothes. These are conditions that make owls stay in their tree holes. No Saw-whets, and more surprisingly, no Great Horned Owls calling. After 45 minutes of playing tapes for owls that would not answer, we began to retrace our steps back to the van. Suddenly a Western Screech Owl called beside the trail and, lo and behold, in the spotlight was the owl. Super! We enjoyed this bird for a few moments, but we had to keep to a tight schedule and get to the coast by dawn.

On the drive down, visibility lowered to zero. Almost

managing to skid off the road, we nonetheless got to Pescadero Marsh a little before sunrise. It was 6:20 a.m. and beginning to get light. We could make out some marsh birds such as herons and egrets, but the bird we were after at this stop was a Sora. We played the tape and one answered on cue. Just then to our left out flew an American Bittern. This was a bonus bird we did not expect to find. It was time to move on. We were now ten minutes off schedule so we omitted our planned stop at Canyon Road. We could find most of the birds we expected here at Gazos Creek a bit later.

At Cloverdale Ranch, we listed the Grasshopper Sparrows that were singing in the weeds. Western Bluebirds were also duly noted. At Gazos Creek Road, we began to fill out our list as a subdued dawn chorus began. It also began to rain. We found a Northern Pygmy Owl here which was fortunate as this was our last place to try for this species. We left Gazos Creek at 7:30 a.m. and headed towards Ano Nuevo. Two more misses here as the Pygmy and Red-breasted Nuthatches were not to be found. We motored on to Pigeon Point. It was raining harder. At this point, the fog hung over the water limiting visibility offshore to a couple hundred meters. There would be no pelagics today. Grant did pick out some Marbled Murrelets, however, and we did see a Wandering Tattler. Back to Pescadero again where we listed most of the rocky shorebirds, the remaining marsh birds, and some gulls. We did well here, picking up many species.

Continued on page 2

We now drove back up the hills to Skyline Ridge. It was here that we planned to get most of our passerine species. As we got out of the van, our spirits sagged. Conditions were just as bad as a few hours ago and now a cold breeze was blowing. We wandered down the trail listening for birds that were not singing. With the exception of a Black-throated Gray Warbler, not much was moving around. We returned to the van a good 25 minutes off the pace. We now had to face some hard choices. Birding in conditions as bad as these was futile. We knew we had to get out of the clouds. But where? Rancho San Antonio? Stevens Creek? Traveling to those places would cost us too much time and ruin our planned day. But a silver lining in these clouds became apparent. Grant had recently been birding the new Arastra Preserve in Palo Alto for the County Atlas Project. It was on our way and about a 1000 feet lower than Skyline Ridge.

We sped down Page Mill Road ready to find the species that Grant had promised. He made good on that promise as we saw Red-shouldered Hawk, Black-shouldered Kite, Solitary Vireo and Northern Oriole. A bonus here was a Vaux's Swift overhead. Although now an hour off schedule, the time spent was well worth it. It was now 12:20 p.m., and we still had a long way to go. A stop in my neighborhood was to produce a Hooded Oriole. Usually a "gimme" bird any day of the week, it was out to lunch today.

Our next flurry of species was at the bayshore area in Palo Alto. Mountain View Forebay netted us both Blue and Green-winged Teals and a Common Moorhen. Charleston Slough was full of shorebirds, but we hadn't the time to walk out there, so we scoped them. Most of the birds were just dots, but the White Pelicans were clearly identifiable. The Palo Alto Duck Pond got us a Lesser Scaup and a Canada Goose. The Spotted Sandpiper staked-out at Geng Road was quite obliging. Ravenswood National Wildlife Refuge was next, but the Bonaparte's Gulls and Phalaropes that I had seen a

week before were not present. However, David picked out an Eared Grebe. We filled the car with gas in Newark at 2:20 p.m. and continued on to Mines Road in Alameda County.

The specialties along this interesting road slowly showed themselves: Rufous-crowned Sparrow, Wild Turkey, Lewis' Woodpecker and Phainopepla. Down Del Puerto Canyon Road, we stopped at the usual stop for Canyon and Rock Wrens. We got 'em both! The sun was setting now and we had just a couple of stops left. We looked for Costa's Hummingbird at the usual place, but saw only a female *Selasphorus* species which we could not count since we had already seen an Allen's Hummingbird earlier in the day. We drove out of the hills and onto the flats of the San Joaquin Valley. A Horned Lark sang on a fence post. Darkness began to descend. Just before I-5, we saw a pair of Burrowing Owls beside the

road. We began the long drive back to the Bay Area. At 8:30 p.m. in downtown Milpitas we got our last bird. Swooping low over the intersection, a Barn Owl was illuminated by the street lights. The day was done 16 1/2 hours after it had started. The species total came to 153.

We all thought we had done very well despite the weather. Some species such as Lazuli Bunting and Olive-sided Flycatcher may not have been in yet. Our most glaring misses were the Great Horned Owl and the Marbled Godwit. But on any 'Big Day' you are bound to miss something easy. Sometimes bonus birds make up for the misses, sometimes they do not. The bottom line for the participants, though, is a day filled with fun, anticipation, and sometimes frustration. Just as you finish, you begin to plan next years' 'Big Day'. And you always hope the weather will be better. ■



BIG DAY FUNDRAISER - A SUCCESS

The Bird Observatory greatly appreciates the efforts of everyone who participated in our 3rd Annual 'Big Day' Fundraiser on April 16. Although not all the pledges have been turned in, at this date a total of \$1,185 has been collected from the four teams of birders who counted. Seeking out the expected birds and the excitement of the unexpected made this a fun filled day for everyone despite the bad weather. We thank the following counters for their time and effort in this fundraiser and their generous sponsors for pledging them. **Phyllis Browning**, Gail Cheeseman, Betty Groce, Susie Formenti, Dorothy Johnson, Gary Halsey, Kathy Hobson, Grant Hoyt, Larry Manning, **Paul Noble**, David & Roberta Seals, **Peg Woodin** and **Lou Young**. (Bold type denotes team leaders.)

S C O P E

Female and Eclipse Plumaged Male Ducks

Paul L. Noble

Summer in the South Bay marshes is a special time of the year. The marsh plants are actively growing and all the animals who depend on the marshes are busy raising families. As birders, we are drawn to the bayside to see these activities and enjoy the solitude that the marsh often affords. Groups of ducklings can be seen swimming with their parents.

Identification of adult ducks is fairly straightforward, particularly the males, when they are in good breeding plumage. Females are drabber and therefore more difficult, but at this time of the year, the ducks are paired and so we base our identification of the females by association with the males. Later, however, things change. Once parental duties are complete, the males go into what is known as eclipse plumage. Simply stated, he loses his colorful feathers and takes on an appearance more like that of the female. There is a reason for this. Most species of birds molt their flight feathers two at a time, one off each wing. As these feathers begin to be replaced, the next two feathers in line on each wing drop out and so on until the bird has all new flight feathers. During this molt, the bird still retains the ability to fly. Waterfowl, on the other hand, molt most of their flight feathers at roughly the same time rendering them flightless for a period of time. By losing the colorful body feathers and replacing them with the drab brown ones, like the female, the male is less conspicuous to predators during this vulnerable time.

How then can these male/female look-alikes be identified? You will have to use more subtle field marks. Let's take a look at a few species of dabbling ducks and see what features we can use to separate them. One of the more familiar breeding ducks in the bay is the Mallard. The drake is a pretty familiar sight during the spring with its green head and chestnut chest. But in eclipse plumage, he loses this coloring. His color is more 'warm' than the female and his eyeline is a bit more pronounced. He retains his yellow bill, albeit a bit duller than in spring. Also retained is the blue or purple speculum on the trailing part of the wing edges, a character he shares with the female.

Another common duck in the south bay during the summer is the Gadwall. The male in eclipse plumage is nearly identical to the female but he retains the dark bill.

The Gadwall can be separated from the Mallard by its rather steep forehead. The Mallard has a more sloping forehead. Also, the female Gadwall has a narrow gray bill edged in orange in contrast to the female Mallard which has a brown bill with an orange base and tip (*National Audubon Society Master Guides To Birding*).



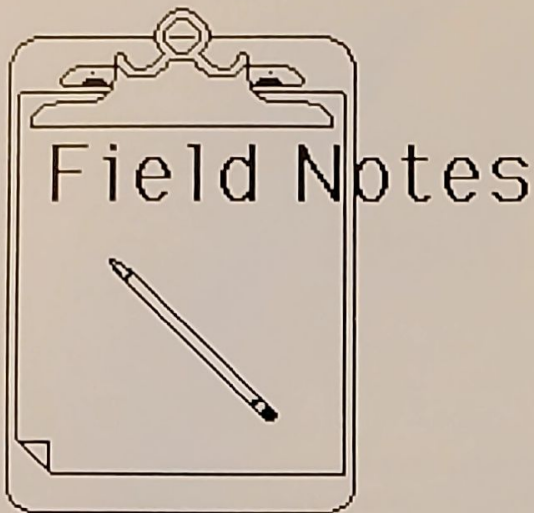
Drawing by Terry Hart

Two duck species that are fairly easy to identify are the Northern Pintail and Northern Shoveler. These male ducks also go into eclipse and become nearly inseparable from the females. The Pintail has a long pointed tail, of course, that is most visible in flight. Pintails also have a long neck and a slate blue-gray bill. In both sexes, the legs and feet are gray. To separate the female from the male in eclipse plumage, look at the speculum. The male has a faint green speculum and the female has a brown one.

The Northern Shoveler is easy to identify in any plumage due to its large spatulate bill. Both the male and female Shovelers exhibit a green speculum which is usually visible while the bird is swimming. Immature male Shovelers have a faint white crescent on each side of the face similar to the Blue-winged Teal.

The two local dabbling ducks which pose the most problems in identification are the Cinnamon Teal and the Blue-winged Teal. Both are about the same size and have similar features. In eclipse plumage the male Cinnamon Teal tends to be a richer brown color than the Blue-winged Teal. The Cinnamon Teal has a less well defined lore spot and has a longer and slightly more spatulate bill. Male Cinnamon Teal more than eight weeks old have red-orange eyes. If an eclipse plumage male or female Cinnamon Teal and Blue-winged Teal are side-by-side these differences are more apparent, but this is not often the case. Though the Blue-winged Teal is fairly rare in the South Bay, particularly in summer, there are always a few around to confuse the struggling birder. Sometimes you just have to let an eclipse male or female teal go by without identifying it as to species. Don't be frustrated as not everyone can identify everything all the time. And as a last resort, you can wait until October as the birds come out of eclipse, but that would not be very sporting.

I hope all of this is more helpful than confusing. I must add the footnote that comparative field experience is the best way to become proficient at ducks or any bird identification problem for that matter. By the time that the next newsletter comes out, shorebirds will be pouring back through the South Bay and at that time I'll be discussing the basics of shorebird identification. So until then get out there and look at some ducks. ■



CALIFORNIA GULLS

Another increase in the population of California gulls in the Alviso colony has occurred in the 1988 breeding season. On May 15, we conducted a census of nests and eggs in this colony and 2049 nests and 5128 eggs were counted. This is an increase over the 1708 nests and 3754 eggs that were counted in the colony in 1987. At this date, 83 young have already hatched. The biggest increase in the number of nests occurred along the access road leading to the old duck hunting lodge. In 1986, the gulls expanded from the main colony to this access road with 69 nests. This year, 492

nests were found along this road. We also took a cursory count of color banded birds present or nesting in the colony from the previous year's banding program and came up with the following totals:

3rd year birds - 1985 (Blue over White)	146
4th year birds - 1984 (Yellow over Green)	109
5th year birds - 1983 (Black)	75
6th year birds - 1982 (Red)	29

These gulls are banded with a Fish & Wildlife Service band on the left leg and one to two color bands on the right leg. If you see a California Gull with color bands, please report the location, time, date and color combination to the Bird Observatory office.

The Bird Observatory would like to thank the following individuals who have worked on this study so far this year: Jan Dierks, John Dixon, Jason Formenti, Susie Formenti, Jane Hawkey, Rick Palmer, Joann Simpson, and Peg Woodin.



Volunteer Jan Dierks recording data for California Gull study.

BAIR ISLAND

During our mid-May survey of the rookeries on Bair Island, we found that all of the colonies were actively nesting. The Great Blue Herons nesting on the island are later than usual this year with only one of the 13 nests having chicks near to adult size so far. The other Great Blue Heron nests contained nesting age chicks. As the photo indicates, there were still some very young chicks and quite a few unhatched eggs. Usually by this time of the year, most of the chicks are nearly adult sized.

The Black-crowned Night Herons are still building in the southern rookery. Although in the northern rookery they are well along with a few nests having adult sized chicks, but in the majority of the nests the adult are incubating eggs. Overall we found an approximately 25% increase in the number of nests in 1988 over the number in 1985 and 1986. However, the number of nests in 1988 is 60% below the number found in 1987.

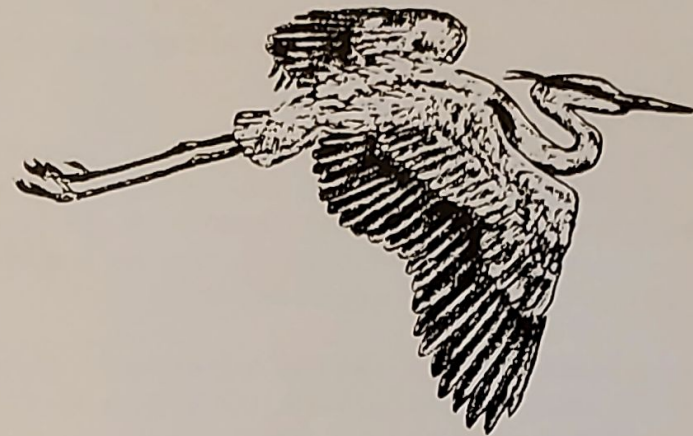
Some of the Snowy Egret chicks have already left their nests, but most of the chicks are younger and have not yet fledged. The Snowy Egret



Nesting California Gulls (Larus californicus)



Photo by Rick Palmer Great Blue Heron eggs and chicks



CANNERY IMPROVEMENTS

Although we would all rather spend our time on bird studies, several Bird Observatory volunteers have devoted their weekends to improving or maintaining the Cannery building and grounds. They finished the north wall by putting up insulation and plywood and then painting and caulking it. They also cleaned out the boat storage area and hauled away a lot of junk that had been left behind by former tenants. The storeroom and lab were reorganized and new shelving was erected. And an Eagle Scout candidate, Tony Contreras and friends from troop #74, put in a water line and faucets and planted native shrubs along the fence line on Hope Street. Other energetic volunteers planted native flowers and grasses along the levee and helped weed out the non-natives.

Many thanks to the following volunteers for their hard work: Derek Currall, Jan Dierks, Pat and Jean Dubois, Susie Formenti, Kathy Hobson, Paul Noble, Janet Pasternak, David Seals, Peg Woodin, Annette Woodin, Mathew Woodin, Heather Woodin, Apryl Woodin, Flora Woodin, Debbie Wright, and Jean & Lou Young.

Editors Note: We are making slow but steady progress on the development of our native plant garden. This fall we hope to plant additional native plants (shrubs, flowers, trees, grasses). If you can help with planning, labor, or by donating plants, PVC piping, faucets, etc. please call the Observatory office.

population has increased by approximately 33% from the 1987 census.

And the newcomers from last year came back. Two pairs of Great Egrets established nests in the northern rookery during the 1987 nesting season, each pair fledged three young. This year we observed at least two nests with a possible third being built at the time of this census.

We appreciate the efforts of the following volunteers who endured stockings full of fox tails and burs to help collect this data for our long term Colonial Nesting Bird Study. John Ascher, Jocelyn Aycrigg, Derek Currall, Jan Dierks, Kevin Foerster, Darrell Gray, Rick Palmer, David & Roberta Seals, Susan Stout, Judy Wiley, Tricia Wilson, Peg Woodin, and Lou Young. We also appreciate the cooperation of Mobil Oil Company for access to their land and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the use of their boat. ■



JULY MEETING HIGHLIGHT

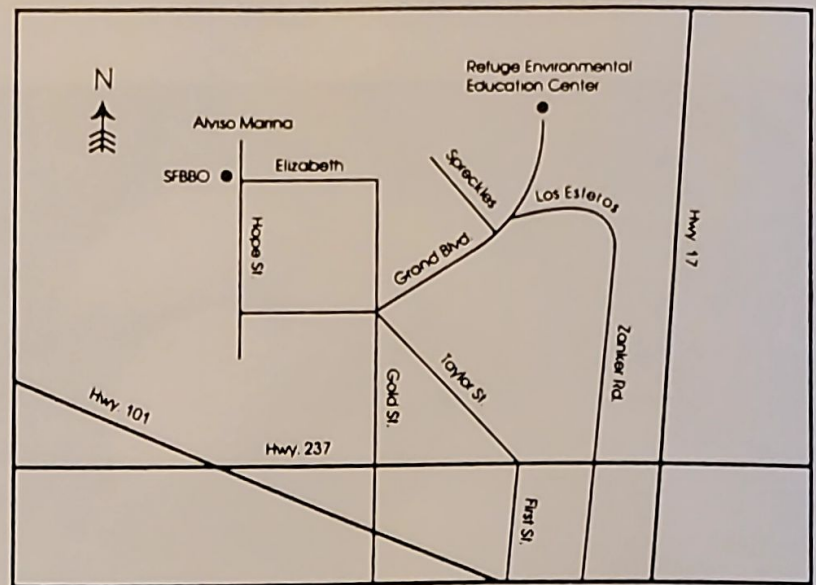
The speaker for the July General Membership meeting will be Dr. Patricia G. Zenone, Research and Education Coordinator for the Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group. She will speak on raptor management and research activities occurring at SCPBRG. She will describe the restoration work with Peregrine Falcons, Aplomado Falcons, Harris' Hawks, Elf Owls, and other species. She will also touch on some of their research concerns, such as egg incubation techniques, monitoring of pesticide contamination of wild eggs, and nutrition for our captive breeding pairs. Don't miss this informative meeting.

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 Bucksin 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 MEETING

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Thursday, July 7, 1987

Refuge Environmental Education Center
in Alviso

7:30 pm

FEATURED SPEAKER: Dr. Patricia Zenone, Research and Education Coordinator for the Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group.

TOPIC: Recent Activities of the Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group. (see article on page 5)

GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Thursday, August 11, 1987

Refuge Environmental Education Center
in Alviso

7:30 pm

FEATURED SPEAKER: Paul Matzner, of the Oakland Museum.

TOPIC: Basic techniques of recording bird songs.



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