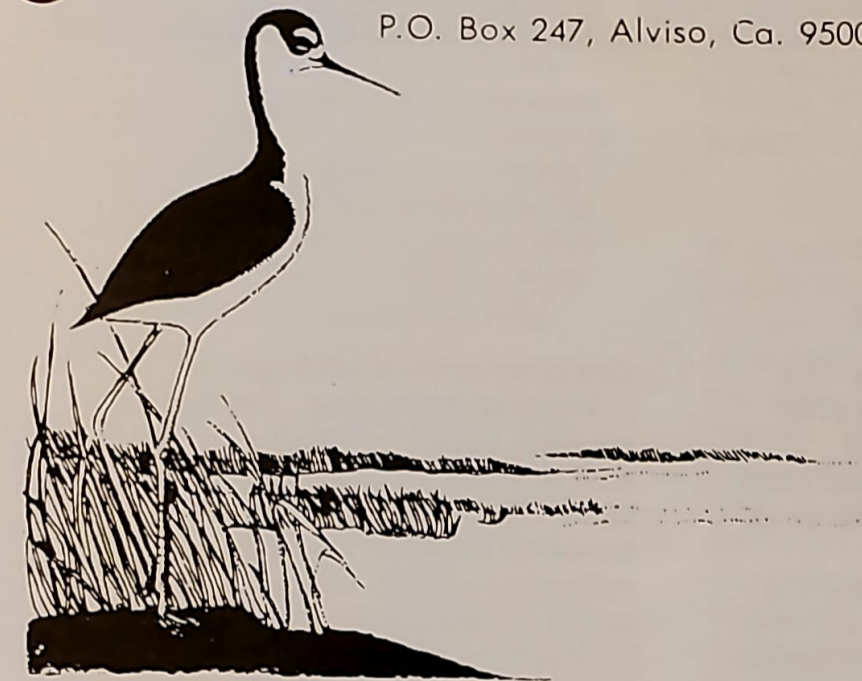


# SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY NEWSLETTER

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

Non Profit Org.  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
Alviso, Ca.  
Permit #9



Volume 7, Number 5

September/October 1988

## SFBBO BOARD ELECTIONS

The September 8 General Membership meeting is the time for members of SFBBO to elect three Directors to serve on the Board for a three year term. The nominating committee will offer the following slate of Directors for your voting approval. Write-in candidates from the floor will be welcome at that time. Come and vote while enjoying Peter Pyle's program on *Birds of the Tropical Pacific*.

**Lou Young** - A Systems Engineering Manager at Lockheed. Incumbent, SFBBO Director since 1985. Served as President of the Board in 1987. A longtime birder with a particular concern for the ecology of the South Bay.

**Susan Stout** - A secretary for the Aeronautic and Astronomical Dept. at Stanford University. Susan is a new member/volunteer to SFBBO and has worked on the California Gull Study. She has a special interest in shorebirds. She has taken bird classes and participated in Christmas Bird Counts at Humboldt State University.

The third nominee will be announced at the September General Meeting.

## 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.

- |                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Aug. 11, 1988 *       | <b>Paul Matzner</b> , Nature Sounds Society<br>Topic: Basic Techniques of Recording Bird Songs |
| Sept. 8, 1988 *       | <b>Peter Pyle</b><br>Topic: Birds of the Pacific, Including the Farallons                      |
| Oct. 7, 1988 (Friday) | <b>Joe Morlan</b><br>Topic: Field Identification of Warblers                                   |
| Nov. 3, 1988          | <b>Harry Ohlendorf</b><br>Topic: Contaminants in San Francisco Bay Wildlife                    |
| Dec. 1, 1988          | <b>Don Roberson</b><br>Topic: Field Identification - Christmas Bird Count Review               |

\* Denotes meetings not held on the 1st Thursday of the month.

Please take notice that the September General Meeting will be held on the second Thursday of the month and the October meeting will be on a Friday. (See back page)

# S C O O P E

## Summer Peeps

Paul L. Noble

Late summer in the South Bay means that shorebirds are returning. As you read this millions of shorebirds are pouring south all through the United States. Here in the South Bay we may see a part of this mass migration. The San Francisco Bay is a major staging area for shorebirds intent on building up fat reserves for the remaining flight south. Often seen as a mass of tiny birds flashing from white to dark, then dark as they fly over the mud flats, shorebirds pose a difficult identification problem. This month I will focus on this problem with tips which will make the reader more proficient at shorebird identification.

Shorebirds are like gulls. Before you can identify them you must age them. This is because juveniles and adults wear distinctly different plumages. Also, adults migrate earlier than juveniles. You must determine the age of a shorebird, either adult or juvenile, before you can assign it to a particular species.

Lets look at the first eighteen months of a typical shorebirds' life to get a better idea of these different plumage changes. When a bird hatches out of its egg, it wears a fluffy downy plumage for its first week or two. These feathers are replaced by fresh, colorful flight and body feathers that will carry this bird to its wintering grounds. Once there, it sheds these feathers for duller ones. It wears these through the winter, until early spring, when it begins to get the feathers that represent the adult breeding plumage. This is worn through spring migration and on its summer breeding grounds. It now raises its young on the arctic plains. By the time it is ready to migrate south again, the feathers on this bird may be six months old. It begins to shed these feathers on the southerly migration, completing the molt on the wintering grounds to begin the cycle anew. As you can see, in August for instance, the juveniles will be passing south in fresh juvenile plumage, where the adults, having arrived in the same spot a month before, will be wearing feathers six

months or more old and looking either quite worn or being replaced by duller winter feathers. Once you have determined the birds' age, you can move on to the particular species it belongs to.

The two species of small shorebirds, or "peeps" as they are called, that are most common in the South Bay in late summer are the Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*) and the Western Sandpiper (*Calidrus mauri*). Before you attempt to identify the more rare shorebirds, you must have these two species and their plumages committed to memory. I repeat, you must have a working knowledge of the Least and Western Sandpipers plumages before you can proceed to the rarer shorebirds. Adults migrate before juveniles, so lets first focus on the adults of these two species. The Least Sandpiper in adult or alternate plumage is a basic brown. This brown color is most pronounced on the dorsal surface. The center of the tertials and scapulars are

dark brown or black with fringes of yellowish-white or rufous. The underparts are white, except the breast which is washed in buff and heavily streaked brown. The feathers should appear somewhat worn or in the process of molting into winter or basic plumage (Of course a Least Sandpiper seen in the first week of July will be in good alternate plumage. By August, birds will begin to show basic feathers, and by the end of September they will be in complete basic plumage).

The Western Sandpiper in adult plumage is distinctly marked. The mantle feathers are blackish and narrowly edged in bright chestnut or fringed grey. The Scapulars have extensive deep chestnut-red fringes and black subterminal crescents. The underparts are white, but the neck and breast are heavily streaked dark brown with chevrons extending along the flanks to lateral undertail coverts. The legs and feet are black.



The juvenile Least Sandpipers are quite brighter than the adults. The mantle and scapulars are blackish and fringed with deep rufous. The tertials and wing coverts are brown fringed with deep buff or pale chestnut. The underparts are white washed in bright buff and streaked with brown. The head has a distinct white supercilium or eye stripe often meeting above the eye. The legs of this species are greenish-yellow, but beware as mud and algae can disguise this color. Note too that the adults migrate before the juveniles.

The juvenile Western Sandpiper has a dark mantle with fringed rufous; the lateral feathers have more white at the edges. The scapulars are centered black with rufous fringes. The tertials are grey-brown with buff edging. The underparts are white, with pale orange-buff wash on the breast overlain by dark streaking. The rufous on the scapulars is an important field mark, as it will allow you to distinguish this species from the closely related Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidrus pusilla*).

Note here that the main factor in separating adults from juveniles in the summer is the feather condition. Juveniles have neat, crisp feather edgings whereas the adults have worn off this edging for the most part. Also, note that for most peeps the adults typically migrate before the juveniles. For instance, in the case of Western Sandpipers you will start to see the first southbound migrant adults in mid July. By early to mid August the juveniles begin showing up. At this time the adults outnumber the juveniles by about two to one. In late August the juveniles will outnumber the adults by that same margin.

The Western Sandpiper typically has a larger bill with more drooping to the tip than does the Least, but beware because there are sexual differences in bill length particularly among Westerns. Migrant habitat preferences are less distinct, but Westerns may forage in deeper water than Least.

Once you have the field identification of Least and Western Sandpipers down (and I must reiterate that one must master the plumages of these two species before trying to identify the other related sandpipers) you can start looking for the more rare ones. One of the more regular rare peeps in the South Bay, in late summer, is the Semipalmated Sandpiper. Basically an east coast migrant in the fall

a few misoriented birds get out to the west coast. Almost all the Semipalmateds found in California in the fall are juveniles, so that tells you one thing already. Don't be looking for Semipalmateds in early July. Mid to late August is best for finding this bird. It favors freshwater habitat with exposed mudflats.

At first glance this species looks like a juvenile Western. It has black legs and feet and a 'warm' appearance to the dorsal feathers, but look closely at the scapulars. (I must regress here for a moment. Terms like tertials, dorsal, scapulars etc. refer to certain feathers or areas on a birds' body. If you are not familiar with them, look in the first few pages of any field guide to find the topography of a bird pictorialized. These areas are particularly essential in identifying shorebirds). They have buffy-cream or brownish edgings--not rufous or chestnut. Very little chestnut should be seen anywhere on Semipalmated Sandpipers. This buffy edging on the scapulars and other dorsal feathers give the Semipalmated a scaly look to the back not readily observed in juvenile Westerns. The buffy edgings on the scapulars is more striking in Semipalmated than in Westerns. This is perhaps due to the more uniformly colored upperparts and greater contrast provided by the brown feathers with cream edges as opposed to gray feathers with white edges seen in juvenile Westerns. Also the Semipalmated typically has a bold light supercilium that is set off by a more solidly colored crown, giving a capped appearance, and by darker ariculars that

extend above the eye.

Juvenile Semipalmated Sandpipers frequently show a buffy wash on the side of the breast, usually smudged looking and often extending as a large wedge from the shoulder midway into the breast. This, however, should only be a secondary field mark as similar smudges are sometimes seen on juvenile Westerns.

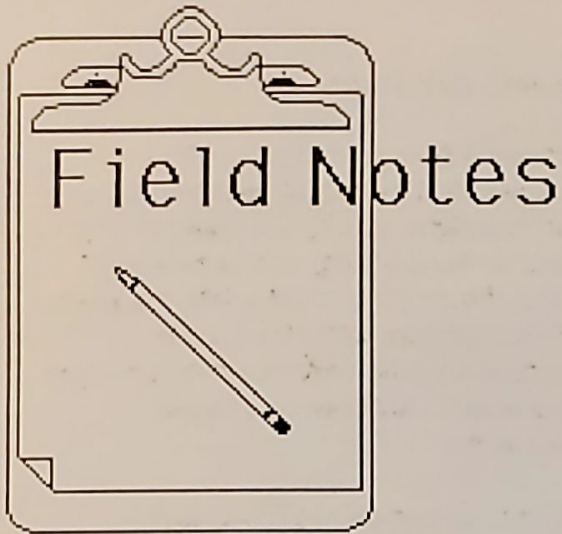
Bill shape can be helpful as well. Westerns have bills that are broad based, but which taper to relatively fine points. Semipalmated on the other hand have a tube-shaped bill that is thick throughout its length, which does not taper conspicuously. Its bill does not terminate in a fine point or in a droop, but instead has a blunt look and may show a somewhat bulbous tip. The two species can also be separated by call notes. Westerns give a thin "jeet" which is readily separable from the Semipalmated's low grating "jrrrt".

Again I must throw in that comparable field experience is the best way to learn field identification. This is particularly true of shorebirds which have distinct adult and juvenile plumages. Good sources for shorebird identification can be found in "*Shorebirds*" by Haymen, Marchant and Prater and the *National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America*.

Next time I'll discuss three other look-alike shorebirds -- the Pectoral, Bairds and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers. Until then, good birding. ■

### ADOPT A BEACH FOR COASTWEEKS '88

Californians and the coast go together like fire works and the fourth of July. We'll get a chance to celebrate the special ways the coast touches our lives during coast week '88, September 17 through October 10. Sponsored by the California Coastal Commission "COASTWEEKS" will feature thousands of activities in communities all along the states' eleven thousand mile shore line. It will include boat excursions, surfing demonstrations, sand castle building contests, behind the scene tours at marine labs and museums, special hikes, lectures, films and much more. One highlight of the COASTWEEKS is the adopt-a-beach coastal clean up set for October 1. Last year over 5000 volunteers rid the states beaches of more than 190,000 pounds of debris that is not only unsightly, but often dangerous for humans and wildlife. The Commission is hoping for an even larger turn out this year. If you love the coast, come join us as we hit the beaches and can the trash from Mexico to the Oregon boarder. For further information contact the California Coastal Commission at (415) 543-8555.



## LITTLE BLUE HERON

*Peg Woodin*

After seeing the adult Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*) around the south bay for the past 10 years and occasionally seeing what looked like a one to two year old in transition the question kept haunting us - Are they nesting in the South Bay? Well, on a routine census in the Mallard Slough area for colonial nesting birds I spotted two adult Little Blue Herons on the edge of the heron rookery near the Refuge Environmental Education Center in Alviso. I saw one adult come up out of the bulrush chasing off a Great Egret from its territory. The two adult Little Blue Herons repeated this tactic several times while other Great Egrets were flying over or near their territory. And then it happened. A young bird looking very much like a Snowy Egret flew in from the south and landed just above the area the adult Little Blues were defending. This new arrival had the awkwardness of a young bird just learning to fly as it landed in the vegetation. This gave me time to check its legs, bill and wings. The legs and feet were a pale grayish color, the bill had a dark tip that faded into a lighter shade near the base and the wings had a pale gray color to the primary and secondaries. Watching this bird for the next 30 minutes I observed it taking short flights, 50-100 meters, and each time returning to the same sight. It then flew over to an area where 4 young Snowy Egrets and 2 Great Egrets were loafing. So, after seeing the Little Blue Heron in the South Bay for the past 10 years we finally have our first recorded observation of an immature with adults. ■

## Classes and Trips

### Ornithology Classes

Evening bird classes are being offered by the San Francisco Community College District. Each class stresses identification, status and habits of North American birds. The instructor is Joe Morlan, co-author of *Birds of Northern California*. Class fees are \$40 per seven-week class and \$45 per eight-week class and will be held in room 222, Marina Middle School, 3500 Fillmore. For more information, call the Community Services Office at (415) 776-8247.

*Ornithology I* is an introduction to avian biology. It stresses concepts in modern ornithology including systematics, evolution, behavior, and population ecology. It meets Tuesdays from 7-9:30 p.m., starting September 6.

*Ornithology II* is an in-depth systematic study of identification and status of waterbirds including diving ducks, rails, and shorebirds. It meets Wednesdays from 7-9:30 p.m. starting September 7.

*Ornithology III* will cover landbirds including owls, swifts, hummingbirds, woodpeckers and flycatchers. It meets Thursdays from 7-9:30 p.m. starting September 1.

### Birding Classes

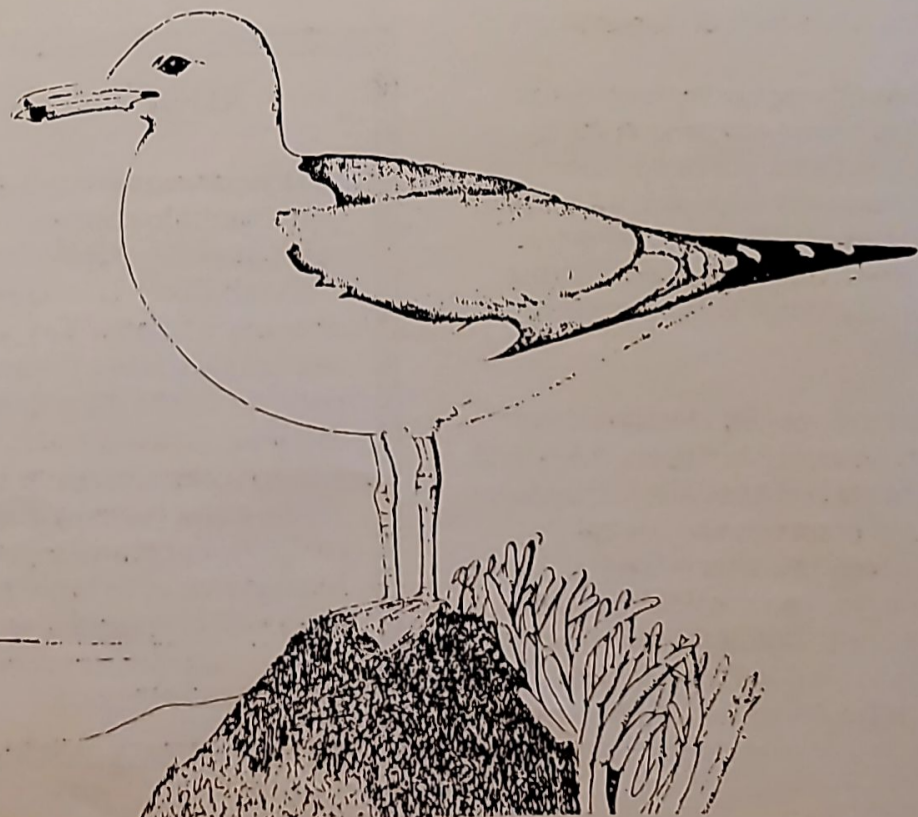
Two classes for persons interested in learning more about birds and improving their identification skills will be offered by Sequoia Adult School. The instructor will be Maryann Danielson. Registration will be at the first class session. For additional information call (415) 369-6809.

### *FOLLOWING THE BIRDS THROUGH THE SEASONS*

A lecture/field trip series for intermediate and advanced birders. This class will highlight the migration cycle and ecology of some of the major bird groups we see during the year. The fee is \$45. Classes will be held at Little House, Menlo Park, 7:30-9:30 p.m. starting September 12.

### *BIRDING BASICS*

A lecture field trip series for beginning and intermediate birders. This class will concentrate on basic avian biology and waterbird identification and natural history. The fee is \$40. Classes will be held at the San Carlos Senior Center, 7:30-9:30 p.m. starting on September 14.



### RAFFLE WINNERS

The drawing for the raffle that benefited SFBBO, Wildlife Rescue, Peninsula Conservation Center, and the Palo Alto Humane Society was held on August 5. The Bird Observatory netted \$1073 in this fundraiser and would like to thank everyone for their support. Congratulations to the following lucky winners:

- |                 |                                      |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|
| Fritz Fischer   | Hawaiian Vacation for two            |
| Mary Jo Cox     | Handmade Wildlife Quilt              |
| Valerie Layne   | \$250 Gift Certificate               |
| Elizabeth Rizzi | Monterey weekend for two             |
| Bob Butler      | TheatreWorks Season Pass             |
| Jerry Jouret    | Bay Cruise for two                   |
| Millie Quan     | Barn Owl Photograph                  |
| Ruth Watt       | Triple Treat Dinners                 |
| Sharon Smith    | \$75 Gift Cert. for Ollie's Catering |
| Harriet Heller  | Silver Pendant                       |
| Tamara Shaff    | Case of Red Wine                     |
| Soudy Khan      | Meadowlark Print                     |
| Bill Cooper     | \$25 Gift Certif. to Nature Company  |
| Joanne West     | Triple Treat Dinners                 |
| Holly LaChance  | Giants Game Tickets for four         |

### GENERAL MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

The speaker for the September General Meeting will be Peter Pyle of Point Reyes Bird Observatory. Peter will give a slide show presentation on, "*Birds of the Tropical Pacific*". His talk will include a look at the seabirds and landbirds of Hawaii, Micronesia, Samoa, and the Eastern Tropical Pacific. He will also talk briefly about the birds of the Farallon Islands.

Please note that the October General Meeting will be held on **Friday, October 14**, instead of the normal Thursday night meeting. Joe Morlan, co-author of, "*Birds of Northern California*" and compiler of the recorded "*Northern California Rare Bird Alert*" will give a slide show presentation on, "*Field Identification of Confusing Fall Warblers*". Emphasis will be on distinguishing fall warblers which are frequently confused or mis-identified in California. Common species such as Yellow/Orange-crowned/Wilson's will be emphasized, but rarities such as Blackpoll/Bay-breasted/Pine will be discussed as well.

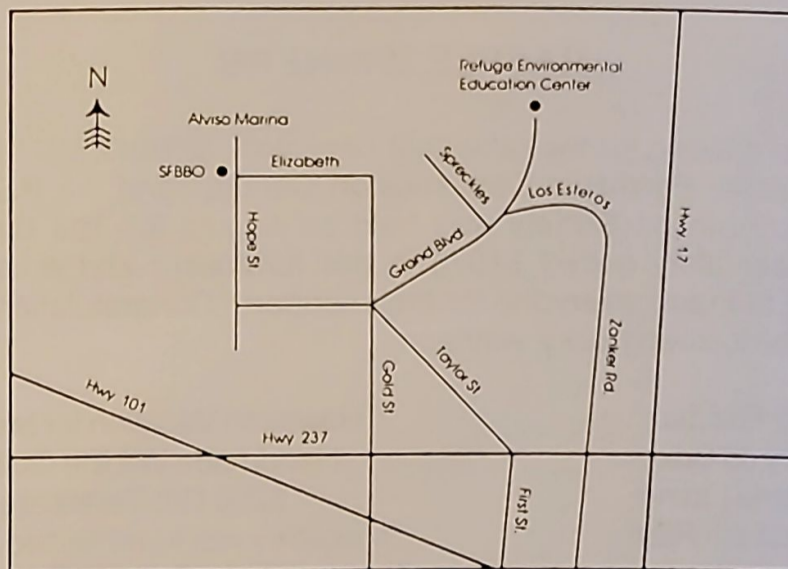


The Bird Observatory office is located at 1290 Hope St. in Alviso. The office is open from 1-5 pm weekdays and some weekends. But before stopping in, call (408) 946-6548 and check the schedule.

The General Membership meetings are typically held on the first Thursday of the month, but are sometimes changed due to the availability of the speaker. The program starts 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 is a bimonthly publication. 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

## SEPTEMBER GENERAL MEETING

Thursday, September 8, 1988

Refuge Environmental Education Center  
in Alviso

7:30 p.m.

**FEATURED SPEAKER:** Peter Pyle of Point Reyes Bird Observatory.

**TOPIC:** Birds of the Tropical Pacific

## OCTOBER GENERAL MEETING

Friday, October 14, 1988

Refuge Environmental Education Center  
in Alviso

7:30 p.m.

**FEATURED SPEAKER:** Joe Morlan, co-author of Birds of Northern California and compiler of the recorded "Northern California Rare Bird Alert".

**TOPIC:** Field Identification of Confusing Fall Warblers



P.O. Box 247  
Alviso, CA 95002  
(408) 946-6540

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

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

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.