

BAY BIRD REVIEW

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION ON THE SCIENCE AND CONSERVATION OF BIRDS AND THEIR HABITATS



SAN FRANCISCO BAY
BIRD OBSERVATORY

Director's Message

Despite the fact that winter weather was late to arrive, spring is in the air. By the time this issue of the Bay Bird Review comes to print, nesting season will be in full swing. It is a busy time for SFBBO biologists as they prepare for another field season monitoring the locally breeding birds. It is also a time of excitement and wonder. Every breeding season, we discover something new and exciting—a new colony of herons or egrets, the discovery of a banded California Gull breeding at a local colony, or a new species migrating through the riparian woodland of the Coyote Creek Field Station. In these programs, and many more, volunteers are integral in helping to document changes to breeding bird populations as well as making those exciting new discoveries.

Our volunteers are a large part of what makes spring such an exciting

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE *continued on page 2*



COMMON SPIKEWEED blooms in flats near the EEC parking lot.

PHOTO BY DAVID THOMSON

Habitats Report

Introducing the SFBBO Habitats Program

Led by Senior Ecologist David Thomson, the Habitats Program is a science-based program that works to determine feasible methods to restore and manage a rare and valuable habitat: the tidal marsh-upland ecotone, which is a transition zone between a tidal marsh and upland habitats. David has been practicing wetland ecology in the San Francisco Bay Area for over a decade. The methods and materials he has developed for restoring ecotone habitats are being utilized to restore sites throughout the estuary. David's work will help contribute to our understanding of bird habitat ecology and greatly enrich our research programs.

The San Francisco Bay estuary was significantly modified by agriculture, salt pond construction, and urban development. Over 75% of tidal marsh habitats were lost, and populations of many marsh-dependent species subsequently declined. Due to increasing public awareness and the tireless efforts of many individuals and organizations over the past 50 years, restoration of the tidal marsh ecosystem in San Francisco Bay has become a regional focus. The

Bay is now one of the three largest restoration areas in the United States, with tens of thousands of acres of tidal marsh currently being restored. However, there has been little effort or success in restoring plant communities at the upland edge of the tidal marsh. Called the tidal marsh-upland ecotone, these transitional zones are a mixture of the two adjacent plant communities.

These ecotones are an integral part of the tidal marsh ecosystem, providing critical habitat for tidal marsh obligates, such as escape cover for California Clapper Rails (*Rallus longirostris obsoletus*) during extreme high tides. For the past five years, I have been working with the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, primarily at their Environmental Education Center (EEC) in Alviso, to determine methods that can restore ecotonal plant communities at a rate that keeps pace with tidal marsh restoration projects. The majority of tidal marsh restoration projects in the Bay, such as the South Bay Salt

HABITATS REPORT *continued on page 6*



THE AMERICAN ROBIN is a welcome sign of spring. Photo by Ashutosh Sinha.

time at the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory. Each spring, our biologists recruit, coordinate, and train over 75 volunteers to help conduct fieldwork for the Colonial Waterbird, Snowy Plover Recovery, California Gull, and Avian Disease Prevention Programs. Add these individuals to those who volunteer year-round to assist with the Coyote Creek Field Station, enter data, or help out around the office, and we are looking at a small army of volunteers, all dedicated to the conservation of birds through science and outreach. Even more impressive is that some of these individuals have been volunteering for the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory since 1983.

So, each spring is not only a celebration of breeding birds at the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory, but a celebration of our dedicated volunteers. Without your help, SFBBO could not achieve all that we do to conserve birds and their habitats. Our volunteers are one of our greatest assets, not only to help us complete our work, but to create community around our mission and organization. I hope that if you are a current, former, or potential SFBBO volunteer, you will join us for our annual Volunteer Appreciation Party this May. I look forward to seeing you there!

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By Jill Bluso Demers, SFBBO Executive Director



CANADA GOOSE GOSLING. Photo by Nagesh Mula.

Staff and Board Migrations

Welcome Aidona Kakouros

An ecologist with SFBBO's new Habitats Program, Aidona has a B.S. in Forestry and Natural Environment Studies from Aristotelian University of Thessalonica, Greece and an M.S in Environmental Studies from San Jose State University, where she studied interactions between Forster's Terns and California Gulls. Aidona got hooked on environmental conservation initiatives in her early teen years and since then she has participated professionally and voluntarily in a variety of conservation projects, including ecotype mapping, bird and other wildlife species studies, habitat assessment and environmental education. Aidona strongly believes that habitat restoration gives us an exceptional opportunity to further increase our understanding of the ecosystem dynamics and particularly of species' interactions, and thus it should incorporate an experimental approach to meet this end. She is very excited to participate in a project with such a creative potential and determined to employ her knowledge and skills towards this direction.



AIDONA in the greenhouse at the Environmental Education Center, Alviso

Welcome Anne Hepburn

We are delighted to add Anne Hepburn to our Board of Directors. Anne brings a strong financial background and a wealth of experience in Human Resource Management. Anne is a native Californian who settled in the Bay Area in 1980 after following her husband's naval career—literally living from coast (Hawaii) to coast (Virginia). She worked as a corporate or staff accountant for several tech firms, focusing primarily on expense management and labor allocation. She has been a member of SFBBO for eight years and has participated in fundraising events. Now retired, Anne is an avid quilter, grandmother and San Jose Sharks fan, and is interested in expanding her knowledge of birds, flora, fauna, the Bay's unique ecosystem and the interactive relationships between them and the human populace. As a director at large, she hopes to contribute as a member who is sincerely dedicated to the success of SFBBO and its programs.



ANNE HEPBURN has recently joined the SFBBO Board of Directors.

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Thank You for Your Year-End Donation!

SFBBO thanks you for your support in 2011! You made our 30th year a fantastic success. Thank you for all of your time and energy and your dedication to the conservation of birds and their habitats. Your support of our mission allows us to continue our research and monitoring to contribute to informed land management decisions. Thank you for making a difference and for caring about SFBBO and the environment of the San Francisco Bay Area.



Volunteering...Is for the Birds!

Volunteers are a crucial part of our work. Each year you give thousands of hours of valuable work to the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory. We appreciate that when we put out the call for people to help—surveys, bird banding, data entry, habitat restoration, net repair, or office work—you respond with enthusiasm and commitment! The work of SFBBO is for the birds, but it's also for the humans who share their environment, to provide opportunities for people to be directly involved in the nature and science of the San Francisco Bay Area.



LARRY MANNING, member since 2000. Participates in Colonial Waterbird surveys. Former Snowy Plover volunteer.



BOB NASS, member since 2008. Volunteers as our Graphic Design Artist for the website, California Fall Challenge and Click Off Photo Contest.



JOYCE BARTLETT, member since 1992. Volunteers as a bird bander at the Coyote Creek Field Station.



DONNA NICOLETTI, member since 2005. Participates in Colonial Waterbird, winter Snowy Plover and San Francisco Waterfront Properties surveys.



MIKE MAMMOSER, member since 1988. Manages our large photo database. Participates in Snowy Plover and Colonial Waterbird Monitoring surveys and the annual Baywide Shorebird Census.



ROSALIE LEFKOWITZ, member since 2001. Data entry volunteer and a cheerful presence in the SFBBO office. Former bird bander at the Coyote Creek Field Station.

Volunteer Appreciation Party

This year, we'll host you at the Annual Volunteer Appreciation Party on Tuesday, May 22nd, from 6:30 -8:30 p.m. at the historic Rengstorff House in Mountain View. This is our day to honor YOU and all of your hard work. We couldn't complete all of our observing, monitoring, counting, capturing, and banding birds without our volunteers. Please come and celebrate all of our shared achievements with staff and fellow volunteers. Enjoy good food, great people, and of course, our local birds. RSVP to Kathi Kendrick at kkendrick@sfbbo.org or 408.946.6548 x10.

How Will You Help this Year?

Thank you to every SFBBO member! You believe that research and stewardship are essential to a healthy community. Your support makes our programs possible. Here is a sample of the programs we will carry out because of your generosity in 2011.

California Gull Research & Monitoring – With the breaching of former salt pond A6 in November 2010—and the displacement of the largest California Gull colony in the South Bay (over 23,000 birds)—we have the challenge in the 2012 breeding season to research where displaced gulls go and how they impact other breeding waterbirds.

Snowy Plover Recovery Program – As the restoration of Pond A6 and others progress, more plovers will need to nest in less pond habitat. We are implementing experimental studies to determine how to increase the number of nesting plovers in the Bay.

Coyote Creek Field Station – We continue the enduring program of collecting avian information within one of the South Bay's largest remaining riparian habitats. We invite you to visit the field station or join us for a "Bird in the Hand" banding demonstration.

Habitats Program – Our new science-based program will aid in our understanding of bird habitat ecology as we work to restore a valuable habitat: the tidal marsh-upland ecotone, which is the transition zone between tidal marsh and upland habitats. "Ecotone restoration is critical for many marsh-dependent species.

Please donate to science and habitat conservation in the San Francisco Bay Area. Your gift in 2012 sends a clear message that you support avian research throughout our unique and ever-changing ecosystem.

Please send your gift today.

2011 Colonial Waterbird Monitoring Program—Year in Review

San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory's Colonial Waterbird Program has monitored active waterbird nesting sites in the San Francisco Bay since 1980. Long-term monitoring programs such as this are crucial to determine conservation status, detect population trends, assess health of habitats and manage populations. In 2011, staff biologists and 48 volunteers monitored 61 colonies throughout the South and Central San Francisco Bay. The Colonial Waterbird Monitoring Program focuses on colonies of Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Double-crested Cormorant, Forster's Tern, Caspian Tern, and California Gull.

Hérons, Egrets and Cormorants

At 596 nests, the numbers of Double-crested Cormorants nesting in the South Bay increased by 11% over their 2010 number. This is similar to numbers before the large decrease in cormorants in 2009. The largest Double-crested Cormorant colony was Steinberger Slough in Redwood City (136 nests).

The Great Blue Heron population in the South Bay has remained stable since 2005 and increased slightly from 115

nests in 2010 to 126 nests in 2011. The largest colony in 2011 was in Portola Valley, with 21 active nests. The number of Great Egret nests monitored by SFBBO remained stable from 2009 to 2010. Since 2005, the number of Great Egrets nesting within the study area has remained fairly stable, ranging from 115 to 141 nests. In 2011, the majority of the Great Egret nests monitored were at two colonies: Shorebird Way (40 nests) and Ruus Park in Hayward (38 nests). Snowy Egret nest numbers in 2011 in the South Bay increased by 233% from 64 in 2010 to 213 in 2011. Most of the increase in the number of nests is from two large colonies: Lakeshore Park and Lake Elizabeth. The colony at Lakeshore Park in Newark increased from 12 nests in 2010 to 76 nests in 2011.

Terns and Gulls

Forster's Terns nesting in the South Bay increased by 5% in 2011. The largest colony in 2011 was at Hayward Shoreline with 725 total nests, which has nearly doubled in size since 2009. In 2011, SFBBO volunteers monitored four Caspian Tern nests in the Central Bay, all at Agua Vista Park in San Francisco.

The number of California Gulls breeding in the Bay decreased by 17% from 2010. In December 2010, the former salt pond A6 was restored to tidal action as part of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project. This pond was formerly the largest California Gull colony in the Bay with just over 50% of the total nests in 2010. Restoring this pond to tidal action displaced the thousands of nesting gulls. A presumed portion of the displaced gulls nested along the levees between ponds A9, A10, A11 and A14.

We thank the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory volunteers as this dataset would not be possible without their efforts. This work has been supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California State Coastal Conservancy, and San Francisco Estuary Partnership. Most importantly, this work has been supported by the members of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory—whose support has allowed the collection and maintenance of this dataset for 30 plus years. We sincerely thank you for your generosity.

By Caitlin Robinson-Nilsen,
SFBBO Waterbird Program Director



FORSTER'S TERNS engage in spring courtship.



GREAT BLUE HERON at a nesting colony.

Calendar

SPRING HABITATS PROGRAM RESTORATION HIKE

Sunday, April 29th, 2012

8:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

SITE: TRIP BEGINS AT THE FABER-

LAUMEISTER TRACTS IN EAST PALO ALTO

Join SFBBO's Outreach Director Stephanie Ellis, Habitats Program Director David Thomson and Ecologist Aidona Kakouros for a fun and informative day of spring birding at restoration sites near the Bay. We will start at the Faber-Laumeister Tracts in East Palo Alto, then head to the Refuge's Environmental Education Center in Alviso to learn about the Habitats Program restoration research (and hopefully see a lot of birds, too). This will be a great opportunity to learn about habitat restoration and its impacts on some of our local birds. Be prepared for spring weather and pack a lunch.



BIRDING SHADOW CLIFFS

Sunday, May 6th, 2012

12:00 - 4:00 p.m.

SITE: SHADOW CLIFFS EAST BAY REGIONAL PARK (PLEASANTON)

Join Rich Cimino of Ohlone Audubon



WALK: Open to the public; \$10 donation requested for non-members. RSVP at outreach@sfbbo.org or 408.946.6548



ACCESSIBLE: Contact outreach@sfbbo.org or 408.946.6548.



SPECIAL EVENT



MEMBER-ONLY ACTIVITY: Active SFBBO membership required to attend event.

for an easy afternoon of birding. Shadow Cliffs borders the Arroyo Del Valle—home of a significant heron, egret and cormorant rookery. Participants can also expect to see several species of waterfowl, and we'll comb a riparian trail lined with Cottonwood and Black Walnut. This may yield a surprise or two. Rich will also discuss local geography and land use. SFBBO monitors Shadow Cliffs rookery as part of the Colonial Waterbird Program. Please join us for this informative walk.




A BIRD IN THE HAND

Saturday, May 12th, 2012

8:30 - 10:30 am

We've changed our membership benefits!

Events designated by this symbol  indicate that this is a member-only event; you must have an active membership to attend this event.

To check your membership status or to RSVP, call 408.946.6548 and we will be happy to assist you!

SITE: COYOTE CREEK FIELD STATION (MILPITAS)

Tour SFBBO's banding station and meet the Coyote Creek Field Station Manager, Josh Scullen. Learn about SFBBO's bird banding research and see several different species up close. We will tour mist nets, watch a bird banding demonstration, and explore a restored riparian habitat. Please join us and learn why bird banding is so important for protecting birds and their habitats. RSVP required. We will meet at the former Borders Bookstore parking lot in McCarthy Ranch, Milpitas. In the event of rain, the tour will be cancelled.



Workshops for the Birder and Naturalist – 2012

WITH: *Alvaro Jaramillo, SFBBO Senior Biologist*

SITE: *Sobrato Center for Nonprofits in Milpitas*

Tuesday, Mar. 27th (instruction), 6:30 - 9:00 pm;

Thursday, Mar. 29th (instruction & field trip), 6:30 - 9:00 pm;

Saturday, Mar. 31st (field trip), Half Moon Bay to southern

San Mateo County

OWL WORKSHOP

Owls have a loyal following, including people who generally don't pay much attention to birds. Why are owls so special? It may be that owls seem mysterious to us—sleeping while we are awake and becoming active at night. Of course, owls can be difficult to see and find, and are well known for having amazing hearing. This workshop will address identification of owls, how to find the local owls, and owl ecology and behavior. We will study their sound and get ready to go and find owls in the field. This workshop includes two field trips to ensure we get in some great owling! The field trip will require easy walking at night.

Birding Level: Beginner and up. \$150 fee.



Tuesday, May 1st (instruction), 6:30 - 9:00 pm;

Thursday, May 3rd (instruction), 6:30 - 9:00 pm;

Sunday, May 6th (field trip), TBA

MIGRANT LANDBIRDS: WARBLERS, VIREOS, THRUSHES AND MORE!

Nothing in birding and ornithology is perhaps as exciting as migration! Throughout the world birds move, and this has captured our imaginations since ancient times. This course is an introduction to and summary of bird migration, but is also a way to know the identification and biology of a sampling of our local migrant landbirds, focusing on warblers, vireos, tanagers, thrushes and a few others. We will follow some of our birds to the south, to find out what they do in the winter, and where they go to spend the time they are not here with us. Our field trip will focus on areas where we can find migrant landbirds.

Birding Level: Beginner and up. \$150 fee.



Pond Restoration Project, are large-scale projects, restoring hundreds of acres of salt ponds at a time to tidal marsh. The amount of upland ecotone habitat associated with these restoration sites is usually in the tens of acres. And while the plant communities largely restore themselves in the tidal zone, plant communities located near or above the upper limit of the high tide zone require assistance. Therefore, actively restoring ecotonal plant communities at this scale and rate required developing new methods of restoration that are feasible for open space management agencies and materials that can successfully establish native-dominated plant communities on what are very harsh sites.

By "harsh" I mean poor soils, with conditions that make it difficult for some native plants to thrive. These are conditions common to ecotonal sites. The EEC provided an ideal testing ground for this research since it contains the harsh characteristics of other sites. The area was previously a tidal marsh that was diked in by the construction of salt ponds, then used as a dump site for construction debris, and finally capped with fill dirt. When acquired by the Refuge as part of New Chicago Marsh, the EEC was dominated by broadleaf weeds like poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), thistles (multiple

genera), and mustards (multiple species). The Refuge began managing the weeds in the 1980s. But after almost two decades of weeding, it was apparent that the natives were not going to come back on their own. This is likely due to the fact that the fill dirt did not contain a native seedbank and native plant species are quite rare adjacent to the Bay. When the Refuge decided to actively revegetate the site, I began assisting them as a volunteer but quickly realized it would take my full attention.

The goal of my work now, as Senior Ecologist in SFBBO's Habitats Program, is to provide the functions and values needed by the flora and fauna of the tidal marsh ecosystem. This includes assessing restoration methods (direct seeding versus planting, or both) and developing materials (species of plants and the protocols for their use). Some of the major challenges addressed by this research have been developing a list of plausible ecotonal plant species that may have historically been found adjacent to the estuary, finding local or regional populations of those species for collections, and describing seeding and container plant propagation protocols for species that are not well understood by testing collections in the nursery and field.

Since these sites are usually degraded, we tend to favor native species that excel at colonizing very disturbed sites. These natives can directly compete with non-natives both during establishment and (I hypothesize) during future disturbances that could provide opportunities for weeds. Many pioneering and disturbance-oriented species are annuals, and as such they are not amenable to container propagation in a nursery for planting—direct seeding is more appropriate. Direct seeding is also more cost effective than planting and requires less logistics. It is therefore more feasible for large and difficult-to-access sites.

This year we are seeding 28 species at three sites in the South Bay: Faber-Laumeister Tracts, Pond A6, and LaRiviere Marsh. These sites are tests of the methods and materials we have developed from our work at the EEC, and we look forward to monitoring their results in 2012. Additionally, we continue to test and refine our methods as well as



COMMON FIDDLENECK (*Amsinckia menziesii*) growing along the EEC entrance road in 2011, the second year after seeding.

develop more materials at the EEC. Aidona Kakouros, an SFBBO ecologist working with the Habitats Program, is leading our search for more native species to include in our seed mixes, and additional collection sites to improve the genetic stock of the species we are already using. She is also testing several aspects of our methods to both improve their performance as well as reduce their costs. If the drought is finally over, we should have something to show you on our Habitats Walk later this spring! Learn about our Habitats Program at www.sfbbo.org/science/habitats.php.

I'd like to thank the organizations and people that have contributed to this research over the years: the staff of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge and the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Complex, the EEC's regular Tuesday volunteer crew (Charlie, Sharon, John, Bill, Stu, and more), Save the Bay, HOPE Services, Hands on Bay Area, One Brick, and the technical assistance of the region's vegetation managers in our working group. Funding and in-kind support has been provided by Charlie Moore, The San Francisco Foundation, National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, Satterburg Foundation, USFWS Coastal Program and Challenge Cost Share grants, San Francisco Bay Wildlife Society, Santa Clara Valley Water District, Zanker Materials, Pacific Coast Seed, and AeroTech. It would not have been possible without your support!

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By David Thomson,
SFBBO Senior Ecologist, Habitats Program



CALIFORNIA POPPIES (*Eschscholzia californica*) grow on a berm at the EEC in 2010, their first year after seeding.

PHOTOS BY DAVID THOMSON

Our thanks to these supporters of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory!



Thank you new and returning members, and generous donors, October – December 2011

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And thank you to the 102 people who gave up to \$40 each to help us meet our \$15,000 2011 year-end goal!

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Coyote Creek Field Station Year in Review

The Coyote Creek Field Station is our year-round bird banding station located on one of the largest remaining riparian tracts in the South Bay. At SFBBO, we band birds to study the seasonal and long-term population patterns of migratory and year-round resident birds. Banding allows us to track individuals, which is important in determining survival, migratory turnover rates, and longevity. Additionally, banding birds allows us to examine how species have responded to the riparian restoration at the Coyote Creek Field Station.

The best part of CCFS is the birds! In 2011, we processed a total of 3,160 birds of 61 species at CCFS; 1,670 were newly banded, and 1,490 were recaptures. Nets were open on 140 days (38% of the year), with our volunteers donating 2,590 hours of their time. The species that we captured the most in

2011 were Song Sparrow (741), Common Yellowthroat (264), Hermit Thrush (230), Bushtit (207), and Golden-crowned Sparrow (175). Over the entire year, we caught only a single individual of the following species: Ash-throated Flycatcher, Black-headed Grosbeak, Brown Creeper, Cliff Swallow, Cooper's Hawk, Least Flycatcher, Marsh Wren, Spotted Towhee, and Yellow-breasted Chat.

CCFS is staffed by Josh Scullen, our Field Station Manager, and more than 25 dedicated volunteers. We appreciate all of our volunteers and their efforts last year, especially those who attended our CCFS Retreat in March 2011. Thank you for helping ensure a thriving avian community around our banding station. Read more about CCFS at www.sfbbo.org/science/ccfs.php or RSVP for a banding demo (see page 5 for details!).



PHOTO BY TIM WALKER/WWW.TIMWALKERMEDIA.COM

YELLOW-BREASTED CHATS are rare migrants for CCFS, showing up in the spring and fall at a rate of one or two individuals every other year. This is the 7th Yellow-breasted Chat captured at CCFS in the past 10 years.



PHOTO BY SFBBO

LEAST FLYCATCHERS are a very rare vagrant to CCFS. This is only the 13th Least Flycatcher that has been captured since 1982. The previous one was captured in 1997!