

BAY BIRD REVIEW

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



SAN FRANCISCO BAY
BIRD OBSERVATORY

Staff Migrations and Arrivals



WELCOME LINDY NICE

Lindy is the new Outreach and Education Director.

"As of March 23rd I became the new Outreach and Education Director. I am following in the footsteps of a great predecessor, Stephanie Ellis. She will be missed, but luckily she is not too far away and we hope to continue to stay in close contact with her. I have spent the past two years working at the Don Edwards S.F. Bay Wildlife Refuge Environmental Education Center as an Interpretive Specialist. I studied at the University of Utah and at Humboldt State University and graduated with a B.S. in Environmental Studies. I originally hail from Salt Lake City, but I am not missing the cold winters one bit. I am very excited to be working at SFBBO and I am looking forward to meeting all of you and working with you on upcoming projects!"

Lindy Nice

MIGRATIONS & ARRIVALS continued on page 2



A DOUBLE-CRESTED *Cormorant* carries nesting material.

PHOTO BY KEN PHENICIE

Waterbird Science Report

2008 Birds of the Baylands: Year in Review

As part of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory's Waterbird Program, staff biologists and volunteers have been monitoring waterbird nesting sites in the South San Francisco Bay since the early 1980s. This year, with the help of 34 volunteers, we surveyed nine gull colonies, 19 tern colonies and 32 heron, egret and cormorant colonies. This long-term data set allows us to follow changes in local populations over time, and to make recommendations to agencies managing waterbird habitat.

Volunteers surveyed each active colony at least four times between March and August, counting adults, nests and chicks. SFBBO also performed one "walk-through" of each California Gull colony in May to count all nests, eggs and chicks present. In this summary, we focus on colonies of California Gull, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret and Double-crested Cormorant. The full Colonial Waterbird report can be found on our website (www.sfbbo.org/science).



A SNOWY EGRET tends to its chicks at the Palo Alto Baylands.

Gull Census

This year we counted 22,718 active California Gull nests in the South Bay, an increase of 23% from 2007. Pond A6 in Alviso (the Knapp property; a dry salt pond with 12,491 nests) continues to be the largest gull colony (Figure 1). Colony numbers remain fairly stable at Coyote Hills and the Mowry pond M1/M2 levee. However, overall numbers at Mowry have increased dramatically due to the re-colonization of the M4/M5 levee. In Mountain View, a new colony established

PHOTO BY MICHAEL KERN

SCIENCE REPORT continued on page 3



WELCOME JOSH SCULLEN

Josh is a new Field Assistant for our Waterbird and Landbird Science Programs.

“From the grasslands in West Virginia and high-altitude valleys of the Rocky Mountains, to the volcanic slopes of Hawaii, the boreal bogs of Newfoundland, and the tropical forests of Costa Rica. I have come to SFBBO through many different ecosystems and habitats, following the course of a multitude of bird species. Over the past two years I have acquainted myself with the coastal California, working with the Ventana Wildlife Society at the former Big Sur Ornithology Lab. I am excited to bring my experiences to SFBBO, to continue to conduct scientific research, and encourage conservation through a better understanding of our natural world.”

Josh Scullen



FAREWELL FROM STEPHANIE ELLIS

“Leaving SFBBO has been an extremely difficult decision for me. My experience here has been filled with laughter, friendship and a passion for raising awareness of

MIGRATIONS & ARRIVALS *continued on page 6*

SCIENCE REPORT *continued from cover*
at the Palo Alto Flood Control basin in 2007 has tripled in size, and the nearby colony on former salt pond A1 increased 665% from 2007.



PHOTO BY KEN PHENICIE (PALO ALTO BAYLANDS)

SNOWY EGRET CHICKS *insist on being fed.*

Hérons, Egrets and Cormorants

Double-crested Cormorants in the South Bay have declined approximately 10 percent since last year (Figure 2). Cormorants once again nested in substantial numbers at the power towers along Steinberger Slough in Redwood City and the towers at pond A2W in the Moffett area. They also colonized a second set of towers in the adjacent pond

A3W. However, most other colonies have declined 15 – 37% since 2007.

The Great Blue Heron population in the South Bay remains stable between 2007 and 2008. Some colonies (such as Lake Merced, Ovation Court in Milpitas and Portola Valley) have increased; a new colony was established at Almaden Lake. Great Egret numbers are also similar to last year, and a new colony (10 nests) has been established at Steinberger Slough.

Breeding Snowy Egrets have decreased 16% from 2007 numbers. Although nesting increased dramatically at Steinberger Slough (43 nests in 2008 compared to two in 2007), this has not compensated for large decreases at Hayward Shoreline (57% decrease) and the Palo Alto Baylands (79% decrease). One pair of Snowy Egrets nested for the first time this year at the Great Egret colony on Shorebird Way in Mountain View.

Widespread monitoring like this allows us to track the health of the South Bay system. This kind of science would not be possible for a small organization like ours without the help of the many volunteers involved in this project.

.....
By Carley Schacter. Carley is an SFBBO biologist and Colonial Waterbird Volunteer Coordinator.

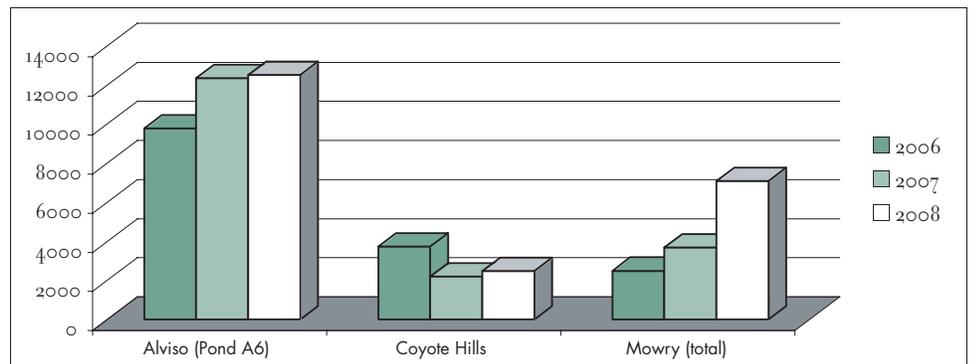


FIGURE 1: *Number of California Gull nests at the largest colonies in the South Bay.*

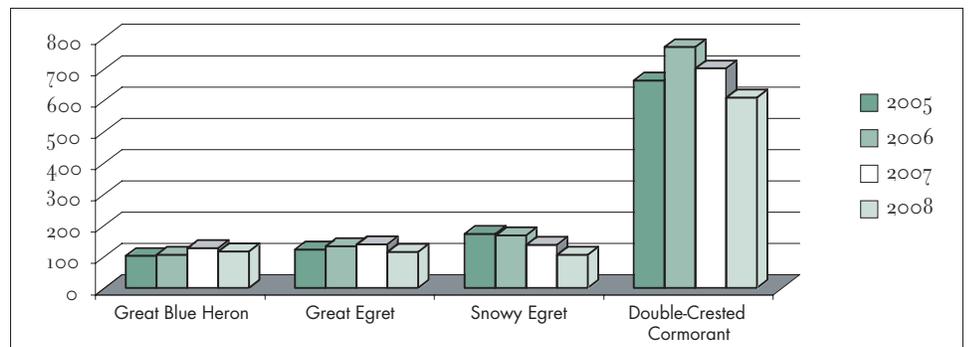


FIGURE 1: *Number of Great Blue Heron, Great Egret and Double-crested Cormorant nests in the South San Francisco Bay Area.*

Ongoing Evolution of Migration in White-Crowned Sparrows

As global climates change, the living world will have a lot of adapting to do. Among the most important adaptations for any living thing is its range or distribution; and for birds, one of the ways to affect their distribution is to make a change in their migration behavior. My research examines this process of migration evolution within species that have a broad mixture of strategies, from completely non-migrant groups, to long-distance migrant groups. In this article I will talk about four population groups within the White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) species: the non-migrant Nuttall's subspecies, a non-migrant group within the Puget's subspecies, migrant Puget's, and the long-distance migrant Gambel's subspecies.

I have focused my research on 3 aspects of a bird's life that could impact or be impacted by evolutionary changes in migration. The first of those aspects, and the one I'll focus on here, is morphology, and wing shape in particular. My research also includes assessments of physiological stress in individuals that do versus those that don't migrate, and genetic markers that can tell us how closely related the different populations are to each other.

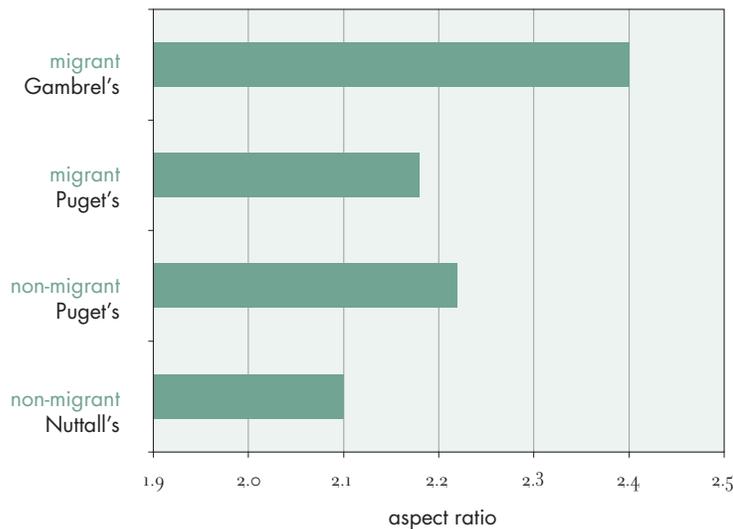


FIGURE 1: Ellipse-based aspect ratio calculated using digital image analysis for non-migratory Nuttall's, non-migratory Puget's, migratory Puget's, and (long distance) migratory Gambel's White-crowned Sparrows. Figure depicts preliminary data only.

The laws of aerodynamics suggest that any bird that needs to fly long distances should have relatively long, skinny wings (high aspect ratio) to maximize lift and minimize drag (imagine a tern or an albatross). However, the tradeoff of high aspect ratio versus short wide wings (low aspect ratio) is a loss of maneuverability, especially in shrubby habitats where darting in and out of bushes is important for evading predators.

I have found that within the 4 groups of White-crowned Sparrows that I study, the non-migrant Nuttall's subspecies does have a lower aspect ratio than short distance migrant Puget's and long distance migrant Gambel's White-crowns.



PHOTO BY AARON CLARK

FIGURE 2: Migratory Puget's (L) and Gambel's (R) White-crowned Sparrows. Both Birds were captured and released at the Palo Alto Baylands October 30, 2007. The primary visible difference between the subspecies is the color of the bill (yellow in Puget's, orange in Gambel's). While they spend the winter side-by-side, the Gambel's breed in Northern Canada and Alaska, while Puget's will only fly as far as Oregon or Washington.

However, the recently evolved group of non-migrant Puget's White-crowns, that spend all year in the Seattle area (while most of their cohort still fly south to California), do not show any adaptive wing changes relative to migrant Puget's White-crowns. The likely explanation is that there has been neither enough time nor enough isolation from their migratory brethren to allow for that level of adaptation. While Nuttall's White-crowns have been completely non-migratory for millennia, non-migratory Puget's White-crowns still interbreed with migrants, thus mixing into their gene-pool the genes that migratory individuals need. With that kind of mixed migrant and non-migrant gene-pool (gene flow), adaptations to a non-migrant life-style will not arise.

These results support a theory that wing shape can adapt quickly, even within a single species, to suit the migratory strategy of different populations, but that it can only do so if there is sufficient reproductive isolation between groups with different strategies.



FIGURE 3: A Nuttall's White-crowned sparrow wing (light gray) overlaid on top of a Gambel's White-crowned sparrow wing. Note the decreased length and slightly increased width of the Nuttall's wing.

My field sites include the Palo Alto Baylands, Shoreline at Mountain View, and Roosevelt Beach, Venice Beach and San Gregorio State Parks in the Half Moon Bay vicinity. I encourage you to watch for banded sparrows at these sites and contact me if you spot one (ascaphus@u.washington.edu).

By Aaron D. Clark. Aaron is a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Washington, Department of Biology.

Gull Banding with SFBBO

PHOTO BY MICHAEL KERN



CARLY SCHACTER prepares a trap for capturing California Gulls.

We drove through locked gates, and onto levees surrounded by salt water. Our destination on this Friday in May was Salt Pond A6, a mostly dry, flat area of dirt in the Alviso area. Carly Schacter, the Colonial Waterbird Volunteer Coordinator for the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory (SFBBO), Cynthia Padula, and I left the old pickup truck and continued on foot carrying banding supplies and a giant bag of tortilla chips. After avoiding mud and climbing onto boardwalks, we finally settled on the ground about a hundred yards from thousands of squawking California Gulls.

Three traps were set up. Why the big bag of tortilla chips? That was the bait for the gulls. We broke up the chips, threw some on the traps, and some into the air to attract the gulls. Some of the California Gulls flew to check out the free food. During the couple of hours we were there, about a dozen gulls were caught and banded. Sometimes they were interested in the chips and some of the time it was ignored.

In 1982 there were less than 1000 breeding California Gulls in the South San Francisco. By 2007 there were more than 30,000 of them. More than half of them breed at the salt pond where

we were banding. In a few years, the levee will be breached and the Gulls will have to find another place to nest. SFBBO is banding the California Gulls to find out where they disperse and where they will breed in the future. The large number of

breeding California Gulls could affect other species of birds breeding in the same limited area.

I had been banding birds, as a volunteer, at the Coyote Creek Riparian Station for 18 years. Retirement was coming up, so I decided I wanted to volunteer with an additional project with SFBBO. I answered a call for assistance with the Gull banding project. I assisted twice with the banding by helping catch the birds and recording data. One day I helped count nests and eggs. Then from July to December I surveyed the Salt Ponds near Coyote Hills, looking for banded California Gulls.



CARLY SCHACTER releases a newly banded California Gull.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL KERN

Sitting in the wet dirt, getting pooped on by the Gulls, and being part of important scientific research, that's my idea of a fun time.

.....
By Tom Goodier, an SFBBO volunteer who has been banding birds at the Coyote Creek Field Station for 18 years. Thank you Tom! Your skills and dedication have been a real asset to SFBBO.



CARLY SCHACTER (L) bands a gill with former SFBBO biologist Cynthia Padula.

SFBBO Partners with the CCC and the Refuge to Enhance Snowy Plover Habitat



PHOTO BY CAITLIN ROBINSON

THE CCC CREW and SFBBO volunteers helped spread oyster shells at Eden Landing as part of a Snowy Plover Enhancement Project.

The Bird Observatory received a grant this fall to team up with the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) and the California Conservation Corps (CCC) to do a large scale Snowy Plover habitat enhancement project at the California Department of Fish and Game's Eden Landing Ecological Reserve in Hayward.

Snowy Plover nest success has decreased over the past five years due to depredation of nests. By improving their salt pond habitat at Eden Landing, we're hoping to increase the number of nests that hatch each year. One of the main goals of the habitat enhancement project was to remove many of the posts throughout the ponds that served as perches for predators. A crew from the CCC worked with us for two weeks, removing predator perches throughout the salt ponds and on the levees. They also removed vegetation that was growing on the salt pans and encroaching on nesting habitat.

The most time-intensive part of this project was adding oyster shells to the bottom of the dry salt ponds. The soil on many of the salt ponds is very dark brown or red which make light colored Snowy Plovers easy for predators to find. We added the oyster shells to the pond bottom to help camouflage plovers and their nests, as well as provide some cover for plover chicks to hide near. Drakes Bay Family Farm generously donated tons of oyster shells to the project!

The most exciting day of the project was on Sunday December 7th, when 22 Bird Observatory volunteers and CCC members spread two hectares of oyster shells! To date, we have spread seven hectares of shells on the pond bottoms! In January, we observed 31 plovers roosting in the shells. The ponds are looking great and we're very excited for this coming Snowy Plover breeding season. Thanks to all our volunteers and to Drake's Bay Family Farm!



of

Become a Colonial Waterbird Volunteer!

In early March through August, the Bird Observatory conducts colonial waterbird surveys throughout the south and east bay. Surveys occur once per month in the early morning.

Volunteers are needed to document nesting, and evidence of disturbance and predation at selected nesting sites of gulls, terns, cormorants, herons and egrets. Previous experience identifying the given species is preferred but not required.

If you are interested, we would love to have you join our existing team of experienced and enthusiastic volunteers. Please contact the Colonial Waterbird Volunteer Coordinator Carley Schacter at cschacter@sfbbo.org.

By Caitlin Robinson. Caitlin is the SFBBO Waterbird Program Supervisor.

SFBBO's mission. What I will miss most are the wonderful relationships that I have developed in the past 2 years. The Membership and Volunteers never cease to amaze me with their unlimited kindness, dedication and support. I have also truly never met such a dedicated and driven staff as I have at SFBBO. I have great faith in the organization with its strong new leadership, Board of Directors and incredible staff and volunteers. SFBBO is in for a great new year! I will miss you all dearly but I intend to remain an active part of the SFBBO family. I hope to see you all on upcoming SFBBO trips and events!"

Stephanie Ellis



FAREWELL SAM SCOTT

In December, Field Biologist Sam Scott left SFBBO to accept a teaching position for a college-level backpacking course in Argentina and Chile. Sam had a few words about his departure; "Working for SFBBO was such a wonderful opportunity for me. While my friends and housemates were complaining about their office jobs, I would explain how I had to catch a white Pelican with a broken wing for our Avian Disease Prevention Program, or how we would lure California Gulls with Nacho Cheese Doritos so that we could capture and band them. I would also explain the sense of fulfillment that would come over me when I helped band Snowy Plover chicks making all of the pre-dawn mornings worth it. My friends thought my job sounded weird, but I could see the envy in their eyes..."

Sam Scott

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



Thank you new and returning members, October – December 2008.

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CAITLIN ROBINSON monitoring a snowy plover nest.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL KERN



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Calendar

Sat. May 9, 8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.



BIRDING THE BAY TRAIL WITH BRENDA SENTURIA

SITE: COYOTE HILLS REGIONAL PARK
(FREMONT)

Join us for a special celebration of the 20th Anniversary of the Bay Trail and International Migratory Bird Day! This will be the kickoff event for our upcoming series of "Birding the Bay Trail" hikes. SFBBO volunteer Brenda Senturia, will lead this tour through the Coyote Hills Regional Park. Located on the eastern shore of the Bay, Coyote Hills offers fantastic views and includes a mix of woodland and marsh habitats. Expect to see a variety of species ranging from raptors to bushtits. Space is limited.

Fri. May 15, 6:30-8:30pm



SAVE THE DATE: VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION NIGHT!

SITE: TBA (CHECK MONTHLY ENEWS FOR
UPDATES)

It's that time of year again! The Bird Observatory would like to show their appreciation for all its wonderful volunteers. Join the Bird Observatory in celebration of another year of valuable volunteer time spent on fieldwork and projects!

Enjoy some tasty eats and good company! More details to come. Please RSVP by May 8th.

Sat. May 30, 8:00-10:00am



A BIRD IN THE HAND

SITE: MEET AT THE BORDERS BOOKSTORE
PARKING LOT IN MCCARTHY RANCH,
MILPITAS

Tour mist nets, watch a bird banding demonstration, and explore a restored riparian habitat. Learn why bird banding is important and how it helps protect birds and their habitats. For more info about the Coyote Creek Field Station please visit www.sfbbo.org/science/banding.php. If we do not have enough sign-ups (a minimum of 5) we will cancel the program. Space is limited to 15.

WORKSHOPS FOR THE BIRDER AND NATURALIST — 2009

With Alvara Jaramillo

SITE: SOBRATO CENTER FOR NONPROFITS IN MILLIPITAS

BIRD SOUND WORKSHOP: JUNE 2 ND & 4TH (INSTRUCTION); JUNE 7TH (FIELD TRIP)

Birders are attracted to birds for many reasons, but one aspect of birds that transcends all is their ability to sing. This workshop will not just focus on learning bird songs, but also understanding the ecology and behavior of bird vocalization. This is not just a workshop for experts, but for any birder interested in obtaining a richer understanding of bird voice.

Birding Level: Beginner on up. Cost per workshop is \$150 and space is limited.

For workshop descriptions and registration forms please visit www.sfbbo.org/activities/workshops.php or call Lindy Nice at 408 946 6548 to RSVP.

Times: Instruction evenings will go from 6:30 - 9:00 p.m. on Tuesday and Thursday evenings; field trip times and location TBA.



WALK: RSVP to outreach@sfbbo.org or 408.946.6548. Space is limited to 20 people. Free for members; \$10 for non-members.



ACCESSIBLE: Please contact the Outreach Specialist so that we can coordinate with you.



SPECIAL EVENT



VOLUNTEER ACTIVITY