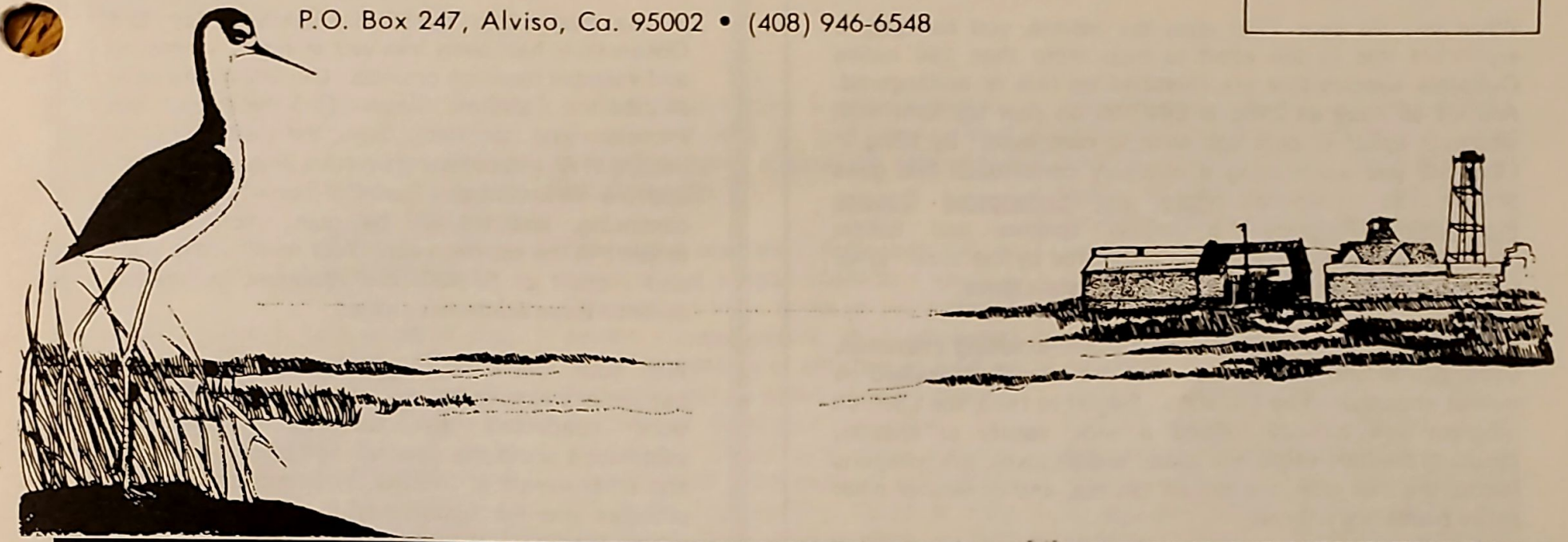


SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY NEWSLETTER

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March 1987

Pellet Analysis Gives Glimpse of Life On Bair Island

by Lee Lovelady

The California meadow mouse, or vole, is the favorite meal - or at least the most easily caught -- of raptors on Bair Island in San Francisco Bay. This finding was one of the results of a recent analysis of raptor pellets I undertook recently at the Refuge Environmental Education Center (EEC). Among the raptors that have been seen on Bair Island are Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Harriers, Black-shouldered Kites, Merlins, Burrowing Owls, and possibly Short-eared Owls.

Pellet analysis yields a variety of information about the fauna of any locale. In this case, I analyzed 22 raptor pellets gathered by Ed Roberts early in January from under the perching pipes in the Least Tern colony and from the pickleweed marsh on Bair Island. Dissection of the pellets yielded the following contents:

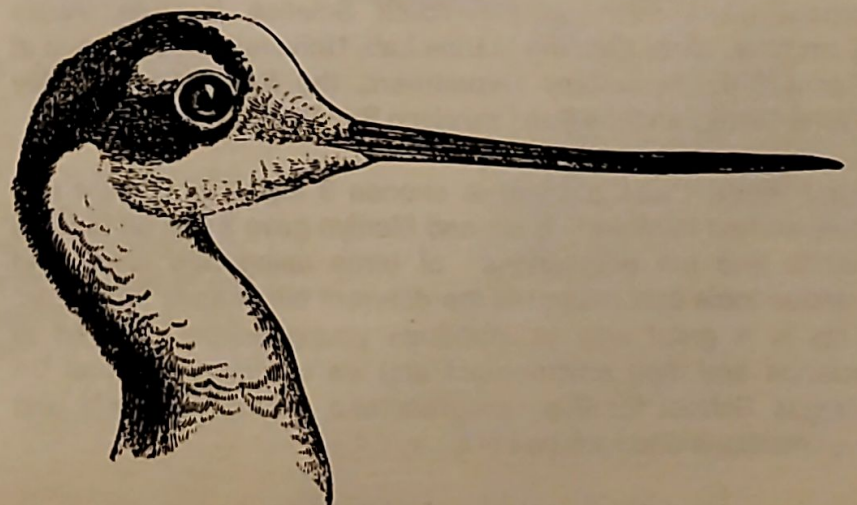
<u>Pellet Contents</u>	<u>No. of Pellets</u>
Bird down and feathers	6
Bird down and vole (<i>Microtus californicus</i>)	2
Vole	11
Unidentified mammals	3

In two cases, only fur of the unidentified mammals remained, and in the third case, a few short, sturdy bones of the mole type were present. All of the pellets looked old, were small to tiny, and were more hard-packed than the typical owl pellet. They were damp and well infested with moth larvae. The presence of immature feathers and down indicated that some of the pellets could have been regurgitated during the 1986 nesting season. No bird bones were present, and most mouse bones were digested and passed through. A few partial

palates were found, and they were soft. In some cases, a single vole molar was present.

As a result of my analysis and earlier experience with pellet analysis, I came to a number of conclusions. First, I found that voles make fat meals for raptors and are more easily caught than deer mice and harvest mice. I also determined that the pellets were not from owls, but rather from raptors that have stomach acids strong enough to digest bones, since Burrowing Owls and Short-eared Owls normally pass only the tiny food bones and leave well preserved skulls and skeletons in the pellet.

I do not believe that the absence of harvest mice remains in the pellets means that this endangered species is not living on Bair Island. It may only suggest that harvest mice are harder to catch than voles. Live-trapping has proved that the salt marsh harvest mouse inhabits the pickleweed around the EEC, yet I have never found one of their skeletons in a Barn Owl pellet collected there. The only way to be sure if harvest mice live on the island is to try live-trapping them. ■



HELP ENDANGERED SPECIES AT TAX TIME

When you file your 1986 state tax returns, you can play a significant role in the effort to help more than 230 native California species that are classified as rare or endangered. And it's as easy as filling in LINE 90 on your tax form--with whatever dollar amount you want to contribute. By filling in LINE 90, you are making a voluntary contribution that goes directly into California's Rare and Endangered Species Preservation Program-- a unique species and habitat preservation effort set up and administered by the state. LINE 90 appears on both the long and the short state forms.

There are more than 230 native species--including mammals, birds, plants and marine life-- that are officially classified as rare or endangered by the state. Begun in 1983, the LINE 90 program has already helped a wide variety of species, including the bald eagle, the island and kit foxes, the peregrine falcon, the sea otter, the desert tortoise, and dozens of other native plants and animals.

For those of us who care about vanishing life forms, this is a prime opportunity to do something good for them. And donations to this noteworthy program are deductible on both state **AND** federal itemized tax returns. Please take the opportunity and help if you can. ■

SFBBO BIG DAY

The "Big Day" fundraiser will be on Saturday, April 25. It's time to start getting your teams together and think about those spring birding hot spots. Complete details and entry forms will be in the April newsletter. ■

"SPEAKERS DAY"

On the 10th of February Elsie Richey and Marilyn Fowler, both members and volunteers of the Bird Observatory, participated in a science "Speakers Day" at Manuel De Vargas Elementary School in Saratoga.

This program, which includes speakers in the field of science, was put together by the De Vargas School to promote science in the elementary schools. "Speakers Day" was started a number of years ago as a kick-off to their annual Science Fair. And this year over 14 speakers participated representing organizations such as the Youth Science Institute, Apple Computer, Moss Landing Marine Lab, University of California at Santa Cruz Astronomy Department, the Santa Clara Valley Water District and the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory.

Each student was allowed to choose 3 topics of interest that they wished to attend. Elsie and Marilyn gave a talk on feeding habits and bill adaptations of birds using bird skins and various tools that resemble the different bill shapes and sizes. This is a great way to introduce young school children to science and their environment and we commend Manuel De Vargas School for this program and all the speakers and organizations who took part in it. ■

IMPORTANT MESSAGE

In the past years the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory has been involved in many interesting and valuable research projects. Our volunteers have studied the California Clapper Rail throughout San Francisco and San Pablo Bays, the California Gulls nesting in Alviso, Breeding Colonial Birds, Bair Island, and the Yellowthroat. Some of these projects are continuing, and we will be doing more exciting projects in the coming year. Your membership dues and support of SFBBO are important to help us continue these worthwhile studies.

With your membership you receive our monthly newsletter which keeps you informed of the research work conducted by Observatory members, information about the general membership meetings and other events of SFBBO. Your membership also provides you the opportunity to participate as an active member of research projects. SFBBO members can help on projects, lead projects, or even design their own project.

We'd like you to share in the knowledge of a young, growing organization and continue your membership in the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory. Your newsletter mailing label will tell you the current status of your membership. If it says "Thank you for your support" that's great. If your membership is 2 months past due it will say "Your dues are due". If your membership is 3 months past due it will say "Final Newsletter". Won't you please continue your support of this worthwhile organization and renew your membership.

Classes and Trips

Fremont Adult School is offering three classes for birdwatchers starting in March.

Tuesday Birding Field Trips Class - Starts March 3rd for 6 weeks from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Wednesday Birding Field Trips Class - Starts March 4th for 6 weeks from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Birding Mines Road Class - A one day trip on April 11 from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Class fee \$14.50. Leader Alice Hoch.

School Community Education at (415) 791-5841.

For more information and registration call the Fremont Adult

Nature Explorations - Tuleyome is offering two Natural Science trips in March.

Owl Prowl - March 20th from 7-11 a.m. at Alum Rock Park. Fee \$8/child, \$12/adult, \$32/family. Leader Dave Johnston.

Birds & Whales Bay to Breakers - March 14-15th. A tour starting at the Palo Alto Baylands and ending with a Whale boat trip from Princeton Harbor. Overnight accommodations at the Montero Youth Hostel. Class fee \$45/youth, \$60/adult, \$165/family.

Bird Kisses

by Ed Roberts

Lenore likes to "help" me when I write. Pencil, pen, keyboard, it matters not to Lenore. She pecks at the writing device and tries to take it from my fingers. Typical captive, teenage Starling behavior, and, Lenore being a captive, teenage Starling, I expect such behavior.

Lenore also spends quite a bit of time sitting on my shoulder or atop my head. She plays with my hair, tickles my ear, and occasionally leans around to give me "kisses". In the beginning she used to attempt to share a beakful of her food with me. She tried to poke it into my mouth while I responded by sealing my lips against her offering of that noxious goop I feed her. The contents are probably no more disgusting, in reality, than the spare parts of a cow we eat with such gusto when said parts are called "hot dogs" or other such euphemistic appellations, but then who would order boiled cow lips in a bun at the ballgame?

So Lenore adapted. Instead of a beakful of food, she carried out the process of poking her empty beak into my mouth. A ritual act. A kiss?

The act of an imprinted bird offering food to a human is not unique to Lenore and me. Konrad Lorenz, in his book *King Solomon's Ring* (1), described his experience with a European Jackdaw in one of the more hilarious animal behavior tales I've ever heard. Rather than me attempting to recount the story here, give yourself the pleasure of reading Lorenz' book. My intent is to take a wildly speculative tack and consider the possibility of Lenore's "kisses" as ritual.

From your perspective as reader you cannot be expected to flatly accept the contention that Lenore's "kisses" are ritual gestures of affection. She is, after all, typical of her species: alert, curious, busy to the point of hyperactivity, assertive to the point of aggressiveness. Perhaps she simply pokes her beak into my mouth out of idle curiosity, just as she pokes into my shirtsleeve, buttonholes, or the spaces between my fingers. Without going into detail, my rationale for regarding her "kisses" as affectionate behavior has to do with her timing. Generally, Lenore is too busy for kissing. I get "kisses" during the less frequent

periods when Lenore is more sedentary. Then she's likely to give me a "kiss" before snuggling against the side of my head for a nap.

Speculative scenario: A Neanderthal, or perhaps that alleged intellectual giant, a Cro-magnon turns to his or her targeted person - mate, parent, child, whatever. As an expression of affection or trust or protection this so-called primitive offers a mouthful of masticated mastodon. The message is, "I'm willing to share with you even the food which sustains me." Could this have happened? Could it have developed into a ritual in which no food was involved, only the pressing together of lips?

Nicolas J. Perella wrote:

Anthropologists, physiologists, and psychologists who have concerned themselves with the problem have put forth the theory that the kiss may very well be a vestigial remainder or a carry-over of a primitive habit of eating and thereby assimilating into the self any object felt to be "good" or desirable. (2)

If we can accept for a moment the possibility of association between eating and kissing, Perella goes on to detail opinion by a number of researchers which support the assumption (although by no means do all investigators of this giddy topic agree).

Lest you dismiss me at this point for Disney like anthropomorphism, let me proceed with the kiss into the world of other animals besides humans. The psychologist Havelock Ellis stated that "Manifestations resembling the kiss, whether with the object of expressing affection or sexual emotion, are found among various animals much lower than man" (from snails to birds to dogs) (3).

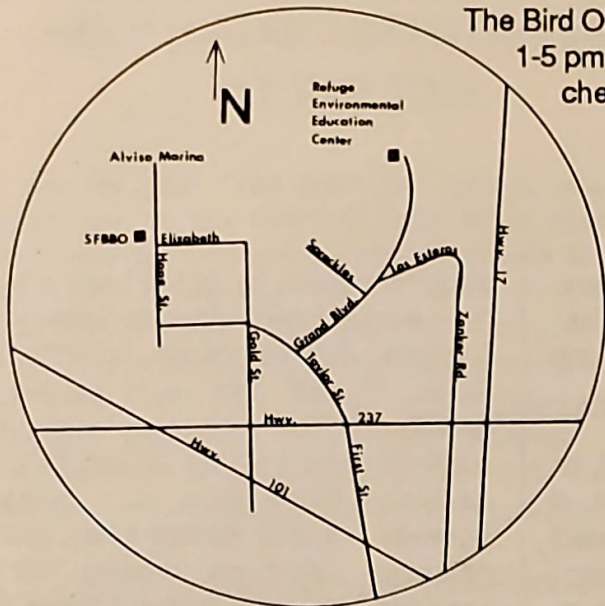
When it is possible to do so, I have always preferred to feed a small bird by poking a glob of food into the chick's maw by means of a toothpick. It's slower and messier, but if one has only a single baby bird to feed, he can have the illusion of at least inserting parent "beak" instead of an eely rubber tube or a plastic syringe. It's fun to let my imagination run loose a bit and to speculate that Lenore began by attempting to return the favor to me, her

adopted parent, by giving back a beakful, then evolved into a ritual of "kissing" when I refused the real thing. Speculations of "what if" like this one usually lead nowhere, but they make a pleasant sort of pastime, and I admit to watching more carefully, these days, the interactions between various parent birds and their offspring. And my reading has even provided an alternative possibility to explain Lenore's behavior. Robert Briffault states that "among the ancient Egyptians the word which is translated by Egyptologists as 'to kiss' meant 'to eat,'" a process which Briffault says may contain "more sinister biological reminiscences than they [the kissers] are aware" (4). Could it be that Lenore is not expressing affection but rather a message of, "Let me free or I'll pick your bones clean!"?

References

1. Lorenz, Konrad Z. 1952. *King Solomon's Ring - New Light on Animal Ways*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.
2. Perella, Nicolas J. 1969. *The Kiss Sacred and Profane*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.
3. Ellis, Havelock. 1930. *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Vol. 4: Sexual Selection in Man*. Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Co.
4. Briffault, Robert. 1927. *The Mothers: A Study of the Origins of Sentiments and Institutions*, Vol., 1. New York: Macmillan.





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.

GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Thursday, March 5, 1987

Refuge Environmental Education Center
in Alviso

7:30 pm

FEATURED SPEAKER: Nancy Norvell will give a slide show presentation on the Seabird Biology at French Frigate Shoal in the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge.

Donations

Thanks to Lorrie Emery, Marge Heintze, and Jean Young for the refreshments for the December General Meeting.

Wish List

Is anyone willing to donate to the Bird Observatory a one year membership to the **Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology**. A Supporting membership is \$25 annually. If you would like to make this donation please call the office.

New In The Library

Now available in the Bird Observatory Library are 8 cassette tapes of the proceedings of the 12th Annual meeting of the Pacific Seabird Group that took place on December 10-14 in La Paz, Mexico. This meeting was attended by SFBBO member Nancy Norvell who was thoughtful enough to tape the proceedings. The tapes include 48 presentations given on a variety of subjects relating to seabirds. If you are interested in checking these tapes out call the office.



Editor, Susie Formenti



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.