

# The Stilt

Fall 2004

SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY NEWSLETTER



VICKI JENNINGS

## In this issue:

- 1 *The Big Day: Then and Now*
- 2 *Guided Challenge Trips*
- 3 *CFC Teams*
- 5 *2004 Spring Season Banding Update*
- 6 *Oracle Funds Threatened Species Research Around the Bay*



MONICA LUNDY

The San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of birds and their habitats through research, monitoring and educational activities.



San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory  
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## THE BIG DAY: THEN AND NOW

AL JARAMILLO, *Biologist*

**T**he California Fall Challenge is part of a grand tradition in the culture of birding. There is nothing like a Big Day with colorful birding tales, the classic flat tire, the "Big Miss," bird identification at 60 mph, and those lucky breaks of legend when some unusual species pops into view like magic . . . good birding karma perhaps? All of this as the clock ticks. But before I tell you more about our Fall Challenge let me back up to the start.

This craziness started in April of 1953 when Roger Tory Peterson (yes THE Peterson) joined British Ornithologist James Fisher in Newfoundland, beginning a trip around the continent's edge. Their book "Wild America" chronicled the trip, kicking off interest in trying to see as many birds as possible in a given amount of time. It was the birth of the "Big Year," an attempt to see as many birds in a year as possible, and the "Big Day", the 24 hour equivalent. Big Days, are known as bird races in Britain, making it clear there can be a competitive aspect to Big Day birding.

Before you turn the page figuring this is all just goofy stuff for the competitively inclined, consider that Peterson's idea came from a desire to show his British friend the America he loved; the wild America.

Peterson bemoaned the fact that most people visited the skyline of New York City rather than the natural places of America. He thought this crazy road trip would lead to many birds *and* a chance to instill interest in conservation, allowing readers to partake in the whirlwind tour. The conservation link has not been lost. Birdathons are an incredibly powerful way to raise funds and increase awareness of our avian biodiversity to this day. Not only that, they are great fun and slightly addictive as it was for me.

I grew up in Canada where half the year nature sleeps under a blanket of snow. Overnight spring happens and suddenly birds are everywhere. It just seemed natural that in spring one would go out like a mad person making up for the winter, trying to see as many of these migrants as possible! May always had a Big Day . . . always. But these big days were kid's stuff. I didn't know about planning or schedules. That came later.

My Big Day nuttiness culminated with several friends in a 1995 quest to see as many birds as possible in British Columbia. We had it all planned, to the second, the time we would

*... what stands out in my mind... is the great camaraderie of the day; the coffee and donuts, the funny stories and just the laughs and excitement as we visited those great places – and all those wonderful birds!!*

*Continued on page 2*



# 8TH ANNUAL CALIFORNIA FALL CHALLENGE

## Guided Challenge Trips

Guided trips are pre-arranged birding outings, led by some of SFBBO's Finest! We offer different styles to suit your skill level and available time. To sign up for a GUIDED trip, we ask that the sum of your pledges total a recommended or required amount. Call or email the Observatory at [cfc@sfbbo.org](mailto:cfc@sfbbo.org) to sign up and for more information.

For all trips, please come prepared with good walking shoes, a hat, sunscreen, water and snacks (or more on big days).

Remember that you can plan your own Challenge trip too, including "big sits" under your favorite tree or "wine and woodpecker" tours or whatever fun theme you dream up!

### MORNING WALKS

*Join a 4 hour trek to several birdy hot spots for experienced birders. Expect 50-60 species but don't be surprised to hit 100!*  
*Recommended pledge sum: \$2.50 per species*

**Elkhorn Superettes**, led by Rick Fournier

County: Monterey

Saturday, September 18, 7:30 am - 12 noon

**Cliff Sweepers**, led by Phil Gordon

County: Alameda

Saturday, September 18; 7:30 am - 12 noon

**Varied Twitchers**, led by Mike Rogers

County: Santa Clara

Saturday, September 27; 7:30 am - 12 noon

### BIG DAY TREKS

*For the stout of heart, here's a pre-dawn to dusk, over-the-ramparts day of birding. Expect few potty stops and 80-100 species. Recommended pledge sum: \$3 per species.*

**The Lingering Migrants**, led by Mark Paxton

County: San Benito

Saturday, October 9; 5:00 am to the dinner hour (or dark, whichever comes first)

**Peninsula Big Day**, led by Francis Toldi

County: San Mateo

Date and times to be announced

## THE BIG DAY: THEN AND NOW

*Continued from page 1*

devote to each site and what we needed to see there. The record stood at 177 species and we were keen to beat that. Why? Partly competition, but mainly to reaffirm that all that biodiversity was still out there. We started at midnight in the interior, the Okanagan Valley and ended up in coastal Vancouver at sunset. Owls, Marsh Wrens and even Yellow-breasted Chats called at midnight starting the "Day" off perfectly. The key was staying on schedule, visiting various habitats from spruce forest, to dry Ponderosa Pine, sage flats, wet coastal forest, coastal deciduous forests, farmland, mudflat, sewage ponds, and even the city to see the Crested Mynas. By 11 am, still inland we had seen 147 species, breaking the record by mid afternoon on the coast. At the end of the day we picked up an amazing 196 species, breaking all our expectations. Almost ten years later this province record still stands.

But what stands out in my mind after all this time is the great camaraderie of the day; the coffee and donuts, the funny stories and just the laughs and excitement as we visited those great places – and all those wonderful birds!! I remember sticking my head out of the car window and seeing a Cooper's Hawk. The car stopped immediately, everybody jumps out, all see the hawk and burst into spontaneous cheering and high fives. Why? We had no spot for this species. It dropped out of nowhere into our laps. It was luck. The constraints are part of what makes this type of birding unique, and what makes you look harder for species you may take for granted, and visit places you may not visit otherwise. It gives a whole new perspective! The limitations make the game, and with SFBBO's Fall Challenge we've an added twist with the aspect of county

birding: increase the awareness of avian biodiversity within counties and help birders show off the great bird watching possibilities in their local areas.

Big Days such as the Fall Challenge are silly and fun, but there is a serious side to all this craziness. They raise funds for conservation research. We currently work on answering a number of science questions including the value of streamside restoration efforts to migratory birds, the distribution of Snowy Plovers in the Bay, and the distinctiveness of the endemic Bay Area "Salt Marsh" Common Yellowthroat to name a few. These are important questions benefiting our local birds as well as assisting land managers in habitat restoration projects, and your participation in the Fall Challenge helps get the work done.

We also want to get you out in the field, in your own county, perhaps visiting new places. Tired of Marin and Monterey getting all the limelight? Show us what your county has got! We want you to experience the wonderful natural areas of California and the amazing avian biodiversity. Join this fun and wacky birding subculture, and help our birds!

That Peterson knew what he was doing. 50 years later we still head out to see birds, to highlight the real America, the real California; the one where Chaparral and birds are what you see, not parking lots and shopping centers.

*For more information on participating in the California Fall Challenge check out the CFC website link at [www.sfbbo.org](http://www.sfbbo.org) Also see profiles of a few SFBBO teams! Pick one to sponsor or form your own team! The Fall Challenge runs from September 11th-October 10th.*



## CFC TEAMS

There are three ways you can participate in this year's California Fall Challenge, supporting SFBBO's work. Create your own Big Day or join a Packaged Big Day (see the guided CFC trips). Or, if you don't have the time to commit to a Big Day, consider finding an SFBBO friend who is a CFC competitor and support their team. OR, read below to see a small sampling of the staff and board teams to get an idea of the fun, enthusiasm, and competition that will be running rampant September 11th-October 10th. Sponsor a flat rate or per bird. Please see our website for updated teams, and to sponsor on-line.

### CHIFLADORES ALADOS

(roughly translates to "Winged Oddballs")

**Members:** Cheryl Strong, SFBBO biologist; David Thomson, Wetlands Ecologist; Aidona Kakouros, SJSU grad student and SFBBO associate biologist; Evangelos Kakouros, USGS Geologist.

After the defection to Florida of original teammates Bryan and Stephanie Dias, I hunted high and low for new Chifladores team members. After interviewing hundreds of applicants we have selected Aidona and Evangelos Kakouros! With the infusion of new blood, our team should be UNBEATABLE! We also have a plethora of expertise on our team in regards to non-bird biology, which may or may not be an asset but shall provide for lively conversation nonetheless. Our date is yet to be determined; the county will likely be one that allows for nice views from a motorcycle so that David agrees to come along (San Francisco County anyone?). He is also the meal planner, and tends to organize our day on where we can stop and eat that looks interesting. Final species count up likely to occur at the nearest pub.

### CAMPIN' CROSSBILLS

Team Campin' Crossbills consists of SFBBO Biologists Gina Barton and Sherry Hudson. Our team has a history of having lots of fun, eating well,



Biologists Cheryl Strong, Sherry Hudson and Gina Barton will be taking part in the CFC on two different teams. CFC funds directly support their work.

and even doing some birding on our California Fall Challenge day. We aren't the team that will see the most species, but we always see challenging birds and visit places we have never been to before. In keeping with tradition, we will most likely explore a new county this year: so far we have covered Santa Clara, San Mateo, and Monterey counties. If we are lucky (or plan ahead - ha ha) we will be able to see our namesake the Red Crossbill, which occurs across California at different times of year. Also as our name implies, we will probably camp out the night before at our starting point. This doesn't necessarily mean we will get an earlier start at birding, but at least we will be able to listen to the dawn chorus... while still in our sleeping bags! We both agree that the CFC day is one our most fun birding days of the year - so sponsor our team (or join us for all or part of the day) and you won't regret it! Details on county and birding date to be announced...

### THE NAMELESS ONES!

aka the Flying Refugees was composed of National Wildlife Refuge employees and volunteers, hence the name. However, having been abandoned by one team member who flew to West Virginia, the name is now in question. However, Sharon Miyako will be going on a "Big Day" (emphasis on the quotes) with any other average birders who just want to go have



Executive Director Janet Hanson, Education/Outreach specialist Sharon Miyako, and Office Manager Eric Feuss, will be participating in the CFC on their own teams as well.

some fun and raise some (or a sum) of funds for SFBBO. Eating will certainly be involved. For more on the fun had by the former Flying Refugees, check out the article in the Winter 2004 edition of *The Still*.

### SLACK BIMMERS

Slack Bimmers was formed 3 years ago to conquer seeing 100 species in San Mateo County. In 2001 it was close: 97 birds. In 2002 there were lots of the same species, and we fell to 92 species. But as they say, the 3rd time is the charm! 2003 brought 105 species! Although none of the more experienced birders are losing sleep worried that the Slack Bimmers may exceed their species count this year, the Bimmers are very competitive in both the Best Fed and Best Dressed categories, attired in local artist Martha Castillo's original CFC-only T-shirt designs. The Slack Bimmers are named after the uniquely mandibled Black Skimmer that has been moving north over the past decade and now is regularly seen at Charleston Slough. The Slack Bimmers consists of SFBBO prez Jan Hintermeister, bird-bander Tom Stewart (husband of Martha), and scopeless Karen DeMello.

## FRANCIS TOLDI'S BIG DAY

In the lovely hours of the early morning before dawn on October 5, 2003, Bonnie Bedford-White, Larry Manning, Mary Wisnewski and Bill Walker all arrived in front of my house to begin our "Little Big Day." Although we ran this as a legitimate Big Day following all SFBBO rules and requirements, the primary purpose of the outing was as a tutorial in the logic and planning involved in a Big Day. Notwithstanding its "Little" diminutive, we managed a creditable 132 species for the day, with 97.72% of the species clearly seen or heard by all. Bonnie provided the vehicle and driving services for the day, which allowed me to give the tutorials while we drove, thereby saving quite a bit of time. It probably also saved our lives, since had I been driving and searching for birds and dispensing tutorial advice at the same time our safe arrival home at the end of the day would have been in doubt. All birders present were strong intermediate birders who had participated on Big Days before, but had not been in charge of planning or execution, and thus wanted a little practice. Although it is never a requirement to participation, it so happened that every member of the team contributed valuable birds to the team total.

Francis Toldi's full account of her successful Big Day tutoring trip can be viewed at the California Fall Challenge website attached to [www.sfbbo.org](http://www.sfbbo.org) Francis will once again be leading a Packaged Big Day in San Mateo County. Date and time to be announced.



## BEYOND THE CALIFORNIA FALL CHALLENGE: What Your Participation Makes Possible

What does your California Fall Challenge participation support? Anything and everything SFBBO from the science to the education, to the office duties that make both of those programs possible. For a bit more detailed information on what our staff is involved in, see below. Whether you participate in the CFC by forming your own team, going on a guided walk, or simply sponsoring a team, your support makes SFBBO and the work it does possible.

### LANDBIRD PROGRAM

Landbird Biologists Sherry Hudson and Gina Barton are excited to participate in two new projects this year. First, SFBBO is looking at the impact of powerlines on bird populations by looking for dead birds and watching the behavioral responses of birds to the powerlines. By the end of this 3-year study, SFBBO will have an idea of how people and birds can continue to co-exist. Both biologists are also working with Santa Clara County Open Space on bird surveys. They are gathering baseline data to discover what species this property supports so SCCOSA can better make decisions on how to manage this land. Finally, Sherry and Gina continue working at the Coyote Creek Field Station studying the impact of a restored habitat on bird populations, utilizing many field and data entry volunteers that make the Landbird Program possible.

### WATERBIRD PROGRAM

Waterbird Biologist Cheryl Strong continues to track gulls, terns, egrets, herons, and Snowy Plovers around the Bay Area. This has been a particularly important year to gather information about waterbirds, as it is the final year before the beginnings of restoration take place, and habitats may begin to change. She is also excited to be part of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Plan Science Team, taking part in the five year planning process in preparation for this long-term restoration project. Cheryl also continues working with the many volunteers who make the Waterbird Program possible.

### EDUCATION/OUTREACH PROGRAM

Sharon Miyako has been happily showing off CCFS and bird banding to the general public, as well as school groups, primarily

high schoolers but a small group of preschoolers as well. Though keeping the attention of a 16 year old and a 4 year old can be difficult, the birds always capture everyone's eyes, ears and hearts. Thanks to the Santa Clara Valley Water District, she's been putting a face to the organization, letting people see wild banded birds up close and personal. One of the highlights of the year was working with a Girl Scout to create an SFBBO Kid's Pack that can now be used at events around the Bay Area. Finally, Sharon has enjoyed introducing many new volunteers to the world of SFBBO and assisting them in finding their niche within the organization.

## WISH LIST

### TRUCK WANTED

SFBBO's pickup truck recently suffered what may prove to be a fatal blow to the transmission. We are very interested in information leading to the donation of a "new" one, 1990 or newer with an automatic transmission. SFBBO is a fully recognized 501c3 and donated vehicles are tax deductible. Thank you!

### BOOKS WE WISH WE HAD

- *Avian Ecology and Conservation in an Urbanizing World*, edited by J. M. Marzluff, R. Bowman, and R. Donnelly
- *Environmental Contaminants in Wildlife*, by W. Nelson Beyer, et al
- *Moult and Aging in European Passerines*, by L. Jenni and R. Winkler
- *Weed of the West*, by T. Whitson

## THE 8TH ANNUAL CALIFORNIA FALL CHALLENGE 2004 EARLY BIRD PRIZE SPONSORS!

### Grand Prize for Top Fundraiser Discovery Voyages Wilderness Cruise for 2 in Prince William Sound

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Donating prizes with a minimum value of \$500

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# 2004 Spring Season Banding Update

LANDBIRD BIOLOGIST  
GINA BARTON



Most of you know SFBBO biologists and volunteers band birds at the Coyote Creek Field Station year round. CCFS is one of the many research outlets supported by the Fall Challenge and your membership support. Why exactly are we banding birds? On the larger scale, we use birds as bio-indicators to tell us more about our environmental communities on the local, regional, and global scales. In order to discover this information, SFBBO biologists look at trends in the bird banding data from year to year. Migration is a particularly interesting time to examine capture rates and times because of the variety of birds passing through or preparing for the nesting season.

Gina Barton compiled the following initial report of the 2004 spring migration. Why are there differences from year to year? What are the trends? For 2004, we don't know yet. We'll continue looking at this year and last year's data, as well as data in the coming years, puzzling out what the birds are telling us. In the mean time, get a taste of what's been going on so far this year.

During the spring, not only are the migrants passing through, but also most of our wintering birds are departing for their breeding grounds. This year we saw some differences from past years in departure dates for our wintering birds. Three of our wintering bird species, Gambel's and Puget Sound White-crowned Sparrow and Ruby-crowned Kinglet left earlier than the

TOP PHOTO  
This was the second year Ovenbird.

RIGHT PHOTO  
Volunteer Debbie Wong holds a CCFS spring highlight, an Ovenbird.



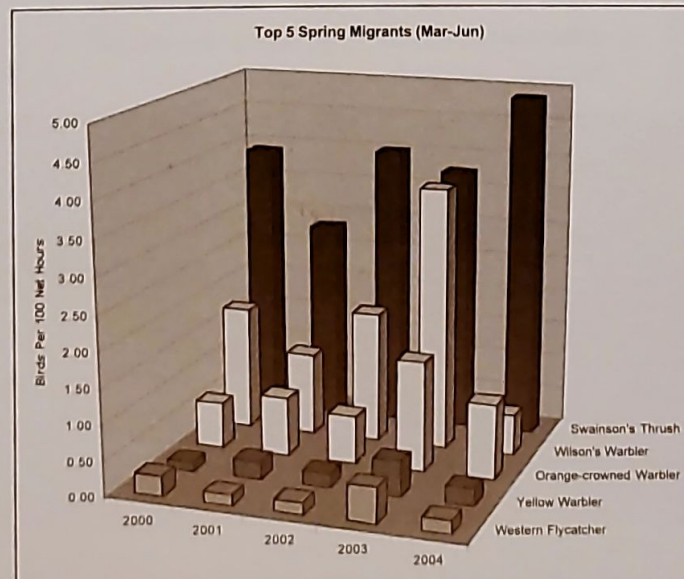
PHOTOS BY SHERRY HUDSON

previous four years, departing on average 22, 18, and 16 days earlier, respectively. Our Hermit Thrush departed on average 18 days later than the previous three years.

This year's top five spring migrants by capture rate (birds/100 net hours) were Swainson's Thrush, Orange-crowned Warbler, Wilson's Warbler, Yellow Warbler, and Western Flycatcher. We captured fewer than half the number of Wilson's Warblers this year compared to the previous 4 years (see below). Note that we had an exceptional spring migration in 2003 that was probably a result of late rains that spring. Rains can force migrating birds to stop their flights and land.

This year we also saw differences in migrant arrival dates and overall passage time compared to the past. I compared this year's arrival and departure dates to 2003, 2001, and 2000 data since we did not band in March of 2002. Our early arrivals this year were the Swainson's Thrush and Wilson's Warbler, arriving on average 7 and 15 days earlier, respectively. This year's departure dates fell within the dates of the previous three years. The passage time was shorter for the Yellow Warbler, while slightly longer for the Western Flycatcher.

Especially interesting captures this year were a **Dusky Flycatcher** captured on May 1st and an **Ovenbird** captured on June 16th. Other migrants we captured at CCFS this spring include five **Warbling Vireos**, one captured on May 12th and two each captured on May 22nd and 23rd, and two **MacGillivray's Warblers**, captured on May 2nd and 9th.





# Oracle Funds Threatened Species Research Around the Bay

In 2003, SFBBO received funding from Oracle to further our research on the Western Snowy Plover on the salt ponds around the Bay. With the help of this funding and a partnership with the Don Edwards SF Bay National Wildlife Refuge, we have been able to train about 25 volunteers and interns, locate important plover nesting and foraging sites, and track nesting success. This information is used by the Refuge as well as the California Department of Fish and Game in managing habitat for snowy plovers.

During the 2004 breeding season window survey, SFBBO volunteers, interns, and biologists located 113

plovers around the Bay! This is a great increase from the 73 found in 2003, reflecting both our increase in areas covered by surveys and (hopefully!) an increase in number of birds. And now a few words from our interns about their Plover Adventures!

Hi, my name is Heather Klausmeyer and I am one of the proud 2004 SFBBO interns. I grew up in Anchorage, Alaska and after high school decided to move to another cold state: Colorado. I attended the University of Northern Colorado, which is located in a small, rather smelly cow town in Greeley, Colorado. Despite the constant smell of cows I managed to get my B.A. in Biology in 2000 and have been working in various biological fields since then. I've managed to work in a Public Health lab at Harvard University AND live in Hawaii studying tropical plant genomics. Hawaii was a lot of fun especially for someone who has seen her share of snow and a great place to get married, which is what I did last summer. My husband is cur-



Interns Heather Klausmeyer and Rachel Strickman on their Snowy Plover Adventures

rently a grad student at UC Berkeley and I pay the rent by working for the Mills College Biology Department during the school year. This summer I have been having a great time looking for plovers.

Hello my name is Rachel Strickman. I am in my fourth year at the University of St. Andrews (a small Scottish university north of Edinburgh) studying for a degree in Biology. I had gone on two field courses which were lots of fun and consisted of falling in streams, identifying barnacles, and going to the pub (not necessarily in that order). I came to SFBBO expecting my first experience of "real world biology" to be much less fun than the university variety. No doubt they work longer hours and expect their workers to be better dressed; and my job would probably involve a lot of photocopying and quality time with a data entry program. I should have stayed in Scotland, I thought gloomily, where the fields are green and the wages are sterling, and taken the job

cleaning out the seal pens at the aquarium. Instead, on the first day I was wearing a bicycle helmet, trying to protect huddles of squeaking, pot-bellied black cormorant chicks (which, by the way, regurgitate dead fish when stressed) from being killed by seagulls as we removed egg samples for a bay-wide contamination survey. And so on. All sorts of fascinating new experiences awaited at SFBBO.

This summer's research focused on the Western Snowy Plover, the cutest little shorebird around that also happens to be a Threatened

Species. We tracked nest success and predation but most of our time was spent just trying to find the little guys through a scope. I guess that's what we get for trying to study a Threatened Species. Once we do find a few plovers we look for nesting birds, check nests and keep track of the eggs until the chicks hatch. Whenever we see chicks, it is always the highlight of our day and if you have seen them you will understand why; tiny little fuzz balls on speedy and sometimes wobbly legs. Besides the regular daily tasks of finding birds, I had my fair share of mishaps including getting stuck in some super smelly mud from which I dug myself out with my bare hands after throwing my equipment to safety. There is nothing like having to carry all of the gear in the truck back to the main road to make one not want to repeat that again. But despite the accidents and the occasionally uncooperative birds I learned a lot about fieldwork, driving a stick shift pick-up, and of course the Snowy Plover.



Snowy Plovers in the East Bay.

PHOTO BY CHERYL STRONG

PHOTO BY CHERYL STRONG



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We wish to recognize our partners for their generous gifts to SFBBO during the second quarter of 2004. Our sincere thanks!

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Board meetings are held monthly and are open to the Membership. Call the Observatory for dates and times.



# Scientists, Conservationists, and Citizens: the Next Generation

Conserving birds and their habitats through original research and education: SFBBO's mission. In the last 6 months, thanks to the Santa Clara Valley Water District, we've been able to approach this mission through a slightly different path. Conserving birds by building up the next generation to carry out the conservation. SFBBO has always taken pride in showing off bird banding at the Coyote Creek Field Station. This year the District's Watershed Stewardship Grant allowed us to provide transportation stipends, making field trips possible for schools that would otherwise be unable to visit us.

As of July, we've happily hosted about 180 students plus their chaperones from a diverse range of organizations. Schools like Lincoln Plus and Andrew Hill High are two organizations that received transportation stipends. We also hosted a group from the Environmental Volunteers camp and three groups from Guadalupe River Park and Garden's San Jose Safari Summer Camp. We also had the privilege of introducing children from InnVision to bird

banding. InnVision provides support to at-risk and homeless families in the South Bay. Many of our CCFS visitors haven't ever seen bird banding, or even taken a walk on a trail outside the city.

In addition to introducing conservation science to these students, we also introduce the impact each of them can have on the wild birds of the south Bay Area through watershed protection. There's nothing like seeing a wild bird up close and personal to inspire a child (or an adult for that matter) to take some action at home to protect habitats: whether it be by cleaning a storm drain up in front of their house or conserving water.

Building up the next generation of scientists, conservationists, and citizens. What a great year it's been!

*Many thanks to the CCFS volunteers as well as biologists Sherry Hudson and Gina Barton for allowing these mild intrusions into the world of bird banding and even helping facilitate the intrusions for the sake of building up the next generation! And of course, thanks to the Santa Clara Valley Water District's 2003-2004 Watershed Stewardship Grant for supporting these student experiences.*

~ Sharon Miyako  
Education/Outreach Specialist



PHOTO BY SCOTT NORTON

*Students enjoying a bird banding field trip.*



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