

# The Stilt

Winter 2005/2006

SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY NEWSLETTER



VICKI JENNINGS

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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  
P.O. Box 247 1290 Hope Street Alviso, CA 95002

## Managing Wetland Habitats for Birds

*SFBBO's role in the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project*

BY  
Cheryl Strong,  
*SFBBO Biologist and Program Director*

This fall, SFBBO biologists will be scoping ponds, levees, and islands to learn how specific south bay wetlands are used by birds. For the past two years, SFBBO and partner organizations have been surveying the salt ponds that will be restored or managed under the 15,000 acre Salt Pond Restoration Project.

South San Francisco Bay is undergoing a restoration of historic proportions. To plan and manage the restoration so that no net loss of birds results, the Project



PHOTO BY ROSS WILMING

*Salt pond that could be impacted by the adaptive management plan.*

Team needs to know how birds are utilizing not only the restoration ponds (already under study) but also the other 23 ponds (~9,000 acres of south bay habitat) that will remain in salt production. SFBBO intends to provide the Team with that missing information.

Our study encompasses east bay ponds, including Coyote Hills, the Newark (or Dumbarton) ponds, and the Mowry Slough ponds. While owned by the National Wildlife Refuge, the salt company retains the rights to continue to make salt with these ponds for the foreseeable future.

Certainly birds use these ponds, and to quantify just how much, we will survey them once a month for the next two years, documenting baseline resources, tracking changes, and determining site fidelity of birds to ponds. We will also characterize water chemistry of the salt ponds in order to relate bird habitat use to water depth and quality. Using this information, SFBBO will then provide information to the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project Management Team that will improve their ability to adaptively manage important bird habitats during the interim stewardship phase. The information will also improve the Team's ability to plan the final restoration mix of habitats that will result in no net loss of the more than 80 species of birds dependent upon south bay wetlands habitats.

**BIRD CONSERVATION TIP!****GARDENING  
FOR THE BIRDS**

This is a great time to support your local bird communities by adding to your yard. Many Bay Area birds are adapted specifically native plant communities and/or the insects that depend on these communities. By adding natives to your garden, you can create miniature habitat.

Think about what habitat is: food, water, shelter and space. Native sages, snowberries, and mallows can add great beauty to your garden while providing some features of a bird habitat.

You not only provide bird habitat by planting natives, but you also protect bird habitat by planting natives. Native plants generally use less water than other landscaping options, facilitating water conservation and watershed protection.

Keep an eye out for native plant sales in the area. Additionally, sites like the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge host bird gardening workshops from time to time.



# Under SFBBO's Wing

Every year, SFBBO trains interns to help conduct fieldwork during the very busy breeding season. This year SFBBO's Interns worked in two programs. Leslie Tucci monitored the Snowy Plover during its nesting season, while Sarah Stoner-Duncan and Eli French monitored bayland birds during the nesting season. Catch a glimpse into what a first foray into the world of avian conservation fieldwork can be like.

## THE SNOWY PLOVER RECOVERY TEAM

by SFBBO Intern Leslie Tucci

Since Mid-March I have been a part of SFBBO as a snowy plover intern. The work is rewarding and it's been fantastic to learn so much about a specific species, while being trained by SFBBO biologists.

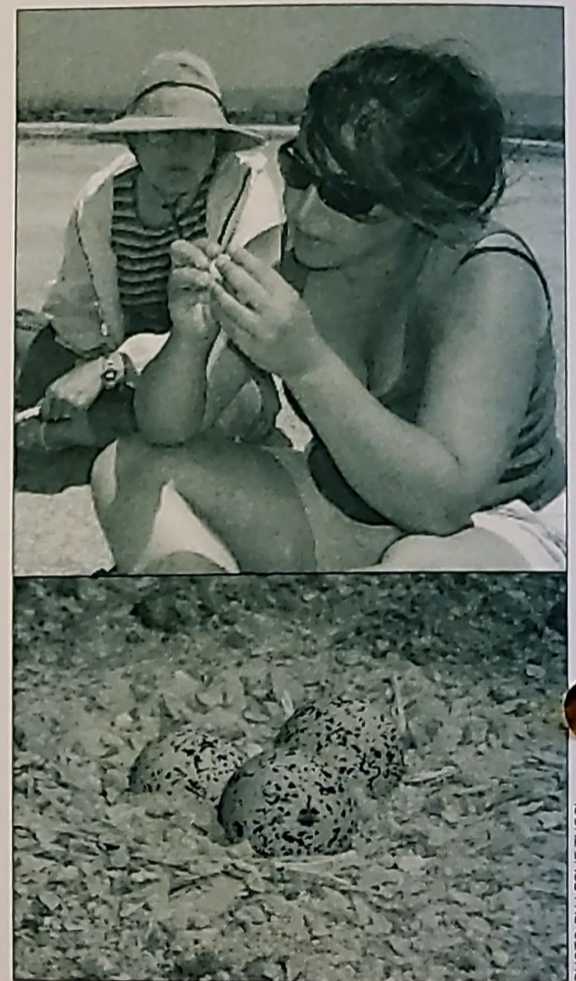
My days typically begin around 8:30 at one of the salt pond complexes around the bay, anywhere from Hayward to Palo Alto. We pick a route, stopping every few hundred yards to scan any "plovery" habitat. It helps knowing that plovers don't like to get their feet wet, limiting the places you must scan. Once we see them, we record information. How many? Male or female? Behavior? Any chicks? This information is not only important to monitor the population of these threatened birds, but also provides critical data for the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration project.

We're thrilled when we find a nest. Typically the females incubate during the day, so if we see one sitting for more than 10 minutes, we consider it a nest. We then attempt to find the nest, approaching it carefully so we don't disturb the three well-camouflaged eggs. The location is marked with a GPS unit, and each egg is carefully floated in a container of water. The amount of shell exposed above the water tells us when the egg will hatch, helping us better determine the fate of the nest. During this procedure a parent plover is always nearby, feigning a broken wing to get our attention.

The day ends with a predator survey. The location of predators affects nest sites as well as nest success.

This internship has taught me so much, and it is wonderful to know my learning experience also contributes to scientific research and conservation of a species.

During this internship, we worked not only with SFBBO staff, but also other biologists from USGS and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It was a great learning experience working with so many different agencies, under the wing of SFBBO. As interns, we were trained to monitor Black-necked Stilts, American Avocets,



Top Photo: Snowy Plover intern Leslie Tucci monitoring a nest.

Bottom Photo: Snowy Plover nest on a levee.

PHOTO BY LESLIE TUCCI

# THE USUAL SUSPECTS

## Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*) Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*)

BY

Lisa Myers,

*SFBBO Volunteer and Board Member, Birding Educator and Founder of Let's Go Birding*



*Caspian Terns in a breeding colony.*

**T**erns are a group of web-footed water birds that belong to the family Laridae. This family also includes gulls, jaegers, skuas and skimmers. But let's not even get into the topic of gulls. We'll stick to how one identifies a tern!

Terns are birds that can be found in both freshwater and saltwater habitats. There are roughly 44 species worldwide and we have 17 species in North America. For the most part terns are white bodied, gray-backed birds with long pointed bills and some variation of a black cap. This cap changes between breeding and winter plumages. Take note of the bill color because that field mark can help you

identify one tern species from another.

Although always found near water, terns don't spend a lot of time in the water. They have rather short, weak feet and thus are not the best swimmers. When you see terns resting on the ground you'll notice they look different than other sea birds. They are slender birds and their bodies are held more parallel to the ground. Their long, pointed wings are folded back and held tight against their body with the feather tips often extending longer than their tail. They appear short necked with a rather large head and one can't miss their long, pointed bill.

When you see these birds in flight they are usually flying near the sur-

face of the water as they hunt for food. The tern's diet consists solely of fish, shrimp and maybe a crayfish or two. This means they spend a lot of time foraging over the water as compared to gulls. These extremely agile birds fly with a constant wing beat, almost never soaring. They scan the surface while their bill is pointed downward toward the water. This posture combined with their agility allows them to turn in a moment's notice to dive for fish.

Both Caspian and Forster's Terns are found in the bay area during the spring and summer months. They are easy to tell apart, as the Caspian Tern is the largest of all terns. The Caspian is 21 inches long with a wingspan of 50 inches. They also have a large, brilliantly colored red bill.

The Forster's Tern is much smaller than the Caspian at 14 1/2 inches long with a wingspan of 31 inches. Terns often vocalize while in flight so learning the two different calls will help you to identify one from the other.

Caspian Terns are found worldwide and breed on several continents. They

*Continued on page 4*

*Juvenile Forster's Tern in the South Bay*



PHOTO BY BRUCE MEDLIN

THE SFBBO BOARD OF DIRECTORS WELCOMES  
JOHN MCLEMORE



John McLemore and his wife Clysta on a recent trip down the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon.

John joined the SFBBO Board of Directors about a year ago. He is well-known in Santa Clara, having served on the City Council there from 1996 to 2004. After 32 years in the electronics industry, John retired last year, at least from the for-profit world. His involvement with non-profit and agency boards has since grown to become an even larger aspect of his life, including serving with several groups to provide affordable housing. He previously served as the Treasurer for the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society for several years, and is currently the Vice-Chair and Commissioner of the Bay area's Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which John describes as "an extremely exciting position." He's on the Board of Directors for Caltrain and the Santa Clara VTA, too.

Between board meetings, John and his wife Clysta Seney are diehard travelers. John visited the Florida Everglades this last January and fell in love with a few of the amazing

water holes where hundreds of birds flock at sunset. Yosemite is always on their schedule, but locally, their favorite birding spot is the Ulistac Natural Area Park in Santa Clara (at Lick Mill Blvd. and Tasman/at the Guadalupe River) – "a great place to see white kites, red-tailed hawks, and a multitude of smaller birds."

On why John decided to become a member of SFBBO Board: "I've been familiar with SFBBO since my Audubon days. My wife has been a birding activist for decades, and I felt this was a way for me to become reengaged in the local birding activities after being on the Santa Clara City Council the last eight years."

*"I hope we are able to increase our activities as a resource center for the study of birds in the San Francisco Bay area. With the restoration of the salt ponds in the South Bay Area, we are positioned to do some significant research projects, as well as work with the Department of Fish and Game and other leading environmental groups in the area."*

## The Usual Suspects

Continued from page 3

are found on both coasts of North America and they breed right here in the bay area. Although many tern species have been impacted by habitat destruction, the Caspian Tern's numbers remain stable. Because they are accepting of man-made structures they have adapted to using dikes, levies and islands for their breeding colonies. Most tern species do breed in colonies and often return to the same location year after year. The Caspian Tern is no exception.

The Forster's Tern is a species that is more restricted than the Caspian Tern, and in fact is only found in North America. The Forster's Tern has a smaller bill and red feet as compared to the Caspian. The Forster's Tern also has a forked tail, which is visible during flight.

At the turn of the century feathers were used by milliners in the decoration of "fashionable" hats. Feathers from several different species of native birds were needed to fill this fashion trend. Tern feathers were also used in this industry. Killing terns for their breeding plumage greatly impacted their populations. Laws were eventually created making the collection of feathers illegal.

If you want to observe terns take a trip to the baylands or stop by any of the lakes and reservoirs in our area. But you'll need to go during the right time of year. Both the Caspian and Forster's start to arrive in mid-March and remain in the area until fall. By mid-October most of the terns have left our area to return to warmer tropical temperatures found in the south.

## Under SFBBO's Wing

Continued from page 2

and Forster's Terns in the South Bay. Specifically, we helped continue a study SFBBO has participated in for the last few years, monitoring the impact of mercury (Hg) contamination on South Bay chick mortality.

### THE COLONIAL WATERBIRD TEAM

by SFBBO Interns Eli French and Sarah Stoner-Duncan

During this internship, we worked not only with SFBBO staff, but also other biologists from USGS and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It was a



Eli French (left) and Sarah Stoner-Duncan (right) examine waterbird nests on salt pond islands.

great learning experience working with so many different agencies, under the wing of SFBBO. As interns, we were trained to monitor Black-

necked Stilts, American Avocets, and Forster's Terns in the South Bay. Specifically, we helped continue a study SFBBO has participated in for the last few years, monitoring the impact of mercury (Hg) contamination on South Bay chick mortality.

Under SFBBO's guidance, we participated in a variety of field work duties including nest monitoring, chick banding, and chick radio-ing. All of our duties were focused on monitoring nests as eggs matured, as well as after hatching. Each week, eggs were floated briefly in water, a technique that helps to determine their stage of gestation, and nest condition recorded. Additionally, a few eggs were randomly collected to obtain mercury levels.

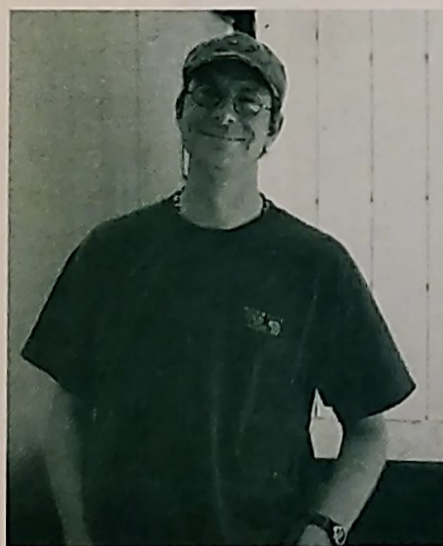
Thanks to this internship, we had the chance to learn many new skills such as data collection methods, nest monitoring, aging eggs by floating, and radio telemetry which involved tracking with the birds' locations with truck and hand-held antennae. All in all, it was a challenging season (occasionally hot and stinky in those sulfurous bay muds!), but great fun. We're excited to see how SFBBO's work will contribute to the overall findings of the south bay mercury monitoring project.

## Migrations

Join SFBBO in welcoming Roy Churchwell to our science staff:

*What's your background?*

I grew up in the mountains of central Idaho. The nearest town to my house was Challis 25 miles away. I did my undergraduate school at the College of Southern Idaho and the University of Idaho. I went to graduate school at Oklahoma State University. My thesis was a study of grazing and fire interactions and how these two disturbances influence the grassland bird community, especially their reproductive success.



Roy Churchwell

exciting work I have done. I also enjoyed teaching biologists in Mexico to band birds for a 10 day stint. I worked on a good variety of projects including surveying shrub-steppe birds in Oregon, riparian birds in San Joaquin, woodrat surveys at Point Reyes National Seashore, bird-banding at PRBO's Palomarin station in the fall and winter, and even on the response of birds

to natural gas development in Wyoming.

*What interests do you have outside of work?*

I enjoy spending my time outdoors, hiking, biking, kayaking, and camping. I also like woodworking and drawing.

*What is the most exciting or best job you've had so far?*

I got to do some hawk trapping at the Idaho Bird Observatory for a couple of days, and that is some of the most

## DIRECTOR'S CORNER

## GOOD THINGS HAPPEN

As SFBBO nears its 25th anniversary next year, we look back at our seminal work, cataloging the breeding birds of the mysterious salt ponds of south San Francisco Bay. The landscape had been fairly fixed for 50 years and showed no signs of changing.

Twenty years later, in 2001, SFBBO was still hard at it, but now the possibility of change glimmered ahead. Interest in our work and the ponds grew, inspired by this hope.

A mere four years later, now in 2005, change in SFBBO and the south bay's landscape has become exponential. Oh, SFBBO is still hard at work on the ponds. But now SFBBO biologists and interns are in the field every day, with partners from the U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service and others, investigating aspects of breeding success in our native tern, shorebird and gull populations, supported by CalFed funding.

And SFBBO will begin work this fall, documenting bird use on the remaining salt ponds in the east bay section, information so important to the restoration process. We are pleased to announce the award of funding for this project by the San Francisco

THE SAN FRANCISCO FOUNDATION  
*The Community Foundation of the Bay Area*



Foundation's Bay Fund and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Another very bright spot is a recent substantial gift from Calpine, in support of our Volunteer Program. This contribution directly funds the "citizen science" aspect of our work at the Coyote Creek Field Station and around the Bay.

In these times when the news is often bad, it's good to give some attention to signs of better times ahead, like the Bay Area's new interest in restored wetlands, tidal marshes, cleaner water and a sky full of birds. I enjoyed sharing some good news with you.

~Janet Tashjian Hanson  
*Executive Director*

## Volunteering for the Birds

I like meeting new birds. However, I've discovered something even more fun: meeting new people who enjoy meeting new birds. The easiest way for me to do this is through SFBBO's New Volunteer Orientation (affectionately known around the office as the NVO). Here, I meet people who have discovered SFBBO, and are ready to get working! I've met people from all over the country, and even from all over the world through this orientation. Some are expert birders while others have never birded in their life, but want to take part in conservation science. Despite the many differences, every new volunteer comes with a passion...sometimes it's exuberant and other times it's subdued, but I can see it when I hit on a project that sounds interesting.

It's exciting to see new volunteers become not so new. I always love randomly intercepting a phone call from a



*Volunteer Gerry Ellis not only bands at CCFS along with serving on our Board of Directors, but also shares bird banding with visitors like these Girl Scouts.*

former NVO graduate a year or two later, when he or she is calling in data to one of our biologists. It means that person has become part of the SFBBO volunteer community. It also means that SFBBO is providing a place for that volunteer's passion to thrive, and hopefully grow.

SFBBO volunteers can be found all around the Bay Area. Some are in our office, faithfully assisting us with data

entry and office management. Others are at the Coyote Creek Field Station doing predator patrol and banding birds. Some volunteers can be spotted during the summer months, patrolling the sloughs for sick birds. The list is endless: trail maintenance, Snowy Plover monitoring, data scanning, avian disease preventing, kayaking, boating, driving, walking, watching, scoping.

If you are interested in volunteering, keep an eye on our website for the next New Volunteer Orientation. Also check out our volunteer webpage to see what our current needs are. If you are a current volunteer, please save Wednesday, February 15th to celebrate your accomplishments with us at the Volunteer Appreciation Dinner.

~Sharon Miyako  
*Outreach Specialist*

## OUR THANKS TO THESE SUPPORTERS OF THE OBSERVATORY...

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*We wish to recognize our partners for their generous gifts to SFBBO during the 2nd quarter of 2005. Our sincere thanks to all!*

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The Bird Observatory is located at 1290 Hope Street in Alviso, behind the historic Bayside Canning Co. building. If you would like to visit the office or our Coyote Creek Field Station, please call in advance.

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

## CALENDAR OF MEMBER EVENTS

### ■ BIRDING THE BAY TRAIL

Participate on one of our walks in the Birding the Bay Trail with SFBBO series, on the second weekend of the month. Join various leaders as we explore each of the sixteen sites listed on the Birding the Bay Trail Brochure. These walks are very popular, so make your reservations early by calling the office or emailing [outreach@sfbbo.org](mailto:outreach@sfbbo.org) Free for members, \$10 requested donation from non-members.

**Saturday January 14th, 8am - 10am**  
**optional 10am - 12pm**

Site: Colma Creek Public Shore

Led by: Laurie Graham and Jeff Fairclough

**Saturday, February 11th, 8am-12pm**

Site: Martin Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline Park

Led by: Bob Power

**Sunday, March 12th, 8-10am**

Site: Las Gallinas Park District.

Led by: Eric Feuss

### ■ BIRD-BANDING AT COYOTE CREEK

Come explore SFBBO's Coyote Creek Field Station and experience conservation science in action. See bird banding and explore a restored riparian habitat. The station is part of SFBBO's Migration Program. It is a wildlife haven in the middle of the urban Silicon Valley. RSVP's required for all demonstrations, to Education Specialist Laura Weiss [lweiss@sfbbo.org](mailto:lweiss@sfbbo.org) Rain cancels.

**ONE SATURDAY EACH MONTH 8-10AM**

Meet at Borders bookstore parking lot in McCarthy Ranch, Milpitas

**Saturday, December 3rd**

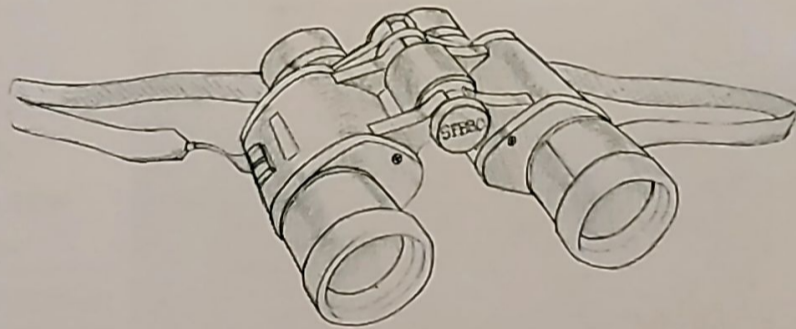
**Saturday, January 7th**

**Saturday, February 4th**

### ■ SAVE THE DATE: FEBRUARY 15TH

Volunteer Appreciation Dinner

Watch your mailbox and our website for more details.



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