

# SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY NEWSLETTER

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## "TRY TO BE THERE"

By Ed Roberts

*"Cruelty is a mystery, and the waste of pain. But if we describe a world to compass these things, a world that is a long, brute game, then we bump against another mystery: the inrush of power and light, the canary that sings on the skull. Unless all ages and races of men have been deluded by the same mass hypnotist (who?), there seems to be such a thing as beauty, a grace wholly gratuitous. About five years ago I saw a mockingbird make a straight vertical descent from the roof gutter of a four-story building. It was an act as careless and spontaneous as the curl of a stem or the kindling of a star.*

*The mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as though he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating thirty-two feet per second, through empty air. Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bars of white, spread his elegant, white-banded tail, and so floated onto the grass. I had just rounded a corner when his insouciant step caught my eyes; there was no one else in sight. The fact of this free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. The answer must*

*be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there."*

*Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

"Try to be there." Those words ring on, bells in the mind, summoning us to heed the advice; a credo by which we can live and find joy, excitement, fascination.

All of us have seen the equivalent of Annie Dillard's mockingbird when we've been able to look. I wrote a short piece about herons building nests in unusual locations which Nancy Norvell and Dave Jensen witnessed. Nicholas Coiro wrote that he, too, had seen an instance of adaptation by Great Blue Herons who were nesting in the transmission towers of powerlines in Foster City.

A couple of years ago, as I walked out of the Fremont Library at Lake Elizabeth, several mallard ducks flew overhead. Suddenly, one stopped. Her wings simply ceased motion. She didn't glide, she plummeted to the ground and struck the earth like a pine cone fallen from high up in the tree. She had died in mid-wingbeat. Why? I'll never know, but the end of life for that female mallard is left indelibly etched in my memory. If I ever see such an occurrence again, I'll recognize what is happening instantly. I'll know what is happening before the bird begins to fall. We learn by looking, by keeping our eyes open. And by remembering.

Neither Jason Formenti nor I was aware that between the two islands which form the gull colony there is a borrow pit. In salt pond lingo, a borrow pit is the hole the dredger leaves when it piles up mud to form a levee. It's a bit of a shock to have been wading through ankle deep water and to suddenly discover that the next step is into the borrow pit - a long way down.

I was playing at being a "gullboy," rounding up a small herd of precocious chicks who had escaped our nighttime intrusion into the California Gull colony by swimming out from the bank of the island. I'd discovered a trick: walk toward them while shining the flashlight on them and the young gulls will swim toward a shadowed spot. If they head away from you, shine the light onto the spot where they are heading. They'll turn around and swim toward you, often right up to your legs, which make the best-looking shadow around (if you happen to be a 7-day old gull chick). All this technique requires is patience.

On the night in question, I became impatient and took one more step toward the gulls. My foot descended on nothing. I was at the edge of the borrow pit. I'm told they are sometimes ten feet deep, but I didn't measure that particular pit. Instead I sat backwards and plopped my backside down on the edge of the pit with both feet dangling in the water. Fortunately, I was wearing chest waders, so I didn't even get wet. (I've had the experience of filling my chest waders with water and thus can answer that important, old philosophical question, "How fast can you get out of your waders?" But that's another story).

Involved in the task of nabbing the gull chicks, Jason saw me sitting down on the job and attempted to fill the breach, so to speak.

"I'll get him!" says Jason.

Step.

Good fortune continued. Sara Roberts was right behind Jason and she grabbed him by the collar before he could test his ability to measure the depths of a borrow pit.

The point of this silly story is that in the space of seconds, Jason and I learned a great deal about the configuration of borrow pits. Jason and I have both been back to the gull colony and, likely, we'll do so many more times. The borrow pit was not all that dangerous. Now that we know where it is, it doesn't frighten us anymore.

Some people might think that seeing a mallard die in mid-flight or nearly stepping into a borrow pit were negative experiences while Annie Dillard's mockingbird was a positive one, but I don't think the judgments of negative or positive have any meaning here. What Annie Dillard was doing, what Jason was doing, the essence of what SFBBO is all about, is "trying to be there." If you are a dues paying member of SFBBO but haven't had the experience of participating in some of the volunteer research activities, consider going out into the field on a project or out to the Coyote Creek Riparian Station to band birds. When the tree falls, when the bird flies, when the unusual or fascinating occurs, you'll be there.

## PROJECT UPDATE

The 1986 breeding season is getting underway and schedules and plans are being made for SFBBO's projects and studies. Listed below are the studies that will be carried out by the Bird Observatory this year with a brief description and time span. You can see that a lot of volunteer help is needed to carry these projects to completion. If you have decided that this is the year that you are going to get involved and would like to work on one of these studies as a volunteer, call the Bird Observatory office for more information.

### **ARTESIAN SLOUGH-COYOTE CREEK BOTULISM STUDY** (Volunteers needed June-October)

Twice weekly survey trips will be made in the Artesian Slough-Coyote Creek study area to census birds, collect invertebrates for identification, and test water samples to determine salinity, temperature and dissolved oxygen levels at several sites in the study area. If an outbreak of avian botulism occurs, all sick birds will be collected, given first aid treatment and transferred to a local wildlife rehabilitation center for further treatment. Training is provided for all aspects of this project. (Avian botulism is a type of food poisoning and is not contagious to humans.)

### **BAIR ISLAND** (Volunteers needed February-October)

This is a nearly 11 year old study involving censusing and banding of nesting birds on Bair Island near Redwood City. In previous years, the study has focused primarily on gathering data on nesting Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night Herons, Snowy Egrets, Caspian Terns, and Least Terns. Projects have been started for the 1986 season which include an attempt to reestablish the Least and Caspian Tern nesting colonies, to provide some artificial nesting platforms for Great Blue Herons, and to plant seedling Coyote Brush in the heron colony. For the most part, work on these projects will be done on weekends.

### CALIFORNIA GULL PROJECT (Volunteers needed March-July)

In 1980 California Gulls began nesting on levees near Alviso. This colony is unusual because it is the only known breeding site for California Gulls west of the Sierra and the only colony associated with an estuarine environment. It is, therefore, a unique situation and one which needs to be thoroughly studied. Two new studies are under consideration for this year to complement the continuation of banding of chicks and obtaining information on clutch size and hatching success. The new projects will be to study nest site preference in the colony and a study of dispersal patterns to the feeding grounds by adult birds. Except for the dispersal study, we will be working primarily at night so that we disturb the colony as little as possible.

### CLAPPER RAIL STUDY (Volunteers needed all year)

The California Clapper Rail is found only in salt marshes of the San Francisco, Suisun and San Pablo Bays. SFBBO and the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge are beginning the fourth year of a five year study on this endangered species. We will be censusing in both the north and south bays and banding birds in the south San Francisco Bay. Birds are captured with hand nets from an airboat. After capture, the birds are measured and banded. Using combinations of a USFWS band and 3 plastic color bands, we are able to identify up to 200 individual birds. Subsequent sightings or recaptures will give basic information on populations, movements, territoriality and habitat requirements of these rails. This data will be used to protect and expand suitable rail habitat, and insure the continued existence of a healthy population of California Clapper Rails.

### COLONIAL BREEDING BIRD SURVEY (Volunteers needed March-August)

The primary purpose of this study is to ascertain the current reproductive status of colonially nesting birds of the south San Francisco Bay area. Volunteers will be coordinated in a census of all colonially nesting birds to determine the number of breeding pairs, and their general success as measured by the number of fledglings. All known nesting sites will be visited twice a month to count nesting pairs and estimate on a given date, the percentages of eggs vs. the percentage of young in nests, and to determine their survival rates.

### COYOTE CREEK RIPARIAN STATION (Year round banding on Wednesday and weekends)

The Coyote Creek Riparian Station provides field experience as a part of the Bird Banding Workshop. It also gathers baseline data for use in the establishment of a long-term bio-monitoring program in several habitats (riparian, fresh water marsh, etc.) where Coyote Creek meets San Francisco Bay.

### SALT POND STUDY (Study continuing through August 1986)

This study will examine various ecological aspects of seven salt evaporating ponds located in Alviso. Water quality measurements will be made of each pond related to the different habitat types present along with determining distribution of various species of fish. Thousands of birds of many different species utilize these ponds and determining bird community structure is one area where volunteers are needed to gather baseline data. Bird counts are conducted two weekends each month, and will continue through August.

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## SFBBO ENDOWMENT FUND

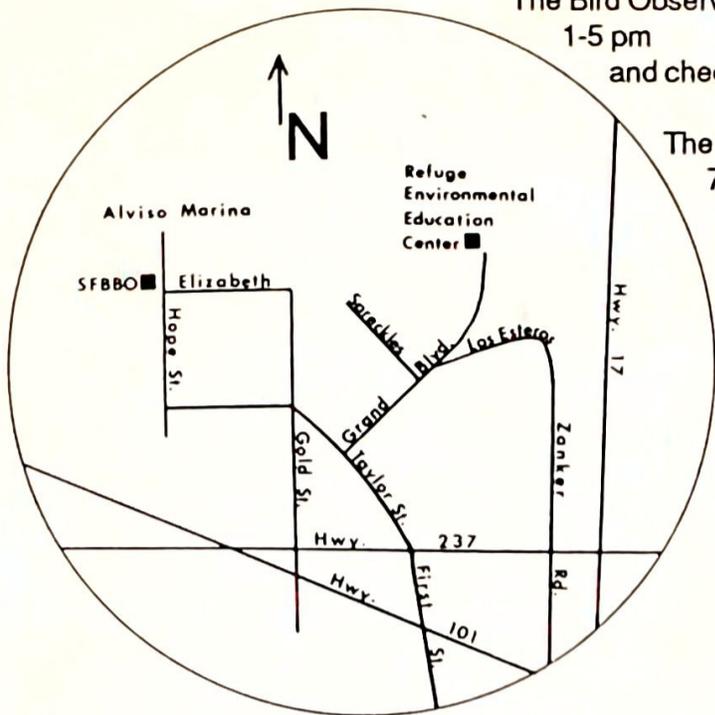
From its inception, the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory recognized the need for long-term funding. As a means of accomplishing this, an endowment fund was established with the money received from life memberships and memorial gifts. Only the interest from this fund is used for Bird Observatory operations. We would like to build this fund up substantially. Please remember the Bird Observatory and its programs when considering memorial donations. We are grateful to the following life members of the Bird Observatory; Eve Case, ✓ Jan Dierks, ✓ Pat & Jean Dubois, ✓ Marilyn Fowler, ✓ Robert Gill, ✓ Mrs. Elgin Hurlbert, ✓ Roger L. Kniss, Eugene Y. Makishima, ✓ Dick & Fran Mewaldt, ✓ Mike & Theresa Rigney, ✓ Phyllis Swanson and Peg Woodin. ✓

*Dorothy Hunt ✓  
(see April newsletter)*



Now on sale at the Bird Observatory office, 1986 SFBBO pocket appointment calendars. A bargain at \$3.50 each. Stop by and pick one up.

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.

**DONATIONS.** . . . Thanks to Joyce Bizjak, Fran Mewaldt and Ann Southward for the refreshments for the February General Meeting.

**THANKS.** . . . Special thanks to Lyman Fancher for many hours of work repairing the electrical system at the Cannery.

**ITEMS FOR SALE.** . . . 1986 pocket appointment calendars are still available at the SFBBO office, \$3.50 each.

## GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Thursday, March 6, 1986

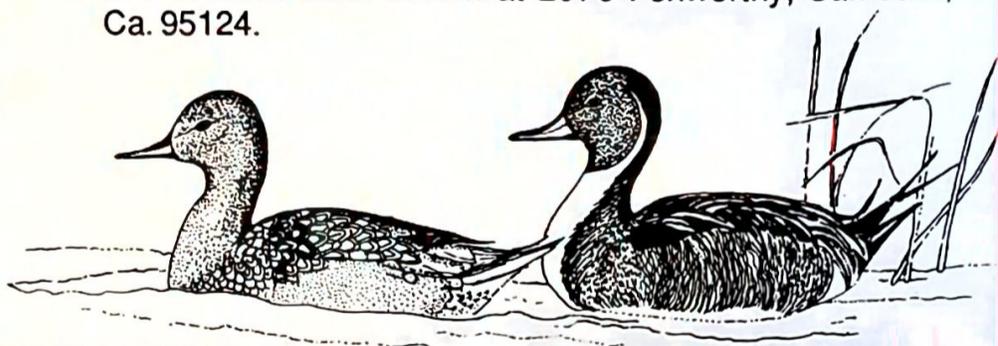
Refuge Environmental Education Center  
in Alviso

7:30 pm

**FEATURED SPEAKER:** Alan Baldrige from the Hopkins Marine Station in Pacific Grove will talk about marine birds of Monterey Bay.

## SFBBO BIRDING TOURS

SFBBO announces another year of Bird Tours starting with Arizona at Easter, Michigan in June and others. For a brochure and more information call Don Starks at (408) 371-9720 or write to him at 2076 Foxworthy, San Jose, Ca. 95124.



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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.