

# SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY NEWSLETTER

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APRIL 1986

## O I L

### THE SECOND WORST SPILL - SO FAR

By Lou Young

On February 1, the first oiled seabirds began appearing on beaches from Marin to south of Monterey. As the birds were picked up in windrows, first by concerned citizens, then by State Fish and Game, State Parks & Recreation, US Fish and Wildlife, and Coast Guard personnel, word spread rapidly among the people who had been through it before. On that Saturday, many of the nation's rehabilitation experts and volunteers were attending the second day of the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council (IWRC) 1986 Wildlife Conference in Burlingame. News of the spill, apparently from a tank barge that had leaked heavy bunker oil from San Francisco Bay to Los Angeles, caused a mass exodus from the meeting. By conference end on Sunday more than half of the attendees, including IWRC President Kathy Hobson, were engaged in or committed to an epic struggle to salvage birds from the worst oil disaster that has struck the Pacific coast since 1971.

Not too ironically, the second paper of the conference was a study of the toxicity of oil to seabirds based on findings from birds oiled in the *Puerto Rican* tanker breakup outside the Golden Gate in October of 1984 (Ref). In that episode, about 1300 birds were picked up on local beaches and about 800 were brought alive to the rehabilitation centers. Setting the 1971 accident aside, the worst recent spill in 1975, required that the rehabilitators deal with about 900 birds. By the end of the first week of the current spill, an estimated 3000 birds

were spread amongst 7 hastily set up centers from Monterey to Marin. SFBBO's (and IWRC's) Kathy Hobson, and Jay Holcomb of International Birds Rescue Research Center in Berkeley, were in charge of the largest of the centers, located in the former bakery of the Agnews State Hospital. The Agnews facility was set up by Kathy and Jay, with assistance from Tom Harvey of the Fish and Wildlife Service's SF Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Cal Hampy, Ron Thompson, Danny Reno, Paul Kelly from the California Dept. of Fish & Game regional office in Yountville and began operating on Tuesday, February 4.

The final statistics are not yet compiled, but at least 1400 birds came to the Agnews center in the three weeks after the spill. About ninety percent were Common Murres. Common, Red-throated and Arctic (Pacific) Loons, Western Grebes, and White-winged and Surf Scoters were represented among the patients. Two Pied-billed Grebes, two Mew Gulls, and one each Brandt's Cormorant, Ring-billed Gull and Glaucous-winged Gull rounded out the species count. Another center reportedly had several Rhinoceros Auklets and Black Scoters.

Facility and people capacities were terribly strained to deal with this load of acutely afflicted birds. The few people who had been trained to wash and rinse birds,

and the somewhat larger cadre who were experienced in force-feeding (gavage, or "tubing"), were spread thinly amongst the seven centers. A large contingent of California Conservation Corps young people are based at Agnews, across the street from the old bakery building, and they were assigned to help in the cleanup. In spite of limited coverage of the media, Agnews attracted an enormous number of inexperienced but willing volunteers. This was fortunate because, unlike previous spills, the great number of birds forced a dependence on raw volunteers. The experienced people under Kathy's and Jay's direction trained the CCC youths and many of the volunteers to acceptable competency in some of the critical tasks.

The Agnews facility had an endless supply of hot water, plenty of water pressure for rinsing, fairly generous kitchen space for washing, and the nearby hospital laundry which, every day, cleaned five or six huge laundry carts full of wet and smelly bedsheets and towels. Even with near-ideal facilities and a reasonably large and dedicated work force, 1400 birds could not be washed, rinsed, dried, and properly prepared for release before many of them reached a point of no return, from a variety of causes. Washing and rinsing was the great bottleneck. The process was so lengthy and labor-intensive that the facility and people could manage at best only about a hundred birds a day, and the average on weekdays was sometimes half that amount. When the number of birds awaiting rerinsing began to strain holding facilities, a third rinse station was cleverly jury-rigged from plywood and plastic sheet.

There were really never enough trained people available to keep the facility operating at full capacity, because no one could survive more than 2 or 3 straight days of washing in the 1-percent detergent, 108-degree water. I'm talking about serious skin problems, here. Jay estimated that more than 50 cases of quart-sized bottles of Dawn detergent were used.

The really knowledgeable people

were stretched beyond normal endurance levels. Most importantly, they performed the really high-skill tasks: they had to evaluate the birds, watch over their progress, and select the strongest ones for washing. In addition, they had to answer thousands of questions, arrange for supplies, discuss progress with the state and Federal officials, train volunteers, speak to the press, enforce safety, and watch over the entire process nearly 24 hours a day. Kathy and Jay were augmented by a few other experts, notably Dorothy Johnson and Joan Humphrey. Joan and Dorothy became ill, but both came back to "recuperate" on the battle lines during the 19 continuous days of the most intense operation.

My first visit to the facility struck me as the entry into fabled Bedlam - it could not have been too different from Agnews' former role. But there was order. Nearly 1500 square feet of concrete floor was covered with plywood pens containing oiled birds, some in obvious distress. Volunteers worked quietly among the pens, offering smelt to the birds or, in pairs, holding and tubing each birds. Every 2 to 4 hours the birds were fed a mixture of Purina Trout Chow which was prepared in blenders by other volunteers in the cramped bathroom, then stored in the operating cooler until use. Three blenders sacrificed themselves in the cause. New SFBBO member Max Lincoln told his son, a Ralston Purina employee, about the need for bird food and

Purina donated 2 tons of Trout Chow! Between feedings of Trout Chow, birds were tubed with a rehydrating formula. Volunteers washed and disinfected hundreds of syringes and tubes and the feeding buckets every day.

In the unused warming ovens of the old bakery, thousands of donated sheets, towels and other clothes were being sorted, folded, and stacked. Out on the loading dock, CCC people were cutting newsprint, donated by the San Jose Mercury and the Peninsula Times Tribune, into pen-sized pieces, then layering several sheets of paper with cloth sheets and towels to form padded floor covers to absorb feces. These pads were placed on bubble pack to provide some additional padding. Still other volunteers went around after the feedings and replaced soiled bedding. Dirty bubble pack was taken out and washed. Periodically, whole blocks of pens were moved and the floor was scrubbed.

There was a separate large room full of pens for drying the birds after washing, and for holding birds to be rerinsed or checked. Large thermostatically controlled blowers kept the birds under controlled warmth and speeded drying, and the pens were protected with cloth covers. Volunteers tubed, fed and rehydrated here, too.

As the cleanup progressed and volunteers and procedures changed,



twice-daily meetings of the volunteers with the leaders helped to minimize confusion and mistakes.

In back of the bakery five large "Doughboy" pools, containing platforms, held the frolicking birds that had been cleaned and were now being watched for signs that they were becoming chilled due to the wetting action of any residual detergent. These were returned to a special pen in the drying room to await rerinsing. Two to four times a day crews of volunteers caught each bird in a net, tubed it, and transferred it to the next pool in line. Large hoses kept a strong flow of water through the pools. Under the rush from the outlets of the main pools, dozens of packages of frozen smelt were immersed in small wading pools to thaw. Volunteers stirred and scooped to hasten thawing, then threw the fish to the birds.

Near the pools, Ed Roberts and his crew built 7 pens using shrimp netting (fine-mesh fishnet) as a raised false bottom. We had heard about this idea (I understand that it was Jay's, originally) at the IWRC conference as the answer to keeping the seabirds clean and, most importantly, protecting them from keel damage. These pens quickly replaced the rudimentary ones in the drying room. The new pens were generally effective, but in the future we might investigate softer net and the use of rope bolsters under the netting.

There was more, but my purpose has been served if you have a feeling for the tremendous scope and organization of the operation, and the deep involvement of many SFBBO members. I won't describe the washing and rinsing, except to say that the good humor and camaraderie of the people was wonderful, packed as they were into a hot and humid kitchen space, and steaming inside huge plastic bags.

Food was donated by a variety of people, from volunteers themselves to restaurants and catering services. I'm sure that the principals will find a way to thank all of these generous and caring people. There are a lot of stories about people, most of them

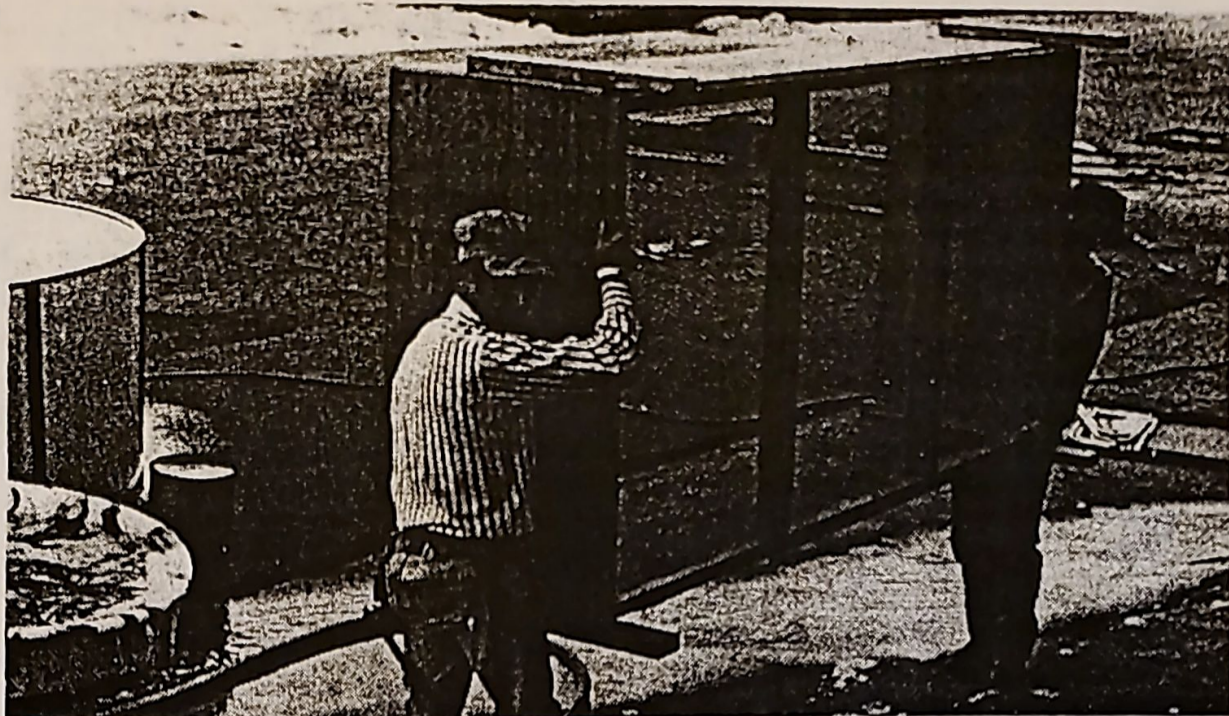


Photo by Rick Palmer

heartwarming. Maybe someday we can collect them for all of us to share.

There are many sad stories to tell, and I must tell one that affected me greatly.

When I first entered the cavernous main room of the old bakery, I heard, over the roar of the rinsing, the wild, thrilling cry of a Common Loon. Memories of youthful camps on northern lakes came to me, and I quickly found his covered and sequestered pen in a far corner of the room. Hardcore rehabilitators know that it is not wise to get too emotionally involved with any particular patient. Especially a loon, whose rearward-placed feet make him terribly susceptible to unrecoverable keel damage when kept, perforce, out of water. I'm not hardcore, however, and I bit. I seemed to be close to his pen when he needed cleaning or feeding, and I watched as they took blood to confirm our opinion that he was growing weaker.

Dorothy Johnson saw my interest in this bird and let me help wash and rinse him. I had a chance to feel his power, study the beauty of his feathers, note the subtle colors on his dagger bill, and see myself reflected, unforgiven, in his wild eyes. When he was placed in an outdoor pool the next day he looked beautiful but did not seem to have much energy, and had to be brought back to the drying room. His calls were weaker and less

frequent. He spent much of the time with his head tucked. He refused fish, as if he preferred starvation to life away from the ocean's expanse. The decision had to be made, and in his primitive brain I'm sure he felt the end nearing. The last time I saw him, mournful now, he raised his head and gave his cry.

The Agnews birds banded and returned to the wild total several hundred to date, with 44 still being held to regrow lost feathers and fatten up in pools at SFBBO. About 170 birds remain at the other centers.

Besides these survivors, of the 1200+ total that were received alive at Agnews 215 were returned to other centers and will, hopefully, be counted among their releases.

Gary Page of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory estimates that the number of birds that were found dead on the beaches was at least equal to the number picked up alive. There is no way of knowing how many birds perished at sea and are not accounted for. Gary said that many oiled carcasses washed ashore during the big storm the week after the spill. I will guess that the total affected was close to 8,000. The current spill is second to the 1971 collision of the two Standard Oil Company tankers near the Golden Gate Bridge. That accident gave us the worst known numbers - 7,000 picked up alive and probably an equal number dead. The 1971 spill was

close to shore, so most of the birds may have been recovered. If many of the birds this year were not blown toward shore, the totals for the two could be closer. The sunken hulk of the *Puerto Rican* is still leaking oil near the Farallons and may also eventually claim a greater total than the February 1986 spill, although as of March 10 freshly-oiled birds from the accused Apex Houston were still being picked up.

The final effect of this oil spill may never be known, but Kathy thinks it must be devastating, coming in the wake of several other disasters that struck the local sea bird populations. PRBO observations show a decline in the Murre breeding population of almost 60% over the past few years. Gary Page thinks that Gill netting has had the most significant affect, and he has not been able to separate the effects of El Nino. PRBO was unable to measure any affects of the *Puerto Rican* spill. Considering all of these catastrophes the Murre population is under considerable stress. Other breeding populations may also be in trouble. Gary said that a fair number of Rhinoceros Auklets were found dead on beaches after the latest spill. PRBO data is not yet complete. The only clue we will have on the cumulative effects will be from future observations of the breeding populations on the Farallons - late and controvertible data.

It is a little early to evaluate all that the community learned from this second biggest - so - far west coast oil spill. Certainly a lot more data were gathered on the frontier of pelagic avian medicine. A group of veterinary students from the University of California at Davis, under Dr. Michael Fry organized by Jan White and the other centers, did blood studies on most of the birds at Agnews. We also learned more about the value of publicity, since this spill and its effects received relatively less than earlier ones, and much of the public and even the volunteers had no idea of the extent of the disaster. Procedures and skills for dealing with oiled birds were sharpened and spread to a larger pool of committed volunteers. Finally, effective techniques for organizing and

directing a huge volunteer effort were practiced and honed. We can only hope that we don't have to use them again. You can help by letting your Congress and Legislature know how you feel about increased surveillance of oil shippers and about offshore drilling. ■

**Reference:** Hematological Studies on Murres in Oil Spills: Toxicity of Oil to Seabirds - Findings From Birds Exposed to Oil Spilled From the Tanker *Puerto Rico*; D. Michael Fry, Leslie Addiego, Steve Schwarzbach, and C. R. Grau; Department of Avian Sciences, University of California, Davis, Ca.



**VOLUNTEERS** who helped in the clean-up at Agnews represented the following organizations: Alexander Lindsay Jr. Museum, Alpha Phi Omega, Ano Nuevo State Park, California Conservation Corps, Committee to Expand the Refuge, De Anza College - Science Dept., East Bay Regional Park District, Humane Society of Santa Clara Valley, International Bird Rescue Research Center, International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council, Mt. Diablo Audubon, Ohlone Audubon Society, Quabaug Bird Sanctuary, San Jose State University, Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory, San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Sierra Club - Loma Prieta Chapter, Sigma Alpha Epsilon, Sigma Alpha Mu Fraternity, University of California Davis - Veterinary Medical School, Vietnam Veterans, Wildlife Education Rescue Center, Wildlife Rescue, Inc. and Youth Science Institute.

## VOLUNTEERS

We would like to thank all the volunteers who generously donated their time to the cleanup at the Agnews center. As you can see by the number of volunteers, the response was overwhelming. It was very difficult to decipher many signatures from the volunteer sign in sheet, so the editor apologizes for any omitted or mis-spelled names.

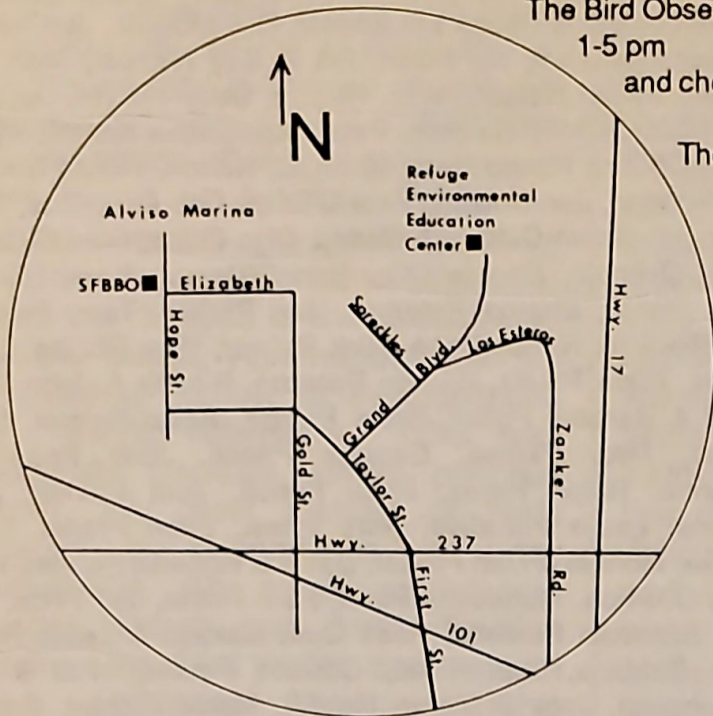
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*Continued on page 5*

Elsen, Andy Elliott, Carol Elias, Mary Lou Etten, Jan Eagye, Lynn Evans, Susie & Jason Formenti, Marna French, Russell & Marilyn Fowler, Roark Freeman, Dr. Michael Fry, Pam Falcone, Charlen Fong, Tom Farkas, Bea Faber, Anne Fogel, M. Friedlander, Steve Farone, Gail Frum, Nancy Forguet, Dee Falk, Maria Frank, Eve Francisco, George Fitzgerald, John Fobes, Ralph Fitzsimons, Frank Fletcher, Bob Franco, Eve & Syd Furman, Marilyn Faull, Don Fong, Ed Fisher, Phil Giacalone, Beth Goss, Susan Gardner, Marilyn Gallaway, Eldon Gresham, Kathie Godoc, Mona Gazlay, Michael Gracolle, Joyce Goss, D. Gentry-O'Brien, Albert Grajeda, Sharon Grant, Frank Garcia, Gilda Gallo, Priscilla Gray, Kay & D. George, Trini Gonzales, Suzanne Goldfinger, John, Sandy & Darryle Golden, Sylvia Goesele, Kim & Sandra Gey, Gary Gray, Larry Gardepie, Paul Goldstein, Janet Galen, Shirley & Chris Gordon, Crystal Garry, Clarence & Howard Green, Karen Hakland, Markham Hirt, Linda & Andi Herman, Jay Holcomb, Joan Humphrey, Steve Hares, Anne Harrington, Cal Hamp, Tom Harvey, Paula Hucal, Patty & Janet Holm, Beverly Hogaboom, Terry Hart, Sharon Hoffmann, Liwel Hsiao, Mike & David Hanley, Carol Hunter, Norine & Ray Hopper, Maribeth Hight, Carol Hakkert, Ed Haynes, Joyce Hanson, Nancy & Debbie Henderson, Lynda & Cheryl Hebert, Deb Hopewell, Karen Hasell, Kathryn Hafvenstein, J. Hewitt, Mike Heger, Kerri Hall, Kathy Haranzo, Holly Hugdahl, Lee Hung, Maria Hughes, Diann Healey, Robert Holland, Connie Hancock, Cathy Hardey, Shirley Hunt, Willie Hayes, Scott Hunter, Jean Hsia, Brenda Hess, Molly Hobson, Anna & Marshall Halford, Anna Hickey, Stephen Hape, Martha Hickey, Elaine Hatfield, Ray Hasler, Cecily Harris, Bruce Irvine, Max Irvine, Dorothy Johnson, Ivan Jones, Steve Jackson, Karen Jackson, Jeff Johnston, Marcia Johnson, Kathy James, Bob Jachens, Frances Johnson, Mary Lou Jordan, Marty Johnson, Mary & Gene Johnson, Jeff & Nancy Jones, Joy Jackman, Ray & Joanne Jason, Pat & Tom Jones, Judy Jones, Leo & Paul Jones, Juanita Jimenez, Tom Kussell, Marji & Alex Kabbaz, Kathryn Kermeen, Kathy Kiss, Elaine Kalmecki, Mathew Kora, Lisa Maria Kares, Elaine Kalani, Tom Kussell, Lydia Keyser, Karen Kienitz, Lois Kilburn, Kathy Kim, Liz King, Megan Kinter, Alice Kellogg, George Klass, B. Krehemker, Richard, Kurth, Barbara Kollin, Iris Kestler, Brenda Konar, Marty Kreel, Sarah Karachi, Jennifer Kline, Denise Kimbrough, Mary Lou Kemper, Pat Leinonen, Joyce Long, Lisa Landsverk, Gail Lubeck, Garrett Lipscomb, Andy & Marina Lutze, Diederik Lagerwerff, Rita Look, John R. Lemmons, Sally Lowell, Kim & Steve Lee, Lisa Landsverle, Helen Lloyd, Barbara Lee, Stan Lukezic, Annette Levelle, Michael Lorie, Becky Ludtke, Jeanne Leanz, Janet Larson, R. Lee, Lori Long, Linda Lloyd, Joyce Long, Travis Little, Cheryl Lee, Vina Lopez, Marilyn Labus, Margaret Lewis, Pamela Laurence, Sidney Leite, Joyce Lusty, Larry & Joann Lausen, Pat Lappert, Sue Lehr, Rebecca Lopez, Greg Letts, Christine Moon, Shawna Madden, Eyn Meyers, Dawn McClelland, Trish Martin, Juanita Morrisen, Jill & Steve Moody, Janet McDonough, Stuart Muntz, Terri McKim, Walt Marsh, Linda Makely, Jeanne & Bill Morris, Susan McCartney, Patrick Mack, Gina Morrison, Doug McAbee, Jerry Marks, L. Melander, Terry McKim, Joe MacDonald, Kathy Moe, Leta McPhillips, T. C. Marsh, Bill McRea, Louise Madrid, Frank Morina, D. Mortensen, Susan McCombs, Tom & Lynn Meadows, Carolyn Mitchell, Dale Managh, Cindy Martin, Sarah Manwaring, Meg Menard, Elizabeth Miller, Aurora Metah, Gina Moran, Tania Miller, Charlie Mosqueda, Lee Mitchell, Bill Maxwell, Bruce Mitchell, Gloria McClain, Howard Meyerson, Marjorie Motch, Pam & Mac McMinn, Andrea Muller, John McAlister, Sandy Mills, Mario & Ronit Monzon, Rick Merrick, Athea Mullin, Joe Maille, Paul & Karen Munana, Monica McShane, Tohoru Masamune, Rich MacKinzie, Donna Meador, Phyllis McMillan,

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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 Barbara Cox, Pat Dubois and Susie Formenti for the refreshments for the March General Meeting. Also, to Bob Garcia for the donation of carpeting from Windword Construction.

### GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Thursday, April 3, 1986

Refuge Environmental Education Center  
in Alviso

7:30 pm

**FEATURED SPEAKER:** Call the Bird Observatory office for information on the speaker for the April General meeting.

### OOPS!

Somehow Dorothy Hunt's name was overlooked when listing our life members in the last newsletter. She was one of the original life members who gave her support to the Bird Observatory at its' beginning. Thank you Dorothy and sorry for the error.



Editor, Susie Formenti



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I would like to join  Renew my membership  in the  
San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory

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