CALIFORNIA CLAPPER RAIL - A COOPERATIVE STUDY

by Peter Perrine

We were a bit nervous as we stood at the end of the P.G. and E boardwalk at Dumbarton Point marsh. After months of preparation, we were finally going to attempt to catch and band California Clapper Rails. Not one of the six of us there on that first day, only Roy Lowe had ever caught and held a live healthy rail in the wild. Would our capture techniques work? Would our new holding boxes contain them? None of us was sure.

Our uncertainty demonstrated the importance of this study. SFBBBO and the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge began work on the California Clapper Rail because almost nothing is known about the habitat requirements of the species. Today, the California Clapper Rail is an endangered species found only in salt marshes of San Francisco and San Pablo Bays. Historically, San Francisco Bay was covered with seemingly endless expanses of salt marsh. In the late 1900's, the California Clapper Rail was abundant throughout the bay area, with large populations in Monterey Bay and north along the coast as far as Humboldt County. An article from the San Mateo Leader dated October 23, 1897 foretold a gloomy future for the Clapper Rail.

"Hunters galore swarmed the marshes all of this week hunting rail. It is safe to say that at least 5,000 of these birds have been slaughtered since the opening of the season last week. At this rate it will not be long before this species of game will be entirely exterminated in this county."

These vast marshes are now reduced to narrow strips along dikes and isolated marshes such as Dumbarton Point and the Palo Alto baylands. The total population of Clapper Rails in the remnant marshes has been estimated at 4500-6000 birds but may be half that. It is vital that we gather more data on the natural history of these birds.

The incoming tide rose around our feet as we arranged our banding equipment on the boardwalk. Roy started the airboat and moved off across the marsh with Mike Rigney and Al Schmitz to begin capturing the rails. The Clapper Rail is well adapted to salt marsh habitat. With its large feet and slender body it moves through the dense vegetation during low tide and walks on it as it floods. However they are weak fliers. Taking advantage of this weakness, we planned to capture them from the airboat with landing nets when the marsh was completely flooded. Within minutes the airboat roared back with Mike seated precariously on the bow triumphantly holding up 2 fingers. Those first birds were transferred to Dick Mawaldt who banded each with a regulation USFWS stainless steel leg band and three color bands.
He then passed the birds on to Valerie Layne and me to be weighed, measured and sexed. Sexes are similar in California Clapper Rails but males tend to be heavier and have larger bills and longer legs and feet. Unfortunately, the measurements overlap and we have yet to find a fool-proof way of verifying sex. We caught and banded eleven birds that day. The birds were released where they were caught, each with a different combination of colored leg bands. Eight more trips have been made and more than 180 birds banded, from Howry Slough to Ideal Marsh and the Palo Alto Baylands. There will be many more trips in the next five years both to capture and band birds and also to census and record locations of previously banded birds. Volunteers are welcome to come share in the adventure. It's a great opportunity to get really close to an endangered species and to become involved in its protection.

WANTED!
SIGHTINGS OF COLORED-BANDED CLAPPER RAILS
by Peter Perrine

As was mentioned, we have color banded over 180 Clapper Rails in the South Bay and we need your help to find out where they go. They were banded with 2 plastic color bands on one leg and a color band and metal fish and wildlife band on the other. The band colors are white, yellow, orange, red and light green. If you see a banded bird, carefully note the color sequence on both legs, the location of the bird, the time and date. You can give this information to SFBBBO or SFBBNO. We need as many sightings as possible to get a clear understanding of rail movements and territories.

BIRD BANDING - SFBBBO STYLE

More than 3,400 birds were banded by SFBBBO personnel this year as a part of its many ongoing research projects. A total of 107 species and sub-species were represented in this year's efforts. Of note were the 942 California Gulls banded as chicks in the gull study (see Newsletter #3) and the 326 Western Sandpipers banded in the sewage lagoons as part of our Riparian Field Station's ambitious monitoring program. The new California Clapper Rail study (see articles in this newsletter for details) netted (literally) 151 rails, all of which were also color-banded. Many ducks, gulls, owls and hawks were banded under the SFBBBO station permit as a result of the activities of Wildlife Rescue volunteers.

We would like to thank and acknowledge the many people who made this year's banding activities such a huge success. Without your help, the accumulation of data and the furthering of our understanding would not have been possible.

BANDERS OF RECORD - 1983

Ginny Becchene, Joyce Bizjak, Virginia Bennett, Aileen Brodky, Jennifer Browning, Chris Dienger, Michael Dressler, Bret Emery, Lorrie Emery, Bill Ferguson, Stevie Ferguson, Suzie Formenti, Marilyn Fowler, Russ Fowler, Tim Gates, Carol Hamilton, Tom Harvey, Steve Haydock, Alice Hoch, Kathy Hobson, Dave Jensen, Dorothy Johnson, Paul Jones, Paul Kelly, Sandra Kinchen, Larry Kistler, Julie Klingmann, Vicki Knirck, Valerie Layne, Roy Lowe, Carol Martin, Dick Hember, Vi Nosinger, Nancy Norvell, Pat Page, Peter Perrine, Joan Priest, Elsie Ritchey, Michael Rigney, Theresa Rigney, Tom Rountree, Allen Royer, Al Schmitz, Don Schmolz, Jim Siegel, Allan Sillet, Peter Siminski, Lynn Tennenfoss, Vicki Silvas-Young, Sally Walters, Cassie Webb, Peg Woodin, Jean Young, Lou Young.
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 is used from this fund and to date, the balance of this fund stands at $3,200. We would like to build this fund up substantially. Please remember us and our programs when considering memorial donations. Thank you.

HABITATS ON DISPLAY AT DE ANZA COLLEGE

by Valerie Layne

The De Anza College Environmental Studies Area is open to the public on the first Saturday of every month from noon to 4 PM. Twelve native plant communities from the cool dark redwood forest of the northern Pacific Coast, to the arid desert of Southern California are represented on 1.5 acres. The ESA is located by the tennis courts at the intersection of Stelling and McClellan Roads in Cupertino. Guided tours are available for school and community groups. For more information contact Bev Walters at 408-996-4525 from 9-5 PM, Monday through Thursday.

LIBRARY COMING ALONG

The SFBBO library has acquired a large number of donated books and journals recently. They have been placed on the shelves and are awaiting cataloguing and processing as soon as their Library of Congress file cards are received. This procedure of labeling, stamping, pocketing and carding the books as well as setting up the file and checkout system will be costly and time-consuming. We would be pleased to accept donations to help with these expenses. We will also be establishing a library fund to help us purchase books and journals needed for the library.

Sandy Kinchen, Library Committee

SFBBO MEMBERSHIP

The current membership of SFBBO stands at 293. New memberships arrive almost daily from individuals responding to our brochure, to personal solicitations and from talks by SFBBO volunteers. Annual renewals began in September and the response has been tremendous (over 90% of September renewals have been received with October and November approaching that rate. As a special and worthwhile gift, may we suggest a gift membership in SFBBO. Let us know it is a gift and we will announce it as such to the recipient.

Sandy Kinchen, Membership Secretary
SFBBBO ANNOUNCES BIRDING TOURS
by Don Starks

SFBBBO BIRDING TOURS are designed with the adventurous and parsimonious in mind. Most birding tours these days cost nearly to $1,000.00 per week and usually this does not include transportation to the tour site. On the other hand, these first-class tours take care of your needs quite well. I've always felt that there is a certain segment of the birding population that wants to go on a professionally-led birding tour and is also willing to camp out and provide their own transportation. Our tours are planned to take advantage of this desire and also get you more birds per dollar spent.

Campgrounds are reserved in advance on all tours in order that a night's "lodging" is taken care of. As on most camping trips, meals are not provided but we may attempt a pot-luck situation if all participants are in agreement. Carpooling and organizing are taken care of at preliminary meetings held before each tour along with a description of areas to be visited, birds to be seen, equipment needed, etc. Each tour has a minimum of two guides so that every participant has a good chance at seeing all birds and the ratio between leader and participant is low.

SFBBBO BIRDING TOURS welcome novices, senior citizens, students, campers and anyone interested in natural history, particularly birds. The following is a list of our upcoming tours. If you're interested, please call or write Don Starks at 408-371-9720 (evenings), 2076 Foxworthy Ave., San Jose, CA 95124 for further information and literature.

Salton Sea 4 days - Apr. $ 90.00
Death Valley 4 days - May $ 90.00
Kern River 4 days - Jun. $ 90.00
Yosemite 4 days - Jul. $ 90.00
Arizona 9 days - Aug. $280.00
Condor trip 3 days - Aug. $ 70.00

Trips that are in the embryonic planning stage include Yellowstone in the summer, Colorado in the summer, the Dakotas in summer, Michigan in summer, west Texas in spring, Texas in spring, and Mexico in winter. Remember, these are all camping tours. If sufficient interest is generated we'll expand.

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The San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory is a non-profit corporation under IRS statute 501 (c) 3. All memberships and contributions are tax deductible. Membership classes are:

- Student/Senior $10 annually
- Regular $15 annually
- Family $20 annually
- Associate $50 annually
- Contributing $100 annually
- Sustaining $200 annually
- Life $400
- Patron $2000
- Corporate $500+ annually

* Single payment becomes part of an endowment fund.