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SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY NEWSLETTER

NUMBER 8

FEBRUARY 1985

1984 CALIFORNIA GULL STUDY

Picture this scene: *it is a lovely late spring evening. You have just completed the fifteen minute drive along a levee track into what appears to be the middle of the South Bay and now stand near an old building which once served as a duck hunting lodge. The brilliant vermilion sunset fades rapidly as darkness takes hold. A pair of low, narrow peninsulas run off to the east in twin serpentine twists. A narrow channel of water separates you from these "islands," and you wander over to a small dock and the raft moored to it, awaiting total darkness before crossing. The lights from the various cities around the Bay now gleam like stars.* Time to finish your coffee, check your flashlight, and ferry across. If you were one of the forty volunteers who participated in the 1984 study of the California gulls you know that the next three hours, or so, will provide a sort of nocturnal, adult version of an Easter egg hunt. While walking down the levee counting nests and chicks you call out your finds to the person designated as recorder for the evening. Occasionally you kneel down to hold a larger chick while the bander applies the aluminum federal band and the two plastic colored bands used for this study.

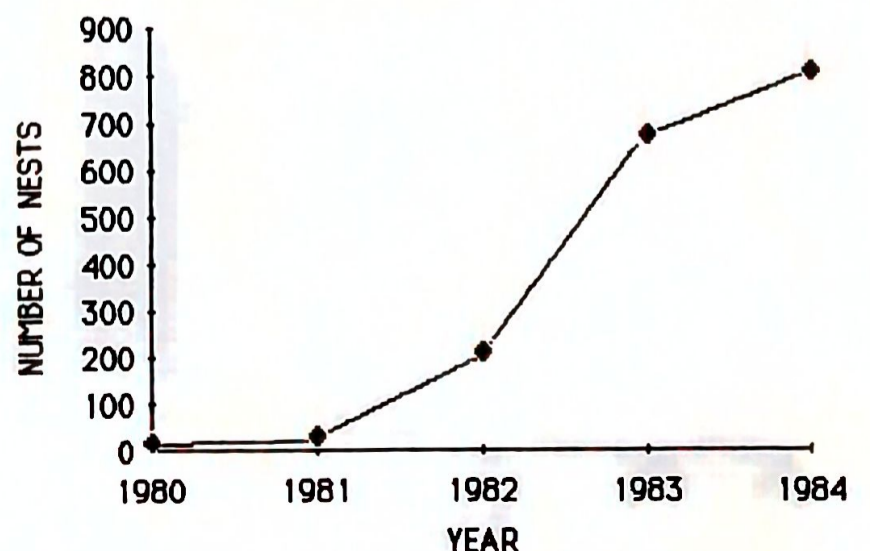
All the while, the adult birds wheel and glide, screeching disapproval of your presence with their cry that puts to mind essence of fog, beach, and roaring breakers. The adults stay on the ground, near to their nests, until you get very close, and they drop back to the earth immediately after you have moved a few steps past. You are virtually surrounded by *Larus californicus*, the California gull: in front, in back, to the sides, and

overhead. The darker wing feathers don't show in the weak light, and the gliding birds are ghost gulls whose white breasts and primary wing feathers look as if they were the source of the light rather than your flashlight.

The downy, spotted, big-footed nestlings at your feet complete the circle of gulls. Sometimes one will be literally under your feet, choosing to hide from the intruding flashlights by tucking up against the shadowed side of your boot. One must walk with care in the gull colony.

The 1984 breeding season brought with it another increase in the population of California gulls which have come from who knows where to establish the colony. 808 nests were counted, a 20% increase over 1983, and 1160 chicks were banded (see Figures 1 & 2). This increase, though not as large as the change from 1982 to 1983, demonstrates the need to continue to study and census the colony in 1985 and to continue to band the chicks produced by the colony.

CALIFORNIA GULL STUDY



Continued on page 2

Each 1984 chick received three bands: the standard metal band from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, plus two plastic bands, one of yellow over a green one. Since 1983 chicks were given red bands and those from 1982 black, chances are increased for discovering where these birds go and when. And this being the third year for those black banded birds, we will have an added activity to consider, in 1985: that of keeping an eye out to see if those birds which hatched here will be returning to breed.

Questions persist: Why are the gulls there? Where have they come from? Where do they go? There are no answers yet.

The traditional breeding range of *Larus californicus* stretches from the Mackenzie River drainage of Canada south through Alberta and Saskatchewan and across the Great Basin and prairie region from North Dakota to Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, and into California at Mono Lake. What alteration of behavior or environment caused this inland breeding species to nest in the saline bay? Continued banding and observation is needed both of our local birds and at other nesting colonies if we are ever to find out why.

Not enough sightings have been made of birds which were banded locally to accurately determine where they go after the nesting season. Again, more time and the efforts of more people will be required to answer the question.

One factor becomes abundantly clear as we think about and discuss the interesting questions which are raised by this study: many volunteers are needed who can give a few hours of time to help. In this study, you really are an active participant, not just a spectator.



California Gull (*Larus californicus*) on nest.
Photo by Tom Rountree

Figure 3 shows a list of those volunteers who participated in the 1984 study. If you wish to be a 1985 volunteer, sign up in the Volunteers' book which is available at all general meetings or by telephoning or dropping by the Observatory. Under the capable leadership of Peg Woodin, 1985 promises to be another fascinating experience in the gull colony.

Ed Roberts



Volunteers organizing before a walk through the gull colony.

CALIFORNIA GULL STUDY 1984 VOLUNTEERS

Ginny Becchine	Don LaVoy
Joyce Bizjak	Chris LaVoy
Jose Castillo, Jr.	Valerie Layne
Howard Cogswell	Armando Martinez
Barbara Cox	Dick Mewaldt
Jim Fangeneir	Bill Mewaldt
Bill Ferguson	Vi Nisonger
Stevie Ferguson	Nancy Norvell
Jason Formenti	Pat Page
Susie Formenti	Peter Perrine
Marilyn Fowler	Elsie Richie
Russ Fowler	Ed Roberts
Margaret Galvin	Sara Roberts
Tim Gates	Allen Royer
Tom Harrington	Al Schmitz
Terry Hart	Allan Sillett
Michealle Havenhill	Lynn Tennefoss
Kathy Hobson	Sally Walters
Dave Jensen	Jim Wittenhour
Dorothy Johnson	Peg Woodin

Figure 3

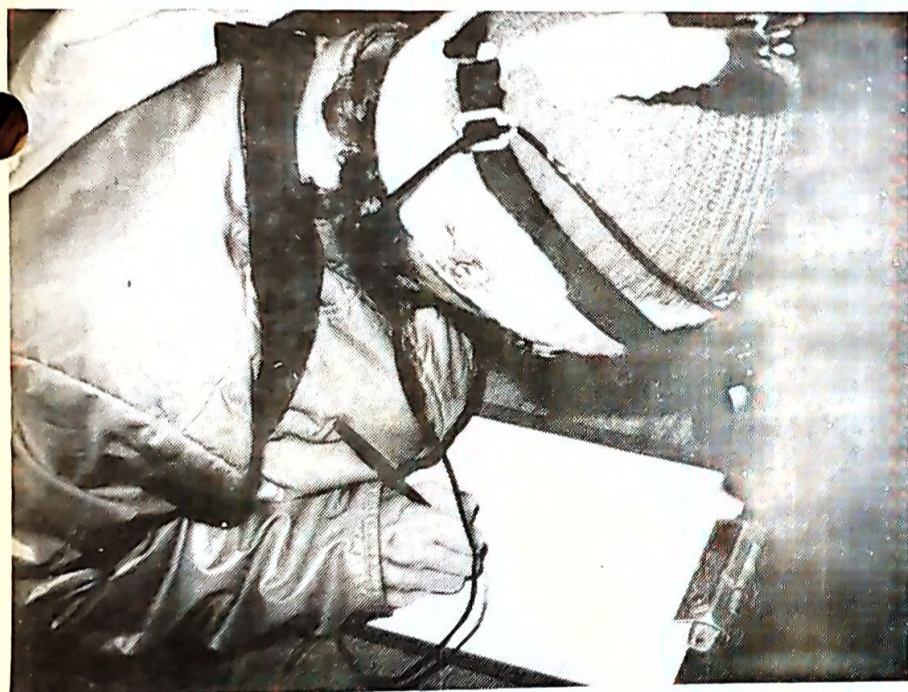
COMPARATIVE STATISTICS CAGU STUDY

	<u>1982</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1984</u>
Number of nests	206	671	808
Number of Eggs	453	1556	1881
Number of Chicks	?	1063	1240*
Number Banded	275	964	1160
Mortality	37 8%	173 11%	641 34%**
Mean Clutch Size	2.20	2.32	2.00

*Includes 7 Western gulls (*Larus occidentalis*)

**Preliminary figures only

Figure 2



Volunteer Ginny Becchine recording data.

Photo by Tom Rountree

1985 pocket appointment Calendars available at the SFBBO office, \$3.50 each. Order calendars from the Bird Observatory office.

1985!

1985!

1985!

The New Year will be a success if we accomplish as much as we did in 1984. It's a good time to look back on our successes and accomplishments.

- * Completion of the Palo Alto Airport Study
- * Another year of data for the Calif. Gull Study and the Comparative Marsh Study.
- * A third year of data for the Botulism Study.
- * 100 volunteers spent 1400 hours on the Colonial Breeding Bird Survey.
- * We raised \$5,000 at Kotani-en Gardens
- * Established a monthly newsletter.

The time, energy, and enthusiasm of our volunteers and staff have made 1984 a successful year. Of course, 1984 had its challenges as well - life would be so one-dimensional if there weren't problems to overcome, wouldn't it? But surmount them we did - and learn from our mistakes as well!

The New Year is a time to look ahead. If we accomplish the goals we set at the November Planning meeting, you'll be seeing our name in print - and on the screen as well. So come out and get involved with our new studies and ongoing research projects to help us make 1985 as successful as 1984 was.

Phyllis Swanson
President

GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Thursday, February 7, 1985
Refuge Environmental Education Center in
Alviso
7:30 pm

FEATURE

Don Starks will discuss the basics of gull identification.

SPOTLIGHT

Peter Perrine reports on the Yellowthroat Study.

DONATIONS

The Bird Observatory gratefully thanks the following people for their generous donations. Bob Gill for slides and papers on the south bay; Dick Mewaldt for a file cabinet for bands and two bookcases; Sandy Kinchen for banding equipment; Vi Anderson for books; Eve Case for books; The Davis' for library supplies; and Darrell Gray for vacuum cleaner, electrical conduit and wire.

ART EXHIBIT

An exhibit of "Birds in Art" will be on display at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco from January 23 through February 24. Harry Adamson who designed the masthead and logo for the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society newsletter has a painting of Emperor Geese in the exhibit.

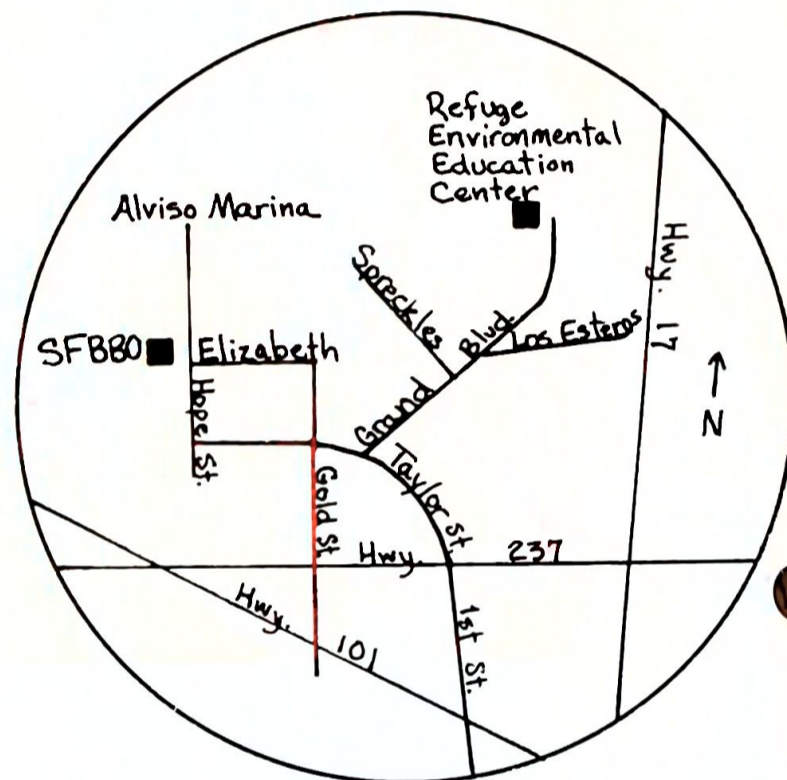
The newsletter deadline is the first Monday of the month. Send contributions to the editor: Susie Formenti, 16675 Buckskin Ct., Morgan Hill, Ca. 95037.

Editor, Susie Formenti

Assistant Editor, Dave Nauer

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 below). The Board meetings are held on the last Tuesday of the month at 7:30 pm at the Bird Observatory. Members are welcome to attend both meetings.



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

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

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____ ZIP _____

PHONE _____

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

Make checks payable to SFBBO. Your gift membership is tax deductible.

* Single payment becomes part of an endowment fund.