



Vicki R. Jennings

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# The Stilt

Vol. 14 No.1

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## *Bair Island Nesting Season - 1994*

by Peter J. Metropulos

During the spring and summer of 1994, I had the opportunity to accompany SFBBO Biologist, Valerie Layne, and a number of research volunteers and associates on visits to Bair Island in San Mateo County. This location, so near to a highly populated urban area, is in many ways distant from the civilized world. Uninhabited by humans and surrounded by San Francisco Bay on one side, sloughs and marshlands on the other, it has (so far) largely been spared the destructive effects of development and remains an important south bay site for birds and other forms of wildlife. Since it is predominantly private land, however, development could conceivably occur at any time. Sadly only a small portion of Bair Island is currently included in the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

From March through July we conducted monthly survey trips by small boat from the Port of Redwood City to Bair Island. The primary purpose of our visits was SFBBO's monitoring of existing heron and cormorant nest sites, inspection of the area for shorebird and tern colonies, and searches for evidence of predation by feral red fox. Another reason I was along was to conduct a comprehensive survey of all nesting birds utilizing Bair Island and surrounding areas as part of my involvement in the San Mateo County Breeding Bird Atlas, a project coordinated by the Sequoia Audubon Society. My goal was to document occurrences of nesting and estimate the number of breeding pairs of as many species as possible in the study area. With just a few scrawny, drought-ravaged shrubs and trees, no source of fresh water and very little cover, it is understandable that the avifauna of Bair Island is not diverse; however many of the species which occur there are "special", limited in distribution and abundance in the Bay Area, a number severely threatened with continuing population declines due to habitat destruction. Bair Island includes a flat upland area of grasses and weeds dotted with clumps of

coyote bush (*Baccharis pilularis*), surrounded by a cordgrass/pickleweed marsh, and at low tide by mudflats. There are also meandering sloughs, seasonal ponds and open areas nearly devoid of vegetation.

"Target" species for SFBBO's Colonial Waterbird Monitoring Program which nested on Bair Island in 1994 included Great Blue Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron and Double-crested Cormorant [see V. Layne's article in Winter 1994 issue of *The Stilt*.] Twenty-two (22) nests of Great Blue Herons and 175 cormorant nests were constructed of twigs and marsh vegetation on tall PG&E towers along Redwood Creek and Steinberger Slough. The cormorant colony was recently established and is the largest in the South Bay. Night herons built 29 nests of thin twigs in coyote bush, mostly at heights of 3-6 feet but some within inches of the ground. Such proximity to the ground resulted in predation of many eggs, and apparently some nestlings, by large rodents (species unknown). During one of our surveys, after being dismayed to find a large number of heron nests containing chewed-up eggs (apparent rat meals), it came as "sweet revenge" to watch a

## Bair Island Cont.

Great Egret swoop in and carry off a large live rat. Predation, it seems, can work both ways!

A peak population year for rodents was evidently the reason we observed such an impressive concentration of breeding marshland raptors. Five pairs of White-tailed Kites were found, these adults raising at least 7 broods (some nested twice during the season). We found their nests, each with 3 or 4 eggs, in the tops of coyote bush, 5-7 feet from the ground. Two pairs of Northern Harriers were observed, at time engaged in courtship displays. Juveniles seen in May and July indicated local nesting success. A pair of highly-vocal Peregrines chasing away an "intruder" Peregrine in March seemed to be defending a territory but, disappointingly, subsequent visits failed to produce any sign of these endangered falcons. Although there is sufficient prey available, finding a suitable site for an eyre is a major problem along the shore of San Francisco Bay. In earlier times it was easier to find a nest site. There is a local record (Condor 29: 269) of a pair of Peregrines nesting each year from 1900 through 1912 on an old barrel cast upon the high tide line on a shell bank along the bay at Redwood City. Charles Littlejohn, an ornithologist/oologist, collected a "beautiful set of eggs from this pair each year." He surmised that this family of Peregrines consumed "an appalling total" of 700 rails per year at this location. (Maybe it's a good thing they didn't nest on Bair Island this year: we don't have any rails to spare!)

Perhaps the most significant nesting observations we recorded on Bair Island during our study involved the Short-eared Owl. Like the Burrowing Owl, this species is a terrestrial nester, and is even rarer and more local since it requires large open fields with adjacent marshlands, an "endangered" habitat in our region. Bair Island is the only location in the

entire San Francisco Bay area where Short-eared Owls currently breed. [Ed. note: The nearest Short-eared Owl nesting area is on Grizzly Island in Suisun Bay]. In May, Valerie and I literally stumbled upon a pair of adults on a nest. The nest, a shallow depression in the grass lined with dried weeds and feathers contained three large fully-feathered owlets. I was interested to learn that the Short-eared is one of few owl species to build its own nest; most species utilize cavities or the old nests of other birds. In July I was ecstatic to see 10 Short-eared Owls at one time, flying moth-like above me, including at least three strong-flying fledglings. I suspect three pairs nested here during the season. Also this season, a pair of Burrowing Owls remained at

a nest hole at inner Bair Island just east of Highway 101, where they have been resident for several years. This is the last nesting pair known to exist in all of San Mateo County. Rounding out the list of raptors utilizing Bair Island was the adult Golden Eagle frequently seen scanning for prey from the PG&E towers along the highway during the spring and summer.

The few waterfowl which attempted to reproduce on Bair Island had a difficult time of it due the relentless predation by rats and red foxes. We found evidence of fox (scat or tracks) on nearly every visit. Being surrounded by water makes little difference since foxes can swim and all it takes is one marauding fox to



destroy or disrupt thousands of nesting birds! During the season we found one Canada Goose nest with 4 eggs in a pickleweed marsh; and one nest of Northern Pintail with 9 eggs, one nest of Gadwall with 8 eggs and 3 Mallard nests, all situated in dry grassy upland areas.

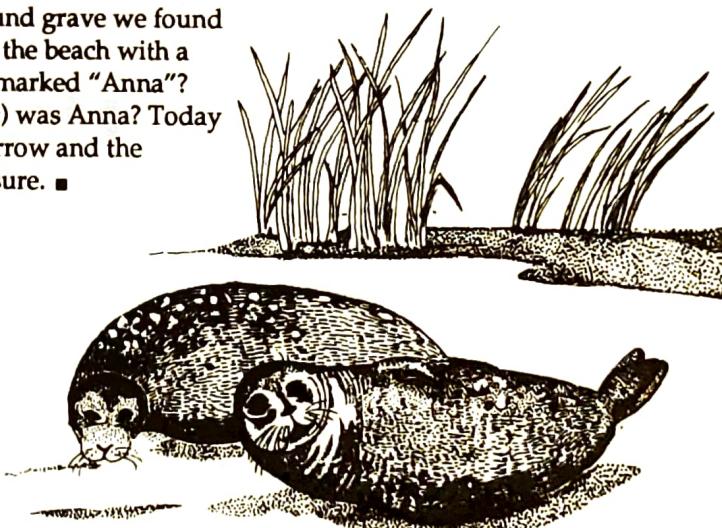
It is disappointing to report a total lack of nesting by terns and shorebirds this year. In previous years Caspian, Forster's and Least Terns utilized Bair Island as a critical breeding site. First recorded nesting here in 1967, Caspian Terns used the site intermittently during the 1980's. Their number peaked in 1988 with a total population of approximately 1,300 birds. The last recorded nesting attempt was in 1993, when all of the nests were destroyed by red foxes. The endangered California Least Tern nested here for several seasons in the late 1960's through the early 1980's, with a maximum of 52 pairs in 1982. Habitat changes may have caused them to move elsewhere.

The California Clapper Rail was spotted twice on our surveys, once by Sue Macias and Sue Hunt, and on another occasion by Stephanie Zador. Although we have yet to observe evidence of breeding here, I strongly suspect a few pairs of this endangered species nest in the extensive cordgrass/pickleweed marshes occurring around Bair Island. Ground-nesting songbirds, too, had a difficult time attempting to produce offspring in this predator-rich environment. In early spring, it was heartening to experience the sweet song of the Western Meadowlark filling the air above the grassy fields. By mid-summer the only evidence of this yellow-breasted songster was a chewed-up wing I found next to a mound of fox scat!

Although the main focus of our attention was on the birds of Bair Island, we also kept track of the number and ages of the resident colony of Harbor Seals. A small group utilizes the higher portions of mudflats along secluded sloughs for "hauling out" and "pupping". Many people are surprised to learn that these marine mammals regularly occur within the South Bay. An even bigger surprise to everyone is the rare occasion when a whale is sighted inside the Bay. Such an event occurred on May 26 when efforts to launch our research vessel were held up by the attempted rescue of a misguided Gray Whale among the boat docks at the Redwood City Marina! The confused young whale became temporarily stuck in the crowded harbor, creating quite a stir, both literally and figuratively.

I look forward to 1995 and a new season on Bair Island. The heavy winter rains promise to rejuvenate the vegetation, deteriorated by years of drought and hopefully, management of the feral red fox population will allow the colonial nesting birds to prosper once again.

Bair Island is today, a unique, and in many ways, a mysterious place. I wonder who, decades ago, left the vintage truck to rest forever in this land with no roads? Who excavated the small shellmound grave we found on the bluff above the beach with a rusted metal sign marked "Anna"? And who (or what) was Anna? Today only the Song Sparrow and the Harrier know for sure. ■



# Project Update

## Colonial Waterbird Monitoring Program

The 1995 season of the Colonial Waterbird Monitoring Program is about to begin! Volunteers are needed to monitor heron/egret nesting colonies March - June, seabird colonies April - July and cormorant colonies April - August. Monitoring surveys will be conducted once per month, and twice in June. Kick-off meeting tentatively scheduled for Sun. 2 April, 9:30 a.m. in the field. Place to be announced. Call Valerie at the office (408) 946-6548 to volunteer and to sign-up for your favorite site!

## Avian Botulism Monitoring

The 1994 avian botulism monitoring season was a relatively quiet one. During mid-June through mid-November, we conducted 28 surveys on Mallard (Artesian) Slough and lower Coyote Creek, and 24 surveys on Guadalupe Slough. We did not find any evidence of an outbreak of avian botulism in either study area in 1994, but we were still busy. We collected a total of 111 dead vertebrates (including 8 fish and 3 muskrats), 44 sick and 15 injured birds. Most of the collections were made in Mallard Slough /Coyote Creek study area; only one sick bird, a first year California Gull, was found in Guadalupe Slough. All of the sick and/or injured birds were taken to wildlife rehabilitation specialist Kappy Sprenger, who released 35 (or 58% of the total) healthy birds.

## Palo Alto Rail Count

On December 2, 1994, SFBBO staff and volunteers gathered at the Palo Alto Baylands to conduct a ground and canoe-based survey of the endangered California Clapper Rail, our contribution to the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge's

annual bay-wide Clapper Rail Survey. On this lovely fall morning we observed 21 Clapper Rails (16% fewer than in 1993, a trend which hopefully does not reflect the bay-wide population), 8 Black Rails (this includes the two eaten by Great Egrets and one eaten by a Great Blue Heron), 2 Sora and 3 Virginia Rails.

## **Thanks Everyone, For A Job Well Done!**

We could not perform our vital monitoring work at SFBBO without the help of our many dedicated volunteers. We are indebted to the participants of all of our projects.

**Avian Botulism Monitoring:**  
*Edith Black, Charles Burch, Jesse Crowell, Robin Dakin, Steve Dakin, Susie Formenti, Reid Freeman, Mari Frymire, Leda Beth Gray, Theresa Grieve, Lynn Johnson, Hope Kingma-Rymek, Sue Macias, Mike Mammoser, Peter J. Metropulos, Frank Metzger, Steve Moore, John Osner, Tom Patterson, Phyllis Rollins, Pete Salvi, Stephanie Schaeffer, Leslie Schuman, Fran Shaw, Kappy Sprenger, Larry St. Regis, Karlene Stoker, Terry Stoker, Francis Toldi, Greg Wagstaff and Peg Woodin.*

*We also thank Cargill Salt Division, for permission to access their levee system bordering the study areas in the event of a severe outbreak of avian disease, and Robin Dakin, our student intern for hard work and many volunteer hours.*

**Palo Alto Rail Count:**  
*Richard Carlson, Al DeMartini, Dave Drake, John Dutton, Leda Beth Gray, Sue Hunt, Carol Hutchinson, Sue Macias, Mike Mammoser, Ann Moser, Caroline Nielands, Susan Sandstrom and Robin Smith.*

## **Calendar of Events**

**February 12, Sunday, time to be announced.** Back-up day for winter shorebird census, in the event we are rained out on January 29.

**February 28, Tuesday, 7:30 p.m.** Meeting, Board of Directors. Open to all members with RSVP, call to confirm date and time.

**March 8, Wednesday, 8:00 p.m.** at the Garden Center in San Mateo. SFBBO presentation to the Sequoia Audubon Society on "Nesting Birds of South San Francisco Bay."

**March 10, Friday** Beginning of Colonial Waterbird Monitoring Program. First survey window for herons and egrets. See related announcement.

**April 2, Sunday, 10:30 a.m.** Workshop and opening meeting for 1995 Colonial Waterbird Monitoring Program. See related announcement. BYO lunch.

**April 8, Saturday** Colonial Waterbird Monitoring Program. First survey window for terns, gulls and skimmers. See related announcement.

**April 23, Sunday, time to be announced.** Spring shorebird census of south San Francisco Bay. See related announcement.

# 1995 South Bay Shorebird Surveys

The orientation workshop for our south bay shorebird censuses was held on January 18 and attended by approximately 45 people. We reviewed the compelling reasons for fielding these surveys: more than a million shorebirds utilize San Francisco Bay during spring migration and 60-70% of them are south of the San Mateo Bridge. This is California's largest shorebird staging area. Our results will aid greatly in management decisions and restoration efforts.

We also went over data collection methods, access to the various pieces of south bay shoreline and species identification, with much welcome audience participation. Dr. Howard Cogswell then refreshed our collective memories on the difficulties inherent in counting huge numbers of small, distant birds. However, he very rightly pointed out that it is much easier than counting, e.g. small songbirds in dense woodlands! We practiced on slides of shorebird flocks flashed briefly on the screen, for which he had the correct number of birds in view. The piece de resistance was his slide series depicting a flock of more than 13,000 Western Sandpipers and yes, he had counted all of them too. And no, none of us got that one right.

If you would like to participate in the upcoming surveys, please check the following dates and call Janet at the Observatory. Count times are based on tides, weekend availability of volunteers and shorebird migration patterns. The winter count will probably be postponed due to wet, undriveable levees. There is no alternate date for the spring count as the goal is to count during peak migration. The summer count will document American Avocet and Black-necked Stilt numbers during the breeding season, in addition to phalaropes and any Snowy Plovers we can find. The fall count could be delayed if rained out, since fall migration is more protracted than spring. Precise times to be announced.

**Winter:** January 29, Sunday a.m.

Alternate date: February 12, Sunday a.m.

Second alternate date: February 26, Sunday a.m.

**Spring:** April 23, Sunday a.m.

No alternative

**Summer:** June 10, Saturday a.m.

**Fall:** August 20, Sunday a.m.

Alternate date: September 3, Sunday a.m.

**Recommended reading:** Shorebirds of the Pacific Northwest, by Dennis Paulson, University of Washington Press, 1993; 406 pages.



## 1994 New Member Drive and Fund Raiser

Thank you, thank you, thank you to all of you who joined or renewed your membership at the end of 1994. We noticed that many of our memberships are new folks and we want to welcome you to an exciting 1995 at SFBBO. We are planning several surveys, the first one on February 12, to count the wintering and migrating shorebirds in south San Francisco Bay. New members, regardless of ability, are invited to call the office to sign up as a volunteer for any of our studies. Once again, a sincere thank you from those of us at SFBBO for your generous support.

## Membership Drive

The 1995 membership drive is in full swing. If you joined during the last quarter of 1994, your membership is valid throughout 1995. Please consider increasing your dues to the next higher category to support our many worthwhile projects in the bay. Fill out the membership application on the last page of this newsletter and mail it today together with your check. As an added incentive, if you join at the \$50 category or higher, you will receive an executive summary of the High Tide Shorebird Roost study. Of course, if you were a volunteer in the study you will automatically receive a copy.

### Wanted

#### Administrative Director

We regretfully announce the departure of our Administrative Director, Pat Carlson. She and her husband, Dick, have extensive travel plans for the coming months, to the great envy of those of us left behind. The search is on for her replacement. If you have any suggestions or potential Directors to recommend, please give us a call for further information.

## 10,001 Titillating Tidbits of Avian Trivia

by Frank S. Todd

reviewed by Lou Young

I won't claim that I couldn't put *10,001 TTAT* down. That would mark me as an excessively compulsive person. But I found it hard to stop looking and I hereby warn any of you who are driven to collect bits of bird-related information to amaze your friends, that owning or borrowing this tome may add to your sleep deprivation.

The book is organized into numbered Questions on blue pages in the first part, and correspondingly-numbered Answers on white pages in the second part. A third section, on light-blue pages, is an index which is potentially very useful to prospective quiz-show guests. The index is organized categorically by (1) "Records" which includes 29 categories from "coldest" through "most threatened" to "tallest" and (2) "Major Index Categories" which spans 129 categories from "amphibians" through "authors and poets," "movie and TV personalities," etc. to "wingtips." Categories are highlighted in bold type where they appear in the index. Obviously, a lot of care and planning went into the presentation of this astounding collection. The only fault I found with the index is that there is no numerical question listed for "highest altitude - bird strike," which instigated a determined, but so far unsuccessful, search for the correct number and answer. I'll find it someday. Six of 13 "teaser" questions on the back cover are also numbered incorrectly.

The book would not be nearly as much fun if the questions/answers were organized in schoolbook style by category. Instead, you will find delightful juxtapositions as "8316 Which bird is known as a 'sweetheart owl' and why?" and "8317 Which birds feed by *hydroplaning*?" If these two questions don't send you off to find a copy of the book to get the answers, then at least 2 or 3 of the remaining 9,999 are bound to intrigue a jaded birder or a keen neophyte. I must warn you that you will not gain comprehensive knowledge about any topic. Bird identification, taxonomy, or general behaviors are not even in the index. However, there are a lot of tidbits on such interesting topics as diet extremes, diseases, etc. that can be useful additions to an existing knowledge base. And there are intriguing behaviors to look for next time you are in the field, like "What does a dipper do with its eyes when it dips or bobs?" (number 1029). I believe there are more than the advertised 10,001 tidbits because many answers contain information about related species, habitats, or behaviors.

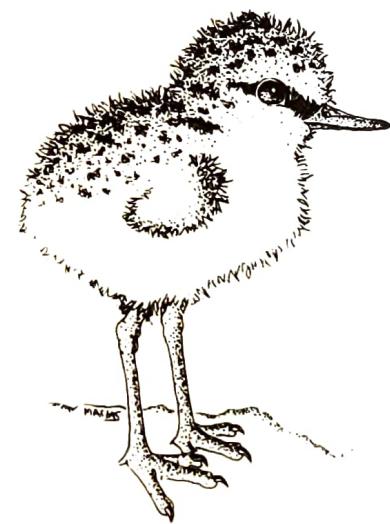
I think the most fun can be had using this book to devise trivia-type games or tests for birders. Do not, however, attempt to challenge someone like Dr. Howard Cogswell. We've tried him and where he doesn't know the answer outright he is able to make a generally accurate guess. I find that I most enjoy having *10,001 TTAT* near the TV where I can browse during commercial breaks. I confess that I've missed a few key plays in several football games while I had to know the answer to a question I'd just read. It's impossible to read a question like "How did the existence of the enormous eggs of the Madagascar Elephant-bird first become known to the outside world?" and not leaf frantically back to answer number 2125 to find out. I found only one "dud" - the answer to "8377 Why are surface-feeding ducks captured more frequently by snapping-turtles than diving ducks?" was so trivial that it was not worth the effort to look it up. Overall, *10,001 TTAT* can claim a niche in your library all its own.

## New Charitable Donations Laws

Beginning 1/1/94, no deduction will be allowed under Section 170 of the IRS Code for any contributions of \$250 or more unless the donor has contemporaneous written substantiation for the charity. The taxpayers may no longer rely solely on a canceled check to substantiate a cash contribution of \$250 or more.

Also beginning 1/1/94, under new Section 6115 of the IRS Code, a charitable organization must provide a written disclosure statement to donors who make a "quid pro quo contribution" in excess of \$75. This requirement is separate from the written substantiation required for deductibility purpose as discussed above.

For more information contact the IRS, 1111 Constitution Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20224 and ask for publication 1771 (11-93).



# California's Endangered Species:

## You Can Help Them At Tax Time

Yes, there is actually something to smile about at tax time. It's LINE 50 on your state tax form—the "Rare and Endangered Species Preservation Program." A LINE 50 donation is your opportunity to help California's species-at-risk.

Pressures from an expanding human population, habitat loss and pollution have pushed 287 of California's native plant and animal species to the brink of extinction. Hundreds more may meet the criteria for listing.

Thanks, in part, to LINE 50 donations, there have been some recent success stories. According to the California Department of Fish and Game:

**Bald Eagles** have experienced significant population increases. The number of breeding pairs has soared, from fewer than 30 pairs in the late 1960's to 103 in 1993.

**Fresno Kangaroo Rats** were rediscovered near Lemoore in 1992 after nearly a decade with no sightings.

The California Condor captive breeding program has gone extremely well despite the deaths of four condors in 1992 and 1993. The wild population now stands at 63—its highest since the recovery program began in 1980.

Populations of **Belding's Savannah Sparrows**, **California and Light-footed Clapper Rails**, and **Least Terns** are rebounding, thanks to programs that remove non-native predators.

A drought relief project at Ellicot Pond in Santa Cruz County reached its goal of providing enough water to

allow the **Santa Cruz long-toed salamander** to reach the adult stage.

Habitat work at Antelope Spring resulted in the successful reproduction of **Black toads** for the first time in at least six years.

The **large-flowered fiddleneck** may become the first endangered plant in the United States for which recovery plan goals will be met.

Five state-listed species will benefit from regional protection plan and preserve system being developed by government and private organizations working cooperatively. The species include: **Stebbins' morning glory**, **Pine Hill ceanothus**, **Pine Hill**

**Flannelbush**, **El Dorado bedstraw** and **Layne's butterweed**.

These successes have been hard-won. And with more than 30 million people placing demands on California's natural resources, recovery efforts are increasingly expensive. At the same time, funding sources are shrinking. Many endangered species recovery programs depend on the generosity of California taxpayers.

Last year, more than 100,000 California taxpayers donated to LINE 50. The average amount donated was just over six dollars.

Can you spare six dollars for California's endangered species? Think of it as a bright spot this tax season for you, and a chance at survival for nearly 300 of California's species-at-risk.

### Help Save California's Native Wildlife Habitat



San Joaquin kit fox

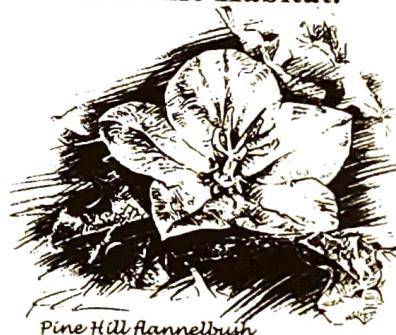
Fill in Line 50 on your tax form.

Dear Tax Preparer:

Please make my voluntary contribution in the amount of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ to the Rare and Endangered Species Preservation Program on my California State Income Tax Return. Thank you.

Cut Along Dotted Line And Give This To Your Tax Preparer

### Help Save California's Native Wildlife Habitat.



Pine Hill flannelbush

Fill in Line 50 on your tax form.

Dear Tax Preparer:

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Cut Along Dotted Line And Give This To Your Tax Preparer

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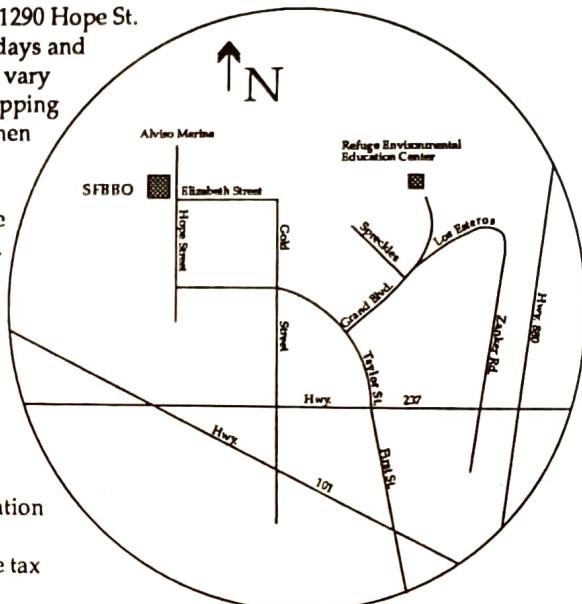
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The Bird Observatory is located at 1290 Hope St. in Alviso. The office is open weekdays and some weekends, but specific hours vary with our field schedule. Before stopping in, call (408) 946-6548 and check when we will be available.

The Board meetings are open to the membership and are held monthly. Call the Observatory office for dates and times. The newsletter is a quarterly publication. Send contributions to the editor: Susie Formenti, P.O. Box 247, Alviso, CA 95002.

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



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Membership categories: check one

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