

# The Stilt

Vol. 17 No. 1

Spring 1998

The Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory

*"The current threats to these inhabitants...portray a wildlife community under siege." from Status and Trends Report on Wildlife of the San Francisco Estuary, produced by the San Francisco Estuary Project, 1991.*

## SFBBO: Stepping Up Our Efforts

When SFBBO was founded in 1981, its creators recognized how little was known about the Bay's wildlife, particularly its birdlife. They knew that conservation of our locally breeding waterbirds depended upon understanding the course of their daily lives: their breeding requirements, their foraging habits, the seasonal cycle of their lives and the nature of threats that might disrupt that age-old cycle.

Today, that challenge still exists if even under more dire consequences. As declines in species once thought "safe" are increasingly noted, we need more than ever to understand the complex interactions between species, habitats, predators and human activities here on the Bay. In response, SFBBO is stepping up its efforts to gather the essential information and get it into the hands of land managers and restoration teams.

This issue of The Stilt focuses on recent SFBBO's activities that directly affect the welfare of our local waterbird populations here on San Francisco Bay.

### Wetlands Ecosystems Goals Project The Future of the Bay

A 2-year project addressing the future of the Bay's ecosystem is reaching its final stages. The Wetlands Ecosystems Goals Project (WEGP) was prescribed as an essential step for the Bay's health by the San Francisco Estuary Project. The purpose: to establish wetlands habitat goals for the San Francisco Bay region. This ambitious project aimed to generate and compile biological information to facilitate future decisions on the conservation and restoration of lands surrounding the entire San Francisco Bay.

Experts in many different aspects of the

Bay's biology came to the table, organized into teams focusing on mammals, birds, fish, amphibians, invertebrates, plants and hydrology. Maps depicting both historic and modern habitats of the Baylands, called the "EcoAtlas", were produced by the San Francisco Estuary Institute's GIS team. Some data, including SFBBO's data on high-tide shorebird roosts, were prepared to overlay the EcoAtlas, thus showing shorebird distribution in a geographic format.

Each team chose certain species to concentrate on. These were often endan-

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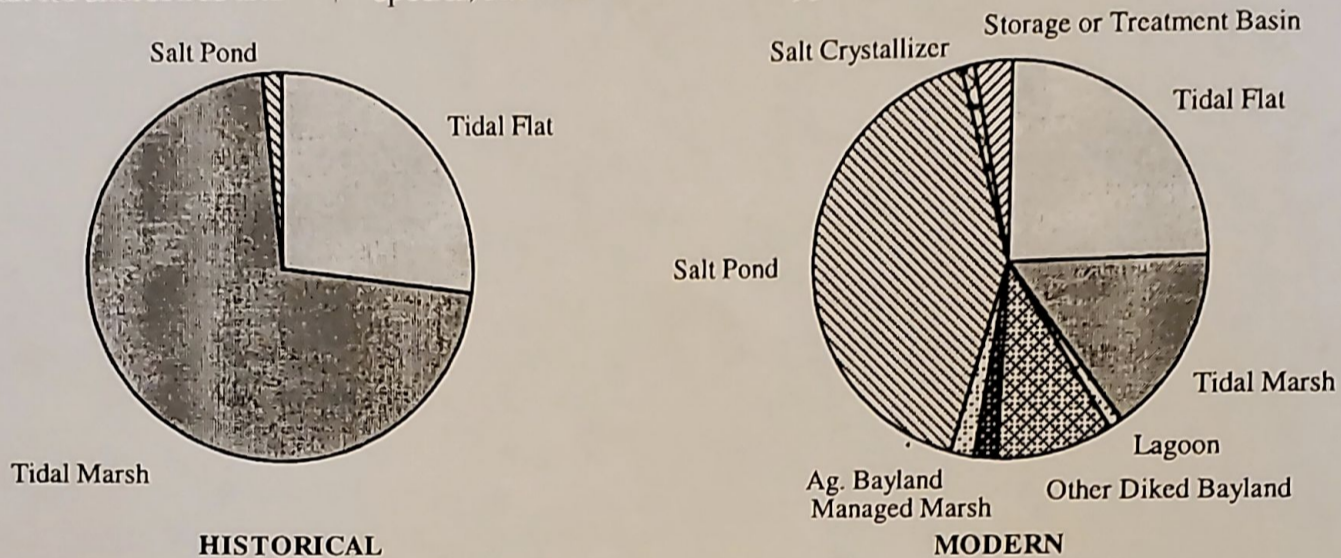
## The Future of the Bay *cont.*

gered or threatened species, but also included species whose habitat needs represented an assemblage of species. Narrative reports were generated describing the species' status on the Bay, current distribution and what type of habitat is needed to support or enhance its future use of the baylands.

It was a foregone conclusion that conflicts would arise. Salt ponds have been shown to be important roosting and foraging habitat for shorebirds and

waterfowl. Some species, including American Avocet and Black-necked Stilt, have benefited from the development of salt ponds. Phalarope species, found on the ponds in mid-summer, have lost considerable wetland habitat elsewhere. And the Western Snowy Plover is often found in the salt pond system, on levees or ponds that are not in use. But the Bay's tidal marsh inhabitants are confined to the remnants of the Bay's formerly vast marsh habitat. Endangered species, such the California Clapper Rail

and Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse, would clearly benefit from marsh restoration efforts. SFBBO has been participating on the shorebird and waterfowl team and on the team covering all other birds. We have been sharing our considerable knowledge of the birds of the south bay, including information from our (now) 17 year study of gulls and terns, and our more recent shorebird surveys, especially those conducted during the 1992-1993 high-tide roost study.



Past/present Habitat Summary - South Bay Subregion Pie Charts. From "Spatial Analysis of the Baylands System" produced by San Francisco Estuary Institute, 1998.

## California Least Terns On the South Bay..... *Islands in Charleston Slough*

This January, Charleston Slough in Mountain View was returned to tidal action when six new culverts were installed, reconnecting this large impoundment to its outer channel. Innovative new tide gates on these huge pipes control water levels to prevent high tides from overtopping the levees that separate Charleston from a salt pond to the east and the Palo Alto Flood Control Basin to the west.

Planners found that the return of high tides would submerge some of the islands within the slough's influence. Local waterbirds, such as American White Pelicans and migratory waterfowl make heavy use of these islands. It's also an area known as a summer roosting spot for California Least Terns. Just this last year, local birders counted more than 90 Least Terns on levees in the Mountain View/Sunnyvale area. These birds are possibly parents with their newly fledged young, roosting

and foraging communally until fall migration takes them south of the border (see page 3). To provide roosting habitat for this species, city planners included the construction of two new islands in Charleston Slough, both situated near the northeast corner of the former pond.

Unfortunately, despite a heavy layer of gravel and oystershell, both islands soon became overgrown with tall, weedy plants (mostly wild radish), known for their hardiness and use of disturbed soils. Recently, the City of Mountain View contracted with SFBBO to resolve this problem. Site visits by SFBBO staff, including Scientific Advisor Dr. Charles Collins of Long Beach State University, produced plans to restore the proper substrate to the islands' surfaces. Since then, several swat teams of staff and volunteers have attacked the problem, and enjoyed some extraordinary birding at the same time, including a Short-eared Owl in the outer marsh.

Complete eradication of the undesirable vegetation will probably be a long-term project, but SFBBO will continue to work to make the islands more hospitable to our locally breeding waterbirds. *Special thanks to Susan Sandstrom, Dick Carlson, Nick Lopez, Peter King and Robin Smith.*



Susan Sandstrom removes vegetation from a Least Tern island. (Janet Hanson)

## Palo Alto's Clapper Rails

by Robin Dakin

Each year, biologists from the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge survey the marshes of south San Francisco Bay by air boat, censusing the remnant populations of California Clapper Rail. As in past years, they asked SFBBO to assist them with a high tide survey of the salt marsh at the Palo Alto Baylands. Since their air boats cannot access this area, we have provided volunteer field observers to conduct surveys from the Baylands observation platform, the PG&E boardwalks and the levees surrounding the marsh.

This year's survey was conducted on January 9, when tides of 8.2 feet were predicted. With an incoming storm, the associated low pressure system was expected to help further inundate the marsh, forcing the rails to higher (more visible) ground. That morning the

marsh was almost completely underwater. It was also extremely cold, but the usual intrepid birders armed with powerful scopes and camera lenses were stationed at the corner of the marsh, nearest the Lucy Evans Interpretive Center. They hoped to catch a glimpse of a Black Rail. No one was disappointed.

SFBBO volunteer observers counted 14 Clapper Rails, 13 Virginia Rails, 6 Black Rails and 1 Sora. We also surveyed the nearby abandoned yacht harbor by kayak but no rails were seen in that location. Other interesting species encountered included a Merlin, a Peregrine Falcon and a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow.

Special thanks to this year's participants: Peg Bernucci, Dick Carlson, Sue Macias, Robin Smith, Vivek Tiwari, and Lou and Jean Young.



Photo by Alan Walter

## A Return to San Blas, Nayarit

by Tom Ryan

*"When I have finished this expedition, knowing that almost all I have accomplished is an increased appreciation and realization of my vast fund of ignorance."*

*William Beebe in Zaca Venture 1938*

William Beebe wrote those words fifty years ago as a part of his account of an expedition to the waters off western Mexico aboard the *Zaca*, a ocean-going research vessel. In the past fifty years scientists have spanned out across the planet exploring, documenting, quantifying, and comparing its vast variety of life. Yet, every time a scientist returns from such a trip, with notebooks, files and laptop computers filled with data containing the answers to our initial questions, we cannot help feel the full impact of the above statement. As we answer our initial questions, we are overwhelmed by the many questions we generate with every one of our "answers".

### The Problem

In March 1997, while on vacationing in

San Blas with my friend Dan Kluza we stumbled upon a scientific hornets nest when we observed two pairs of Least Terns 20 kilometers off the coast of San Blas (see *The Stilt* 16(3) pg. 3). At the time, it was a great bird for the day list. Dan and I knew at the time that this was an unusual sighting. Least Terns are generally regarded as a coastal species, foraging occasionally in inshore waters. In discussing the sighting with more knowledgeable tern biologists, I found out that nobody really knows where Least Terns winter. The statement "somewhere in Mexico or Central America" was generally the best guess that was offered to us. Digging further, I ran across observations of Least Terns in the pelagic zone during migration (April and May). I also found an account of a few Least Terns being found in January at estuaries around the city of Manzanillo which is in the state of Jalisco, about 300 kilometers southeast of San Blas. Greater numbers were observed here in April. We found that the northernmost winter record for Least Tern was north of Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco. After digesting what was known, we began formulating questions;

1. Are Least Terns wintering as far north as San Blas? If so, where are they, and what is their status, abundance and distribution?
2. Do Least Terns utilize the pelagic zone during the winter?

### The Plan

These questions were answerable by doing the obvious - going to Mexico in the middle of winter, renting a boat and looking. In October, I began planning an expedition to begin to answer these questions. This expedition would consist of a series of pelagic transects off the coast of San Blas, Nayarit. These techniques would allow us to detect the presence of Least Terns if they were in fact wintering here. It would also allow us to study the avian community found in the pelagic waters above the broad shallow shelf off San Blas. These studies would be augmented by surveys of known tern roosting sites and exploration of estuaries and river mouths to attempt to detect new ones. This would provide us with an

*Continued on page 4*

opportunity to encounter Least Terns at their roost sites. I knew that the odds were that we would not find Least Terns north of Puerto Vallarta. Therefore, initial studies of the avian community of the pelagic zone off the coast of San Blas, and the mapping and documenting of the species composition of wintering birds at estuaries and river mouths were the primary studies we would attempt to accomplish. As the expedition became a reality, support for the project grew. The San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory provided staff time and financial support. SFBBO board member Ed Pandolfino donated frequent flier miles, Palo Alto-based Trimble Navigation supplied us with a GPS unit to record the positions of the transects and the roost sites. El Dorado Audubon Society in Long Beach provided us with funds for boat surveys and transportation. Charlie Collins, Adrian Del Nevo, Eduardo Palacios, Richard Rowlett, Lisa Ballance, Jon Atwood and Barbara Massey provided us with expert advice on almost all aspects of our trip.

### The Adventure begins...

We (Dan Kluza, Amy Hinshaw & myself) met up in San Blas around mid-morning on January 8th at Hotel Posada del Rey, a nice, but funky hotel near the harbor in San Blas. The first day was to be dedicated to learning the equipment, arranging for the boat and getting our feet wet with a little birding. Nearby Singayta Road did not disappoint us. In a little over 2 hours we had great looks at a variety of local endemic species, tropical species and migrants. Highlights included Russet-crowned Motmot and Laughing Falcon.

Once the heat of the day set in, we went for lunch and to find our expert guide Armando Santiago. Unfortunately he was out with none other than Steve Howell that day and we had to wait until evening to meet up with him. We left word that we were looking for him and allowed word of mouth to do the rest.

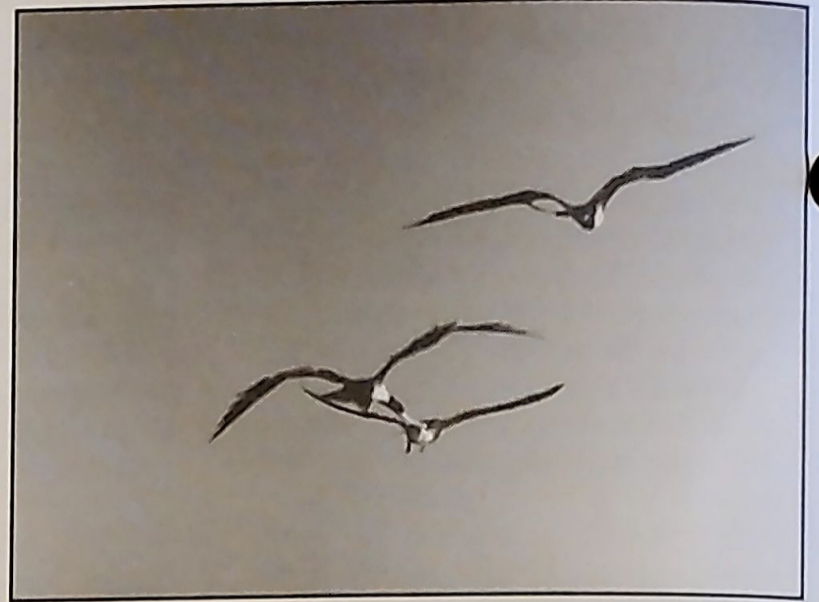
On the afternoon of January 8, 1998, we did our first roost site survey, traveling to the nearby river mouth. We worked with the Trimble GPS unit and easily mastered the basic functions in a matter of minutes and marked each of our survey points. In the waters at the river mouth were two species which I did not expect, Surf Scoter and Common Loon. Several Caspian Terns were foraging above the river mouth and others were already settled down on nearby sandbars.

That evening Armando found us at a local restaurant (the coconut telegraph was as reliable as always). Armando is a local

fisherman who is one of the finest self-trained naturalists I have encountered. He has amazing eyes, and his identification skills are fantastic. He has been guiding birding trips since 1974 and has an intimate knowledge of the local bird-life. We arranged for the boat rides beginning the following day and had a wonderful conversation about the state of the planet. We learned about conservation from the eyes of someone who knows the oceans. It was a fascinating evening.

The next day, we arrived at the launch at the appointed time and discussed what we hoped to accomplish over the next three days and what the best plan of action was. Our boat would be a 26 foot "pongo." It is an open boat resembling a giant row-boat, with a wood-fiberglass hull. There are several benches to sit on, with a holding tank for fishing in the middle. Our vessel was powered by a 70 horsepower Mercury Outboard covered with an old Oakland Raiders T-shirt. We decided on three routes. The first transect would take us parallel to the coast approximately .5 km off shore on a 30 kilometer transect northwest terminating at a known tern roost, Boca Asadero. We could then do a short leg 15 km straight out to sea. And return at a 45° angle to the coast, passing an offshore rock, locally known as Elephant Rock, NOAA charts call it Piedra Blanca del Mar. In order to avoid birds attracted to the river mouth, harbor and the rock, we would stop surveying when we got to within 2 kilometers of such areas.

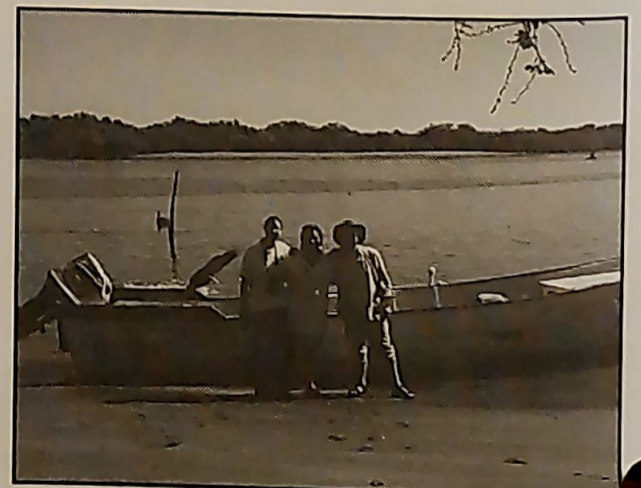
The trip to Boca Asadero was fantastic. We started out by surveying the roosting terns on the beach at Pozo Island then began our first transect 2 km from the rocks at the harbor entrance. The ocean here was full of Laughing Gulls, Blue-footed Boobies, Magnificent Frigatebirds and an occasional Brown Booby. Once we finished the transect, we turned toward the river mouth at Boca Asadero. It was low tide, and getting into the river was



*A Magnificent Frigatebird harasses a Blue-footed Booby. (Tom Ryan)*



*Tom and Armando enjoy the work of pelagic surveys. (Tom Ryan)*



*The "pongo" gets readied for the day. (Tom Ryan)*

going to be tricky. Armando was cautious as always and guided us in, between the breaking waves. The big pongo handled well, but got hung up briefly on a sandbar, thankfully just beyond the breaking waves.

At the large sand bar at the river mouth, Royal Tern was the most numerous tern species. Smaller numbers of Caspian Terns, Elegant Terns and Forster's Terns were also present along with a hoard of Laughing Gulls, Heerman's Gulls, Neotropical Cormorants and Brown Pelicans. Among the 15 Elegant Terns, 2 had USFWS aluminum bands. Unfortunately I was not able to get close enough to read them without spooking the birds. Also present was a juvenile Herring Gull. We watched as an optimistic Magnificent Frigatebird repeatedly harassed an Osprey carrying a large fish in its talons. The Osprey won this encounter and the frigatebird departed as a second Osprey appeared. Unfortunately no Least Terns were present at this site. From the estuary, we headed back out to sea. We encountered several shrimp boats, all laden with gulls, frigatebirds and a few boobies. We continued to see the same species, although as we got farther out we encountered fewer Laughing Gulls and Brown Pelicans, and found more terns and Brown Boobies.

Approaching Elephant Rock once again we saw a cloud of birds above the rock. As we got closer the hundreds of Blue-footed Boobies, Brown Boobies, Brown Pelicans and Magnificent Frigatebirds transformed from brown dots on the rock to identifiable forms. The frigatebirds were observed harassing the boobies, grabbing them by the tails and giving them a good shake to encourage them to let go of whatever meal they were digesting. As many as six Red-billed Tropicbirds flew overhead. At times they would all fly together calling in what was apparently a courtship display. We found a lone Wandering Tattler on the rock as well.

After burning through several rolls of film each we resumed our transects back towards San Blas Harbor. A few kilometers from Elephant Rock we encountered two teenage boys who had been fishing. Their starter cord had broken and they were drifting. They had no tools with them. Armando knew both of the boys and loaned them the necessary tools. We gave them our gallon of water and towed them back to their net. I marked their position on the GPS unit and we soon



*Shrimp boats are popular seabird destinations. (Tom Ryan)*

encountered their "rescue party" and directed him to the boys. They got in late that night, but were safe.

The second pelagic survey was on the morning of January 10th. We were to go straight out to sea on a bearing that would take us towards the Islas Marias. Our plan was to get 25 kilometers out to sea. Having found the Least Terns approximately 20 km off the coast last year, I thought that today would be our best shot at finding them. The seas were calm and visibility was excellent. We were able to record birds approximately 300 meters to either side of the boat. We took GPS readings at 15 minute intervals. Traveling at about 8-10 knots we covered about 5 kilometers on each 15 minute transect. Dan and Amy were up front calling out species and numbers. I was in the back with Armando recording data and navigating. Armando would regularly call out birds that we had missed. My toughest job was making sure what Armando was calling was within the 300 meter limit.

On the fourth transect Armando called out a Least Tern. We slowed the boat and immediately everyone was on the bird. It was flying alone about 50 meters in front of the boat in a southwest direction. It was the northern-most record of a wintering Least Tern. There was no doubt this was a wintering bird. We could now answer the question that there were Least Terns (ok Tern) wintering in the pelagic zone off the coast of Nayarit, Mexico. We continued farther out to sea,

where we encountered a group of wintering Black Terns. They were curious, they looked like groups of Storm-Petrels, hovering over the water picking bits of food from the water's surface. A few minutes after our first sighting we observed a second Least Tern 25 kilometers out. This was seen at more of a distance and was also traveling on a southwest heading. We all had an identifying look at it, although not as satisfying as the first bird. We turned 90 degrees at 30 kilometers off the coast and headed parallel to the coast for 5 kilometers before turning back toward San Blas for our return home. On this short 15 minute leg we picked up a Black Storm-Petrel. Shortly after turning around we encountered our first Red-necked Phalarope. On the return leg, we encountered several more groups of Black Terns and phalarope. On the way back to the harbor we encountered 4 whale sharks 3 km off the harbor mouth. I jumped in with a 25 footer and got "goosed" by its tail. Unfortunately, we found out that they were feeding on jellyfish the hard way. I spent the better part of the afternoon on my back with several jellyfish stings.

The third survey would take us at a 45° angle to the coast into an area where whales and phalarope were known to feed on plankton which local currents tended to concentrate there. This survey detected good numbers of Red-necked Phalarope and more flocks of Black Terns, but no more Least Terns. We went out 26 km, but only got about 15 km from shore.

The bird of the trip was a Humpback Whale which we detected at the end of our transect leg and chased briefly.

The second week we were joined by Gjon Hazard, Barbara Henry and Dick Carlson. We surveyed several estuaries and river mouths. No more Least Terns were observed although excellent information was gathered regarding the species composition and numbers of flocks at these sites. Several other significant sightings were made including what may be the southernmost winter record for Pacific Loon at Chamela, Jalisco, a large flock of Black Skimmers at Barra de Navidad, continued sightings of good numbers of Black Tern and Red-necked Phalarope off shore as well as several sightings of Black-capped Vireo (little is known about its winter distribution).

The birding was fantastic. We had 213 species in Nayarit the first week, and then totalled over 300 species for the trip. Some highlights were Chestnut-sided

Shrike Vireo, Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiecers, Red Warber, Red-headed Tanager, Flame-colored Tanager, Laughing Falcon, Mountain, Elegant and Citreoline trogons and Russet-crowned Motmot

## Conclusions

We did return with a far greater appreciation for our own ignorance. We now know that there are Least Terns in the pelagic zone during the winter, unfortunately, from the observation of only two individuals. This could be due to surveying in the proper region for a short period of time and only detecting two of many birds. This is akin to going to Mountain View Shoreline during the winter, seeing two Lesser Scaup fly overhead, and then having to get back in your car without visiting the pond. OR, this could be that we happened to sight two vagrant Least Terns, akin to going to Monterey, observing a Yellow-billed Loon

and stating that Yellow-billed Loons are a regular wintering species in the Bay Area.

However, we did gather excellent information regarding the winter abundances and distribution of several other resident species, including Blue-footed and Brown Boobies, and Magnificent Frigatebirds as well as migrants such as Black Terns and Red-necked Phalarope.

We now know that Least Terns were there at that time, but the numbers we observed do not allow us to state anything conclusively. To answer these questions we will need to return to the pelagic zone farther offshore, repeatedly sampling the area 20 km and more off the coast.

Who's coming along next year?

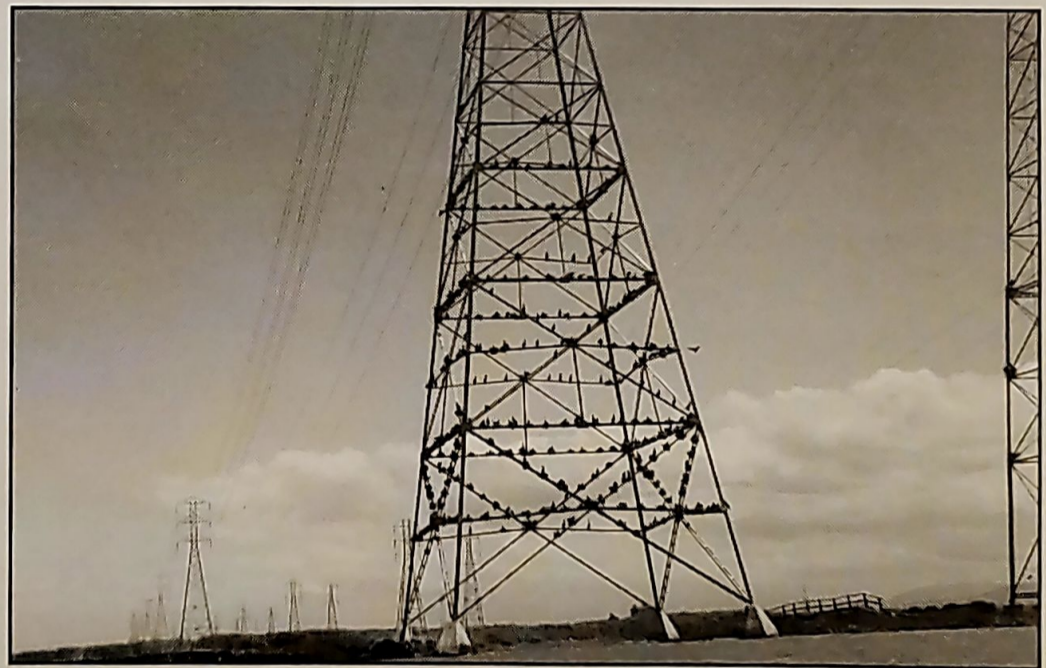


## Bair Island Wildlife Surveys

### *FWS funds SFBBO*

Over 1600 acres of former tidal marsh, at Bair Island, San Mateo Co., was acquired in April 1997 for addition to the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge in the year 2000. SFBBO has conducted breeding waterbird surveys on the property since 1981 and sporadic shorebird surveys from 1992 to 1996. The draft report "Bair Island Environmental Inventory" was produced by Observatory personnel in 1988 but never finalized due to budget constraints. Our surveys have produced records of White-tailed Kite, Caspian and Least terns, Snowy Plover, Long-billed Curlew, Burrowing Owl and Short-eared Owl using the site, in addition to large numbers of migrating shorebirds.

SFBBO has been awarded 3 years of funding by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to conduct year-round monthly surveys on all 3 parts of Bair Island. Our staff will be collecting a variety of data. We will first document the presence of migratory birds and breeding status of resident birds on the property and note the type of habitat



*Double-crested Cormorants nesting on PG&E towers on Bair Island. (Janet Hanson)*

they are using. Many of the species listed above are of management concern, which means while not endangered or threatened, they still warrant special consideration. We will be detailing their presence in relation to vegetation type. And finally, we will be on the lookout for signs of predation, especially red fox, but also feral cats and other potential problem species, such as weasels and Common Ravens. Because of the difficulty of accurately censusing large shorebird flocks from old

levees, we have included 3 high-tide aerial surveys for spring and fall migration peaks of Western Sandpipers and for overwintering shorebirds. This data will be presented in a final report for use by the Fish and Wildlife Service in restoration design.

Would you like take part in these monthly surveys? See page 8 for more information.

# Report from Carrizo Plain and Morro Bay

Tom Ryan and Gjon Hazard, Trip Leaders

Between the waves of rain we managed to get three solid days of birding (February 20-22) in throughout San Luis Obispo county on Friday (scouting), at the Carrizo Plain on Saturday and Morro Bay on Sunday. We totaled 152 species for the weekend.

Highlights along Soda Lake Road at the Carrizo Plain included 10 Ferruginous Hawks roosting in the trees at the Carrizo Plain Lodge at 7 am. Prairie Falcon, Horned Lark and Mountain Bluebird, and American Goldfinch were in the fields west of the California Valley airport. A Rough-legged Hawk was just beyond where the road passes through a cut in a low hill south of the observation point. On Friday this bird was sitting on the poles adjacent to the road and on Saturday it was observed flying above the hills to the west. This was the only RLHA observed on the trip. A Merlin was observed in this same area on Friday. Several large flocks of Long-billed Curlew were observed flying overhead. A Burrowing Owl was observed in the fields north of the visitors center. Both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs were observed at a pond beyond Seven Mile Rd. Horned Lark, Loggerhead Shrike, Vesper, Savannah and White-crowned sparrows and Western Meadowlark were observed along the roadsides throughout Soda Lake Road.

Seven Mile Road produced a very secretive Sage Sparrow and an immature Golden Eagle. Continuing up Hwy 58 into the Temblor Range, to the Kern County line we observed Sharp-shinned Hawk, California Thrasher, Lincoln's Sparrow, and Golden-Crowned Sparrow.

Returning west along Highway 58 towards California Valley numerous short-grass fields were checked, but no Mountain Plover were observed. Large flocks of Lark Sparrow were observed as well as another immature Golden Eagle. Near the intersection of Hwy 58 and Bitterwater Road, we found a large flock of Brown-headed Cowbirds plus Tricolored, Red-winged and Brewer's Blackbird.

Pozo Road produced Yellow-billed

Magpie, Oak Titmouse, Western Bluebird, Wrenit, California Thrasher, Phainopepla, Spotted and California towhees and Dark-eyed Junco. A Lewis' Woodpecker was spotted on a telephone pole, approximately one mile east of the railroad crossing in Santa Margarita, before you get to the cemetery.

In the driving rain we observed Greater White-fronted, Snow and Ross' Goose near the boat dock at the end of the road. A Common Merganser was in the lake nearby. On Friday, under much sunnier conditions a Mew Gull was among a mixed species flock at the parking lot on the southeast end of the lake.

On Sunday we began our birding at Morro Rock with both male and female Peregrine Falcon perched on and flying near the rock. In the harbor White-winged Scoter and Common and Pacific Loon were observed as were all three local cormorants. A Black Oystercatcher was on the breakwater. A Canyon Wren was observed on the breakwater and on the rock along with White-throated Swift.

From the Morro Bay Natural History Museum, we observed Great Blue Herons attending their nests, Brant, Common Goldeneye, Black Skimmer, Belted Kingfisher, Caspian, Royal and Forster's terns and a Townsend's Warbler. At the Marina we observed Black-crowned Night Heron, a Black Scoter and a Horned Lark. At Sweet Springs Preserve at least 6 male Eurasian Wigeon were present among many species of duck. In the nearby trees a Purple Finch was observed. At Montana del Oro State Park, on the rocks near the visitors center, we observed Black Oystercatcher, Spotted Sandpiper, Black Turnstone and Wandering Tattler.

## Wish List

Drawings of local birds and wildlife  
Bookcases  
Office volunteers to organize reference materials  
Laptop computer, capable of running Excel 5.0  
Surfboards, small kayaks  
Bench seat cover for our pickup truck

## An Important Contribution: *A GPS Unit from Trimble Navigation, Inc.*

As the Least Tern expedition planning sessions got underway, it quickly became apparent that an essential piece of equipment was needed: a GPS unit. These handheld receivers give the user an exact location on the earth's surface, hence GPS for "Global Positioning System". A system of 24 satellites maintained by the Department of Defense orbit the earth, transmitting unique radio signals. The GPS unit receives those signals and translates them into a precise location. In the type of search for rare birds that we were proposing, this type of information is a must.

Trimble Navigation, Inc., a locally-based manufacturer of GPS equipment and software, came through with a very generous donation of a Trimble GPS receiver. Bob Trimble and Scott Young, both of Trimble, were extremely helpful in providing the equipment and making certain our biologists were up-to-speed with it before boarding the plane to San Blas. We envision using the unit during the upcoming breeding season to record colony and nest locations of terns and shorebirds nesting around the south bay. In particular with Snowy Plovers, we believe their nests often fail due to predation, but this has been difficult to document. Exact locations can improve our ability to document problems and make better management recommendations. The GPS adds tremendous value to our data and we sincerely thank Trimble!



# SFBBO UpDates

## Great Blue Herons of Golden Gate Park

Nancy DeStefanis, volunteer extraordinaire, has been observing the Great Blue Herons in Stow Lake for 4 years now and will tell all on their love lives. The event will also feature the premiere of "Heron Island", by documentary filmmaker Judy Irving. Nancy will narrate the film and tell about the courtship, mating and parenting habits of these amazingly charismatic birds. Don't miss the accordion rendition of "My Blue Herons" by Nancy and Friends. Free to the public.

7:30 PM, Thursday, June 4 at the Randall Museum, 199 Museum Way, San Francisco

## Sage Grouse Booming: Lake Crowley, Mono Lake & Eastern Sierras

Join us on this spring trip to see first hand one of the most unique and spectacular displays in the avian world, the Sage Grouse's "booming" display given at the leks in the pre-dawn hours. We will visit different lek sites on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Later we will travel to Lake Crowley for swans and Bald Eagle, and search local hot spots for mountain specialties such as Goshawk, White-headed Woodpecker, Clark's Nutcrackers, Pinyon Jay, Mountain Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire and Evening Grosbeak.

Date: March 27-29.

Cost: Member \$35/Nonmember \$50.

Leaders: Tom Ryan and Gjon Hazard.

## Kayak Tour of Bair Island

All day kayak tour of sloughs surrounding Bair Island. Thousands of shorebirds pause on the mudflats of the south bay to refuel on their way north. Join us on this low tide tour of Redwood Creek and the adjacent sloughs. By special arrangement with Riptides and Rapids Kayaking. No experience necessary.

Date: Sunday, April 19.

Limited group size. Birding ethics observed. Member \$60/Nonmember \$75.

Advanced registration required.

## Bair Island Wildlife Surveys

Accompany two SFBBO biologists on our monthly wildlife surveys of Bair Island. Search for the return of herons, egrets and terns to their former nesting grounds on the island. Observe harbor seals as they lounge in the cordgrass. These surveys will be conducted at high tide both on foot and in our 13' powered inflatable boat. All trips depart from the Redwood City Marina. Call for departure times. Reserve your space soon as each trip is limited to only 4 participants. Proceeds supplement FWS funds in support of this project.

Dates: Feb 6, Mar 9, Apr 24, May 24, June 20, July 20, Aug 21, Sept 19, Oct 17, Nov 17, Dec 18

Cost: \$35 Members, \$50 non-members

## Bair Island Annual/Spring Clean-up

SFBBO co-sponsors this annual clean-up event of inner Bair Island sloughs, marshes and the waterways around the marina. The event is organized by the Redwood City Pride and Beautification Committee, in cooperation with Sequoia Audubon, Peninsula Open Space Trust, and Local Birds Inc. Refreshments and snacks provided. Bring your boots and gloves.

9 AM - 2 PM, Saturday, May 2 at the end of Whipple Road, Redwood City

## North American Ornithologists' Conference

On April 10, Senior Biologist Tom Ryan will be presenting a paper entitled "Population Trends of Herons and Egrets in southern San Francisco Bay" at the NAOC in St. Louis, Missouri. He will discuss present population trends of Great Blue Herons, Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets and Black-crowned Night-Herons in southern San Francisco Bay from 1982 to 1997, an analysis funded by the Santa Clara Valley Water District. The cost of this trip was paid for with donations made to the SFBBO 1997 Year End Appeal. Thanks to everyone who contributed.

## New Board Member Develops SFBBO Website

Please Welcome: *George Oetzel*



*George Oetzel*

"I've long been interested in the natural world and in outdoor activities: back-packing mountaineering, bicycling, and photography. These interests and my career as a research engineer at SRI International came together with my introduction to bird research during a 1994 Earthwatch trip, "Golden Eagles of Mull" in Scotland. Subsequent birding stimulated my interest in making a larger contribution to research on the lives and activities of birds, so I cornered Tom Ryan at a Sequoia Audubon meeting and volunteered to help at SFBBO. I soon discovered that SFBBO had no World Wide Web site and realized that I had both a suitable account and the tools to provide one. It's now under construction, soon to be <http://www.sfbbo.org>. I welcome both suggestions and assistance in improving the site.

In my first Board meeting, I learned of current opportunities and challenges for the SFBBO. Expanded research, such as monitoring the transition of Bair Island back to a wildlife habitat, is a great opportunity that also challenges us to find members and volunteers to support the research effort. I volunteered to participate in the field activities and data analysis. I'm finding that the larger picture is also very interesting."

Please visit our new web site at:  
<http://www.sfbbo.org>.



## Our thanks to these supporters of the Observatory....

### Memberships

We welcome the following new and returning members of the SFBBO (November, December, and January):

Leon Abrams, Jean Alexander, Peter Allen, Richard Anderson, Robert Ball, Ron and Viola Barklow, Joyce Bartlett, Gordon Bennett, Will and Margaret Betchart, Richard Brannon, Juliette Bryson, Denise Catalano, Ted Chandik, Doug and Gail Cheeseman, Rich Cimino, Bill and Jean Clark, Robert Clement, Terry and Zoe Coddington, Howard Cogswell, Rita Colwell, Arthur and Helen Dawson, Cliff Drowley, Lorrie and Ron Emery, James Ernst, William Ferguson, Susie and Dave Formenti, Lillian Fujii, Harriet Gerson, Thomas Goodier, Shirley Gordon, Lorraine Grassano, Thomas Grey, Madelon Halpern, David and Dennise Hamilton, Bernard Hand, Cecily Harris, Garth Harwood, Merry Haveman, Gjon Hazard, Carl Hendrickson, Carol and Tom Henry, Kathryn Hickey, Jan Hintermeister, Grant and Karen Hoyt, Lance Hull, Kit Jones, Steve and Lisa Kurasch, Peter LaTourette, Jessie Lawson,

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### Contributions

Our special thanks to these Contributors to the Observatory (November, December, January): Leon Abrams, Jean Alexander, Patricia Asbury, Ginny Becchine, Gordon Bennett, Robert Braun, Juliette Bryson, Stephen Chin, Herbert and Sherry Cole, Terry and Zoe Coddington, Charles and Joan Coston, Michael Cross, Janice and Frank Delfino, Cliff Drowley, Lee Franks, G.K. Giese, Lois Goggin, David and Dennise Hamilton, Dolores Hansen, Merry Haveman, Jan Hintermeister, Dorothy Hunt, Sue Hunt, Steve and Lisa Kurasch, Robin Leong, Julie and Robert MacLean, David McIntyre, Fran Mewaldt, Richard Miller, Sandy Moore, John and Nena Padley, Doug Padley, Margaret Panton, Patricia Polentz, Elsie Richey, Mike and Theresa Rigney, Jan Ryan, April and Mark Sapsford, Sequoia Audubon, Aileen Thompson, George and Marilyn Trabert, Alan Walther, Daniel Watson, David and Natalie Weber, Gerry Weinberger, Virginia Whipple, Anna Wilcox, Virginia Willcox, Lou and Jean Young.

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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.

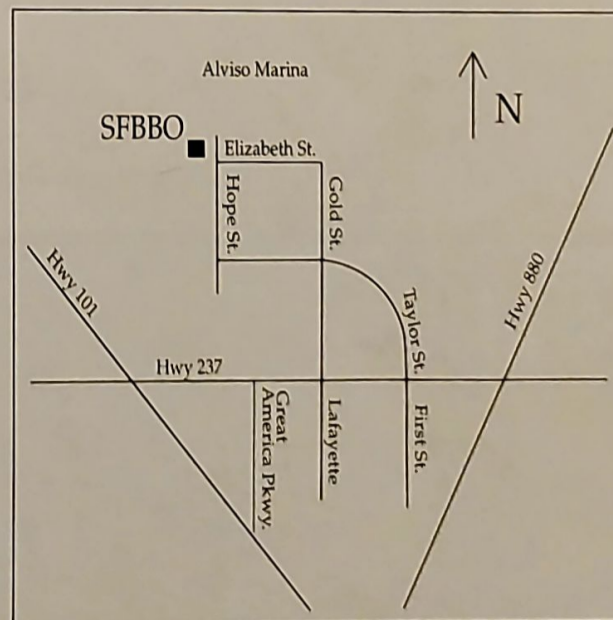
The Board meetings are open to the membership. Call the Observatory office for dates and times.

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### SFBBO

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The San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory is a non-profit (501-C-3) corporation. All memberships and contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law. Annual memberships are as follows: Patron: \$2,000 Sustaining: \$200  
Life: \$400 Contributing: \$100



Associate: \$50  
Family: \$35

Individual: \$25  
Student/Senior: \$15

## 1998 Banding Program

# *Are you ready for Banding Bootcamp?*

SFBBO staff and volunteers started banding on the newly discovered California Gull colony in 1981 and to date, have banded more than 14,000 birds! Band sightings have been reported from as far away as Sinaloa, Mexico. In 1997 we successfully banded 135 Forster's Tern chicks.

In 1997, our Scientific Advisory Board reviewed our banding program of years past. The project was reworked with the result that the research goals of banding are now clearly stated. And we are on track to proceed with gull, tern and hopefully skimmer banding once again.

### **Volunteer Workshops**

Training for our Colonial Waterbird Monitoring and Distribution programs were held in February and early March. Both new and old volunteers attended these sessions, led by Senior Biologist Tom Ryan, designed to update our field observers on our goals and to educate them on proper data collection techniques. One new aspect of volunteer work is band-reading, the all-important last step of any banding program. With large birds, such as gulls, numerals on metal FWS bands can be read with patience and a good scope, which is just what is happening on the central coast: our California Gull bands are being read on roosting birds and reported to the Banding Lab. Such re-sightings (or recovery of bands from dead birds) are the reward of banding, the valuable information about the bird's movement after banding. The next issue of *The Stilt* will have more information about future bandreading workshops.

Volunteers are needed right now to help with this year's banding. To qualify, attendance is mandatory at our Banding Bootcamp, to be held Saturday, April 25, from 10 AM to 3 PM. We will practice banding, handling, measuring and weighing chicks, data collection, predator detection, kayak deployment and other skills needed to make each foray a smooth successful operation. Subpermittees under other master station permits are welcome. Most but not all banding trips will occur on weekday mornings. Call us to sign up for Banding Bootcamp!

After a morning on tern islands (*left to right*): Dr. Charlie Collins (Cal State Long Beach), Robin Dakin, Kim Briones, Peter King, Tom Ryan, Jennifer Parkin, unknown grad student (sorry), Dr. Zed Mason (Cal State Longbeach), Dr. Mike Horn (Cal State Fullerton).



**SFBBO**  
San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory

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