

The Stilt

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The Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory

CALIFORNIA FALL CHALLENGE - 1998

In only its second year, SFBBO's California Fall Challenge is well on its way to becoming one of the country's premier competitive birding events. This year fourteen different teams competed in eleven counties throughout the state, finding a combined total of 223 species. Although this is a little down from the fourteen counties and 279 species found in 1997, the fundraising (which is, after all, the point) is well above last year. As this issue went to press we have raised about \$9000 with donations still coming in, up from \$7500 raised last year. Thank you to everyone who participated and all who supported teams with donations.

The Fall Challenge is also beginning to attract significant media attention. This year there were three articles in Bay Area newspapers and next summer Bird Watcher's Digest will run a full-length article on the event.

Our prize list continues to expand. Once again, Leica donated a Televid spotting scope for our grand prize. In addition, Pentax, Swift and Orion contributed binoculars, Brunton and Burris gave discount certificates, Cheeseman Tours provided a free pelagic trip and Sequoia Audubon sent several copies of San Francisco Peninsula Birdwatching. The generosity of all these organizations allowed us to provide extra incentive to all our teams.

So How Does it Work?

The California Fall Challenge is a twist on the typical Big Day birdathon event. Each team chooses one California county and tries to find as many species as they can in that county in one day. This year the count period ran from September 17th through October 16th, so teams could choose to go early and try for those fall migrants or go late to pick up more wintering birds. The grand prize goes not to the team with the

most species, but to the team with the highest percent of the official CFC list (generously provided by John Sterling) for that county. This serves to 'level the playing field' between different counties. Prizes are also given for a variety of categories described below. So even if you're not a gonzo birder who can identify obscure sub-species by the length of the third tertial, you still have a chance to have a great day in the field, help SFBBO with its research and education and maybe take home a nice prize for your efforts.

And the winners are...

Highest Percent of County List: For the second year, the Rowdy Stoneterners, Peter Metropulos, Francis Toldi and Bert McKee took the grand prize. In a year when all teams reported low numbers of migrants (one more thing to blame on El Nino) the Stoneterners managed to increase their 1997 total of 158 species in San Mateo county to an impressive 162 species, or 60% of the San Mateo list. Nipping angrily at their heels were the Beasts of Birdin', a.k.a. Tom Ryan, Greg Schott and Ed Pandolfino, who found 160 species in Marin county (57%). In third place with 51% (132 species) was the Santa Clara county Vagrants team of Mike Mammoser, Grant Hoyt, Dick Stovel and Janet Hanson.

Most Species: The Rowdy Stoneterners also repeated as winners in this category with their 162 San Mateo species.

Most Rarities: The Beasts of Birdin' found Tropical Kingbird, Least Bittern, Clay-Colored Sparrow and Mountain Plover in Marin county. Among the other birds of note, the Shasta Birders, Bob and Carol Yutzy, saw a Costa's Hummingbird and a Pectoral Sandpiper and the Rowdy Stoneterners found a Tropical Kingbird and a Least Flycatcher.

Best Bird: This was a tough one between Mountain Plover and Least Flycatcher. In the end the judges gave it to the Stoneterners for their flycatcher.



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Best Story: As always, a Big Day produces lots of great stories. The judges' three favorites were:

"Its a...its a...its a ...UGHHH!"

Robin Smith and Harriet Gerson (the City Flickers) were in San Francisco trying to pish up something interesting from the Lake Merced marsh. The sound they got in response was unfamiliar to them and their excitement mounted. The reeds began to move right in front of them and they prepared to record their 'bird of the day' when one very large, very ugly rat emerged to see who was making those weird sounds.

"How to Resolve that Pesky Identification Problem"

Gulls are certainly a major source of identification frustration for many of us, but Randy and Janet Little of the Lifescan team found a creative solution. They birded Santa Clara County furiously visiting as many habitats and finding as many birds as they could. It wasn't until the end of the day when they stopped to do their tally that they realized they had succeeded in completely ignoring all the gulls...just looked right through them. Randy did add one to his list, 'Gull sp.'

"Alive, wild and unrestrained"

The Best Story prize goes to the Vagrants. Mike Mammoser had a Parasitic Jaeger staked out at the Sunnyvale Sewage Treatment ponds. All they had to do was walk out there, find it and add one more good tick to the list. However, as stakeouts sometimes do, this bird was not

cooperating. They looked all over for the Jaeger without success. As they walked back along the levee they ran into Peg Woodin who had been collecting sick birds in the ponds. She told Mike about an odd-looking bird she had picked up and pulled the poor sick creature out for Mike to identify. You guessed it. Mike's Jaeger was in Peg's hands. She generously offered to lay it on the ground for Mike to 'discover'. To his credit, he would have none of that.

Most species per mile: This year the Beasts of Birdin' took this category with nearly one species per mile. Next year we fully expect someone to do a Big Sit just so they can collect this prize.

Fundraising: We awarded a special prize in this category to Randy and Janet Little for persuading Lifescan (a local Johnson & Johnson health care company) to sponsor their team. We hope to see many more participants getting local corporate sponsorship next year.

The team with the most total funds raised to this point is the Beasts of Birdin' (\$2600 and counting) with the Vagrants in close pursuit.

We want to thank all the participants and all the donors as well as the organizations that provided prizes, Leica, Pentax, Swift, Orion, Brunton, Burris, Cheeseman Tours and Sequoia Audubon.

Start planning now for your 1999 California Fall Challenge. We hope to see many more teams, many more counties and some serious challengers to give the Rowdy Stoneterners a run next year.

California Fall Challenge

1998 County Teams

Alameda Co.

"Chickadees": Denise and David Hamilton

"Kettle of Recorders": Steve Beckendorf, Bill and Judy Hein and Margaret Phillip

Contra Costa Co.

Adrian del Nevo

Del Norte Co.

Steve Shunk

Marin Co.

"Beasts of Birdin'": Tom Ryan, Greg Schott and Ed Pandolfino

Monterey Co.

Dick Carlson and Jen Parkin

San Benito Co.

"Bay Birders": Lou Young, Larry Manning, Robin Smith and David Mabisohn

San Francisco Co.

"City Flickers": Robin Smith and Harriet Gerson

San Mateo Co.

"Snack Team": Carol Masterson and Steve Sweet

"Rowdy Stoneterners": Francis Toldi, Peter Metropulos and Bert McKee

Santa Clara Co.

"Lifescan": Randy and Janet Little

"Vagrants": Mike Mammoser, Grant Hoyt, Dick Stovel and Janet Hanson

Shasta Co.

"Shasta Birders": Carol and Bob Yutzy

Sierra Co.

"Sierrandipities": Dick Carson, Lou and Jean Young, George and Marti Oetzel



California Fall Challenge Grand Prize winners: Francis Toldi and Peter Metropulos (S. Dakin)

Ducks, Disease and Dedication

SFBBO takes on an outbreak of avian botulism

By Robin Dakin

We began the job of monitoring for avian botulism in the south bay sloughs in the early 80's and we've been lucky these past few years. Due to the dedicated work of our biologists and volunteers, there have been no outbreaks of avian botulism. No weak Shovelers, flapping helplessly along the surface of the water unable to take flight. No Gadwalls, too weak to dive and no dead waterfowl scattered along the edges of the slough channel, spelling trouble for other birds nearby. This year was different though.

We began the monitoring season in mid-June this year; a little later than usual this year due to unseasonably heavy rains associated with El Nino. Until early September, we picked up very few birds. Apart from a handful of sick and injured gulls all the birds seemed to be healthy. Then on September 6 we picked up two sick and five dead ducks near the confluence of Coyote Creek and Mallard (Artesian) Slough. We immediately became concerned because the live ducks we collected clearly showed symptoms of avian botulism: weakness in the neck, eyelids and legs, diarrhea and inability to fly or dive. The cause of an outbreak of avian botulism is not as easily detected. Several factors are thought to be important in causing an outbreak of botulism. In bodies of water with little flushing action, warm temperatures and little dissolved oxygen, the normally harmless bacterium known as *Clostridium botulinum* type C (different from types A and B that cause death in humans) may begin to germinate and produce the toxin which causes this disease. Some researchers feel that conditions of high pH and low salinity encourage dormant bacterial spores to germinate. An organic substrate, such as dead vegetation or invertebrates, provides an energy source fueling bacterial reproduction as well as providing an enticing food source for waterfowl. Diving ducks are the first birds affected. Since they feed in muddy areas on vegetation and invertebrates, they are the most likely to ingest the toxin, which attacks the nervous system, causing paralysis of the neck muscles (hence the term "limber neck"), legs, eyelids and eventually the muscles of respiration. Death is usually the result of

drowning (due to the bird's inability to keep its head out of the water), respiratory failure, or predation by other animals. When the bird dies, decomposition quickly attracts flies, which lay their eggs on the carcass. Maggots quickly hatch out and begin to feed on the remains, thereby ingesting and concentrating the toxin. Other birds consume these maggots with their deadly dose of toxin, thus spreading the disease. As few as three maggots can make a bird to sick.

Birds that become sick with avian botulism do not die quickly. From the moment they ingest the toxin, it may take 3 to 4 days before death occurs, depending on the dose. This makes the prognosis for rehabilitation very good. By giving large doses of electrolyte solution to birds, the toxin is flushed from their systems and many birds survive to be released. While secondary to the importance of removing dead birds from the system, the capture of sick birds for rehabilitation becomes an important component in fighting a botulism outbreak.

This year's outbreak was centralized in an area known as Coyote Creek Lagoon, part of Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge (DESFBNWR). This area was opened to tidal action in 1988 as mitigation for a nearby light industrial complex. Currently it is a mudflat that is inundated by daily high tides. A shallow, narrow channel cuts through the lagoon from its mouth at Coyote Creek to Mud Slough at its north end, making it navigable by boat only during a tide of about 5.3 feet or higher. Besides providing ideal conditions for botulism, this area posed several other problems to SFBBO biologists attempting to quell the outbreak.

Remotely located, Coyote Creek Lagoon was not part of our normal monitoring area. When we began to find a large number of sick and dead waterfowl near Newby Island (the end of the line for our normal monitoring route) we felt it prudent to explore further up Coyote



Creek to find the source of the disease. Our first few attempts at entering Coyote Creek Lagoon had to be abandoned because tides were not high enough. We were repeatedly frustrated in our attempts, running our boat aground on the muddy shoals hidden below a foot of murky water. Knowing that each day any sick and dead birds went uncollected meant a potentially higher toll, we became very concerned. Finally, with a higher tide working to our advantage, we were able to fully explore the lagoon. What we found worried us even more.

Dead ducks were scattered along the dense bulrush edges of the lagoon and many more sick ducks paddled helplessly, unable to dive or fly. We collected as many birds as we could before the tide dropped, but the time available to us was short. For every bird we could pick up, three more were sick, but healthy enough to dive and elude capture. During each of several days of high tides, we collected about 40 dead birds and 20 sick birds. And we arranged for Joy Albertson, DESFBNWR biologist to accompany us. What had been, up until this time SFBBO's battle against this outbreak, suddenly became full-scale war. After witnessing the magnitude of the die-off, Joy quickly organized Refuge staff, an airboat, two Boston Whalers and a small mountain of equipment to assist in the effort. Our wildlife rehabilitation expert, Kappy Sprenger, contacted Wildlife Rescue (WR) in Palo Alto to assist with the treatment of all the sick birds we recovered. Kathy Tyson of WR arranged to have volunteers available to pick birds

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Ducks, Disease and Dedication

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up on the levee next to Coyote Creek Lagoon. This would not only speed treatment and improve the chance of survival, but also freed up valuable space in the boats for more birds, and maximized our effort during high tides. SFBBO rallied every able bodied volunteer and biologist they could get their hands on to drive boats, comb levees and drainage basins, drive trucks and even make television appearances.

Unfortunately, Coyote Creek Lagoon was not the only area that was experiencing a large die-off. An additional outbreak occurred at the Sunnyvale Water Pollution Control plant. We quickly informed SWPC that we suspected an avian botulism outbreak and our fears were confirmed when dead and sick waterfowl began appearing in the sewage treatment ponds. SFBBO was engaged to help thwart this new outbreak. Peg Woodin and Becky Brown (long time friends and associates of SFBBO as well as experienced veterans of botulism outbreaks) then jumped into the fray. Meanwhile, we continued our normal routine of monitoring Guadalupe Slough and the Moffett Channel for similar symptoms. Fortunately, only a few dead ducks were found in those areas, and no large die-off ever materialized in that area.

After about three weeks of intense cleanup in Coyote Creek Lagoon we finally began to gain the upper hand on the disease. By October 25 there were only four dead birds and one sick bird recovered, and by November 1, the area was free of disease. By October 28, SWPC appeared to be free of the disease as well. Due to the huge number of birds we processed (about 500 individuals) we have not yet been able to establish the success of the rehabilitation effort. Given the good prognosis for birds afflicted with botulism, we expect to find that between 70 and 80 percent of all birds were later released. On the down side, we lost over 1000 birds to these two large outbreaks, making this one of the largest outbreaks of this disease in the western United States this year.

In the end it took seven different rehab organizations and a very large group of dedicated employees and volunteers from SFBBO and the USFWS to gain the upper hand on this outbreak. There were some benefits to this experience, in addition to gaining a great deal more knowledge than we started with. Several newspapers and two television stations ran stories informing the public about the disease and our efforts to stop its spread. As a result we recruited quite a few new volunteers and had our fifteen minutes of fame.

We would like to extend a special thank you to all the volunteers who assisted in these efforts: Deborah Bartens, Peg Bernucci, Larry Cochrane, Lee Franks, Erin Hendricks, Yvonne McHugh, Craig and Chris Michie, Cheryl Millett, Melissa Passanisi, Susan Sandstrom, Robin Smith, Kappy Sprenger and Frank Metzger, Karlene and Terry Stoker, Peg Woodin, Jean and Lou Young. Most of all, we thank all the wonderful folks at Wildlife Rescue in Palo Alto, especially Kathy Tyson, for cheerfully meeting the challenge of 500 sick ducks.



SFBBO Web Site

[Http://www.sfbbo.org](http://www.sfbbo.org)

by George Oetzel

Have you checked our Web site lately? Did you know that it's a convenient place to obtain up to date information about SFBBO activities? While we mail out activity schedules and include a schedule in the Stilt, these mailings generally occur quarterly. Our volunteer activities often require schedule flexibility, so changes are often updated as needed on the Web. For example, the rail tracking and tagging schedule has required a number of changes as we learned how to trap and then track these elusive birds. The rail program now has its own page within our site, and it's frequently updated.

The Web site also offers an archive of Stilt articles, beginning with the 1998 issues, often accompanied by color versions of the pictures in the newsletter. Suggestions for improvements are always welcome. Even more welcome are suggestions accompanied by offers to contribute materials for the site. Here are a couple of things I'd like to implement:

A photo gallery of the birds we study. I have some pictures for the gallery, but need some more. Perhaps I will start one and post a wish list for those that are missing.

Pages oriented toward education. Any one topic related to our work would be a good volunteer project. It would be good publicity for SFBBO and help to produce a return on the huge investment made in getting schools online.

I can be reached by email at gmoetzel@sfbbo.org.

SFBBO Upcoming Events

Owl Identification

Instructor Paul Noble uses slides and tapes to describe all species west of the Rockies and review profiles, plumages and calls. Then the group takes off for two separate evenings of owling in the Santa Cruz Mountains and along the San Mateo coast.

Class meeting: Thursday, Feb 25, 7-9PM
Field trips: Saturday evenings, February 27 & March 6; locations to be arranged.
Cost: Members \$30/Nonmembers \$45

Carrizo Plain/Morro Bay

Carrizo Plain is known for breathtaking scenery as well as unique habitat types. Morro Bay has among the highest Christmas Count totals in the U.S. Combining these two locations should provide incredible bird-watching. We hope to find Sand Hill Cranes, Mountain Plovers and wintering raptors at Carrizo. We will look for specialties such as Eurasian Wigeon, Black Scoter, Wandering Tattler and Black Oystercatcher.

Date: February 13-15
Leaders: Tom Ryan and Gjon Hazard
Cost: Members \$60/Nonmembers \$75

Honey Lake Sage Grouse

Meet in Susanville, CA for a memorable search for high desert birds. Visit the Sage Grouse lek at dawn on Saturday and then bird Honey Lake for large flocks of geese, ducks and raptors. Sunday AM a second chance at the lek if we're rained/snowed out. Then bird Sierra Valley for more waterfowl, cranes and raptors on the return. Fanatics can try for Black-backed Woodpecker and Winter Finch.

Date: March 19-21
Leader: Dick Carlson
Cost: Members \$60/Nonmembers \$75

Wine, Wildflowers and Woodpeckers

In June, the Tahoe Sierras explode in a sudden profusion of wildflowers and bird-song. SFBBO's President, Richard Carlson, has explored this area for the last decade and knows where both the wildflowers and birds will be as the Sierras come to life. Join him at his Tahoe cabin, enjoy sweeping vistas of the lake, have a glass of wine and watch the Cassin's Finches, nuthatches and flying squirrels at the feeder. Explore for Black-backed & White-headed Woodpeckers, Red-breasted & Williamson's Sapsuckers, McGillivray's, Hermit & Nashville Warblers which nest nearby.

Date: June 11-13
Cost: \$300 per couple, all meals and lodging included.

Annual Meeting 1998

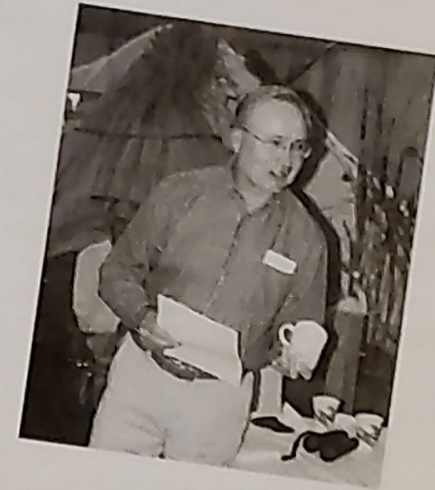
Focus on Volunteers

October 18 was the date for SFBBO's Annual Membership meeting, held this year at the Refuge's Environmental Education Center in Alviso. After enjoying a sumptuous meal of barbecued chicken, thanks to Mike Spence, members and volunteers gathered around to hear the results of the 1998 California Fall Challenge, presented by Event Chairman Ed Pandolfino (see the lead article). Then as all present tucked into dessert and coffee, we gathered round the slide projector to hear SFBBO biologists summarize the field season's highlights. After introduction by SFBBO Science Advisor, Adrian del Nevo, Tom Ryan gave a talk on the terns of the south bay, fresh from his presentation to the American Ornithological Union meeting in Miami a few days before. We were all taken aback by his news of an overall decline in our local Forster's Tern population. Information on our rail telemetry work was provided by project leader Danielle LeFer. And Robin Dakin told the story of the 1998 avian botulism outbreak, with frequent referrals to the dedicated volunteers who rose to the challenge of controlling the epidemic.

We then had the great fun of presenting certificates of appreciation to our very special volunteers. Among the outstanding contributors:

Robin Smith - "Volunteer Extraordinaire" for helping with everything from banking chores to collecting duck carcasses.

Lee Franks - "Best Fake Rail" for outstanding contribution to the Rail Project, including helping calibrate our



Volunteer Lee Franks (S. Dakin)

telemetry equipment by wading through the marsh with a transmitter.

Cheryl Millett - "Thank God You're Here" for consistently showing up to cheerfully help put out whatever fire was burning.

Sue Macias - "Here's Your Damn Data" for an extraordinary effort to collect gull data on a muddy levee (her reply upon return was....)

Frances Chen - "Number One Gull Target" for enthusiastic participation in our California Gull surveys, despite being viewed as a bull's eye by the locals.

These are a few of the many volunteers we recognized that night. The Staff and Board of SFBBO are honored to work with so many wonderfully talented and dedicated individuals. We look forward to seeing many of you again at next fall's Annual Meeting and Volunteer Appreciation event.

Special thanks to Fran McTamany and all the staff of the EEC for their generous hospitality.



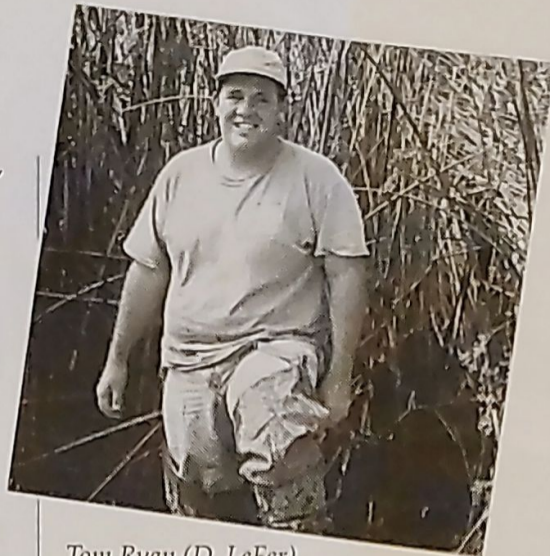
SFBBO 98-99 Board of Directors: (left to right, front) Harriet Gerson, Robin Smith, Ed Pandolfino; (back row) Jan Hintermeister, George Oetzel, Adrian del Nevo, Mike Spence, Dick Carlson. Not shown: Anne Moser, Lou Young. (S. Dakin)

SFBBO Updates

SFBBO staff news Hellos and goodbyes

After nearly two years as Senior Biologist, **Tom Ryan** departed in September for a new position with the Santa Clara Valley Water District. Many of our members have been in the field with Tom, either banding birds as part of our Waterbird Program or on weekend birding trips. As a leader who learned the skill at Victor Emanuel's knee, he provided great birding experiences wherever he happened to be, on colony surveys, on our regular trips to Bair Island or on a refuge field trip. Tom's special knowledge of terns, gained during his graduate work with Dr. Charles Collins of Long Beach State, enabled him to improve our waterbird work, by increasing the quality of the data collected by volunteers and by encouraging the follow-up work of band reading. His many additions to SFBBO's contribution list include papers summarizing 17 years of data gathered around the Bay, on heron and egrets, on Snowy Plovers and on predation events, and include presentations made to several national meetings. His paper on Least Terns in west Mexico was recently accepted for publication and he is the lead author of the Birds of North America account of the White-throated Swift, in press. Tom is well known for wild enthusiasm and was one of the founders of SFBBO's California Fall Challenge. Fortunately, he will still be collaborating with SFBBO on our future research program and as a trip leader par excellence. We send him our very best wishes for success in his new position and are happy to welcome him back as "Chief Volunteer".

The avian botulism outbreak of 1998 underscored our need for personnel trained in the use of small watercraft and competent at waterfowl identification. We are fortunate to welcome **Brian Ryckewaert** to our staff as a part-time assistant for this important work. Brian is trained in park management, and has excellent volunteer management skills. He has worked as an intern on several of the Central Valley refuges, where he has banded waterfowl and monitored for signs of avian cholera. Of particular interest is his work with Wood Ducks, maintaining nesting boxes and banding young birds, while balanced precariously



Tom Ryan (D. LeFer)

atop "small watercraft". We look forward to Brian's continued participation, while he pursues a degree in wildlife biology.

You probably noticed that our last issue of *The Stilt* featured an article on our rail work by **Danielle LeFer**. (see photo page 8) Please forgive this belated introduction. Danielle began as the field assistant for the project headed by Tom Ryan and has since moved up to the lead position. She is a graduate student at San Francisco State, expecting her Masters degree in December 1998. Her field experience includes nest-searches and banding, and her radio-telemetry experience was gained on hornbills in Cameroon, Africa. These are important skills for her current assignment. Few humans have any experience in bulrush marshes (or desire to), but now Danielle has learned to navigate the maze of several marshes with ease. We are lucky to have someone who loves mud and rails so well. Volunteers for this project are needed, and you don't have to love mud to help out.

Also pictured on page 8 is the new field assistant for the rail project, **Kim Briones**. After interning with our Colonial Waterbird Program last year, Kim returns to SFBBO from fieldwork on the endangered Palilah in Hawaii. Her duties there included point counts, nest searches, mist-netting and attaching radio-transmitters for this study in the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. Kim has also surveyed for Northern Spotted Owl and Goshawks in the Klamath National Forest. She recently received her undergraduate degree from San Jose State University, and is now assisting Danielle with advanced studies on mud and rails. Welcome back, Kim!

Knowledge Is Power

SFBBO's currency is knowledge of the Bay's birds and getting that data used for informed conservation decisions. You may have knowledge that would help SFBBO achieve that goal.

Is your company moving or upgrading equipment? Our administrative staff needs an extra personal computer that can run Windows 98 and Office 97.

The staff would appreciate computer desks and room dividers.

Our Library needs tall metal bookcases to support our growing collection of reference materials.

We would all appreciate a larger functioning copy machine, with collation.

Does your employer have a matching funds program? You may have the potential of doubling your contribution to SFBBO. Check with your human resources department for information and forms.

Did you know that you may enjoy tax benefits through your donation of securities to SFBBO? Your tax planner can explain the advantages of giving stocks, bonds or mutual fund shares to SFBBO. Call us for our Charles Schwab account number.

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

Memberships

We welcome the following new and returning members of SFBBO (Aug, Sept, Oct):

Donald Allen, Emily Allen, Linda Allen, David Anderson, Jacob Asher, Liz Bathgate, Steve Beckendorf, Karen Berger, Laura Black, Nancy and Al Boggess, Debra Bowen, Ann Brohmer, Joelle Buffa, Eugenia and Peter Caldwell, Barbara Carlson, George and Carol Carpenter, Mary Elizabeth Casanova, Susan and Robert Cossins, Jay Davis, Arthur and Helen Dawson, Julia Denney, Ray Dondero, Arthur Feinstein, Dave and Susie Formenti, Marie Gordon, Laura Gould and Severo Ornstein, Ira Greenberg, Nancy Greenfield, Dan Guthrie, Madelon Halpern, Elaine Harding, Claudia and Scott Hein, Judy and Bill Hein, Howard Higley, Jean and Frank Hilmes, Jan Hintermeister, Delia Hitz, Susan and Ronald Holmes, Susan Hood, Caralisa Hughes, Bill Johnson, Patricia and Gerald Johnson, Carol Jordan, Daniel and Janice Klein, Marge Kolar,

Joel Kositsky, Rich Kuehn, Steve and Lisa Kurasch, Donald Lewis, Randy and Janet Little, Joyce Loughmiller, John Luther, Elizabeth Massie, Carol Masterson, Donald Mayall, Yvonne McHugh, Beverly McIntosh, Peter Metropulus Gary Meyer, Craig and Chris Michie, Cheryl Millett, Barbara and Kevin Monahan, Sandy Moore, Carol Orme, Dennise Orr, Margaret Panton, Christina Peterson, Margaret Phillips, Tim Pile, Edith and Bill Pounders, Judith Radocha, Elizabeth Rush, Earle Schremp, Clysta Seney, Stephen Shunk, Helga Small, Al Spears, Norma Standard, John Sterling, Dick Stovel, Mark and Leila Sutherland, Karl and Helen Tashjian, Francis Toldi, Ruth and Gene Troetschler, John Wagnitz, Kathy and Larry Webster, Rick Wicker, Crystal Woodin, Des and Cathy Wytmans, Bob and Carol Yutzky



Contributions

Our special thanks to these Contributors to the Observatory (Aug, Sept, Oct):

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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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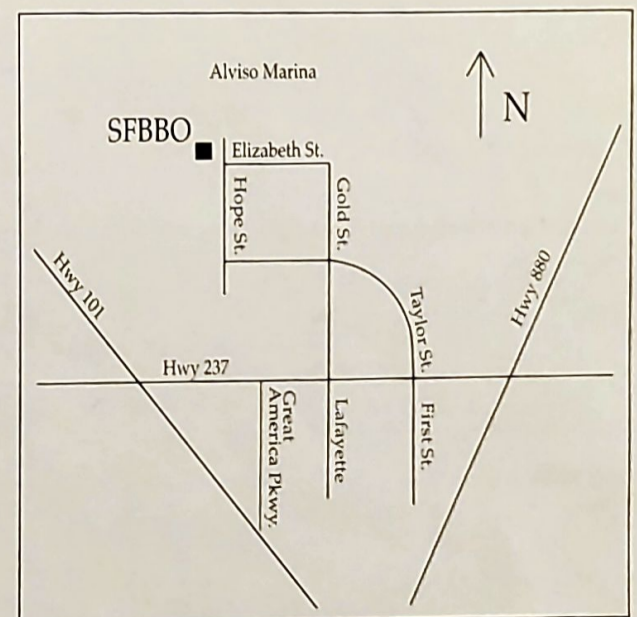
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Patron: \$2,000
Life: \$400

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Rail and Radios

by Danielle LeFer

Since the start of the Virginia and Sora Rail Disturbance study in July 1998, we have gained an increased understanding of the seasonal movement, local movement, relative densities and survivorship of Virginias and Soras in the South Bay.

As of December 1, 1998 we have radio-tagged 41 birds. At the disturbance site, Sunnyvale East (SE), we have tagged 26 birds (11 Soras and 15 Virginias). At Alviso Marina (AM), we have tagged 15 birds (2 Soras and 13 Virginias). While we have the birds in hand, we are collecting data which can aid in identifying the sex and age (juvenile or adult) of the birds. We are also collecting weight and fat indices to note the condition of the birds and compare any changes over time (during retrapping sessions).

Most of our tagged birds have remained within a few hundred meters of their trap location. We have lost track of four radio-tagged Virginias from SE. A flight survey of the marshes south of the San Mateo Bridge on December 4, 1998 did not find the birds. Eight of the 41 radio-tagged birds have died. Most of the birds appear to have fallen prey to hawks or owls. Two birds might have been killed by a mammalian predator (fox or cat). The average survival rate of both species is 80%.

Call count surveys have shown an increase in relative densities of Virginias and Soras over time. Relative Virginia densities (average number of Virginias responding to calls) have

increased tenfold from 3.3 per site in July to 32.9 in October. Densities have decreased slightly to 20.8 per site in November. Relative Sora densities tripled between July (0.67 per site) and August (3.3 per site). Their relative density has increased to 5.6 per site in November.

To obtain an estimate of the percentage of birds responding to call counts, we have combined call counts with a study of detectability of Virginia Rails. We have been locating tagged birds at each of the seven call count stations. During the call count, any responses from the tagged birds are noted. We can then calculate the percentage of tagged birds responding to calls. The initial results of

the detectability survey find that about 50% of the radio-tagged Virginias responded to the calls. This indicates that the actual population numbers are twice the number obtained during call counts. By continuing the detectability survey throughout a year, we can observe seasonal changes in rail call response.

We are continuing to trap, track and do call counts throughout the next few months. Thanks to all of our volunteers for their support.



SFBBO Rail Biologists Danielle LeFer and Kim Briones with a Sora in hand
(J. Hanson)

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