

SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY NEWSLETTER

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Permit #9



Volume 6, Number 9

October/November 1987

SFBBO BOARD ELECTIONS

At the October General Meeting the membership voted in 3 new directors to serve a three year term on the SFBBO Board of Directors. The new directors are:

Paul Noble - Paul, a self employed landscape contractor, has been a birder for over 17 years. He has been an SFBBO volunteer since 1982 working on the Palo Alto Airport Study, California Gulls, Salt Marsh Yellowthroat and the Botulism Study. He has also been active in Santa Clara Valley Audubon and is the Field trip Chairperson this year.

David Seals - David is running for re-election after serving one year on the Board. He has his BS in Biology and works for Syntex Laboratory's in Palo Alto. He's been a Birder for 10 years and a volunteer for SFBBO since 1982 working on the Palo Alto Airport Study, Salt Pond Study, and Colonial Bird Study.

Judy Wiley - Judy works for Owen -Taylor Construction in Los Altos. Although Judy is just getting started in Birding, and has been a volunteer for the Bird Observatory for two years, she has worked on the Botulism Study, California Gulls Study, Bair Island and assisted in banding demonstrations at the Refuge.

In May the Board elected **Jane Hawkey** as a Director to fill a vacancy left by the resignation of Tom Medeiros. Jane works for the Memorex Credit Union as an Operations Manager. She is a volunteer for the Humane Wildlife Center and serves on the Board of Save Our South Bay Wetlands. She is a new volunteer to SFBBO and has worked on the Botulism Study, California Gull banding, worked on many of the projects on Bair Island and is currently conducting a census on Mallard Slough.

GARDEN PROJECT

SFBBBO is preparing to embark on a large gardening and landscaping project of the property surrounding the Cannery building in Alviso. The plan will include the development of the northern piece of land into a native plant and tree garden. We'd like to design sections for some sort of amphitheatre, for burrowing owl nesting sites and a small wetland demonstration area. The goal is to have a landscape design that will reflect the bay heritage we all enjoy, but that can also be used for educational demonstrations and events.

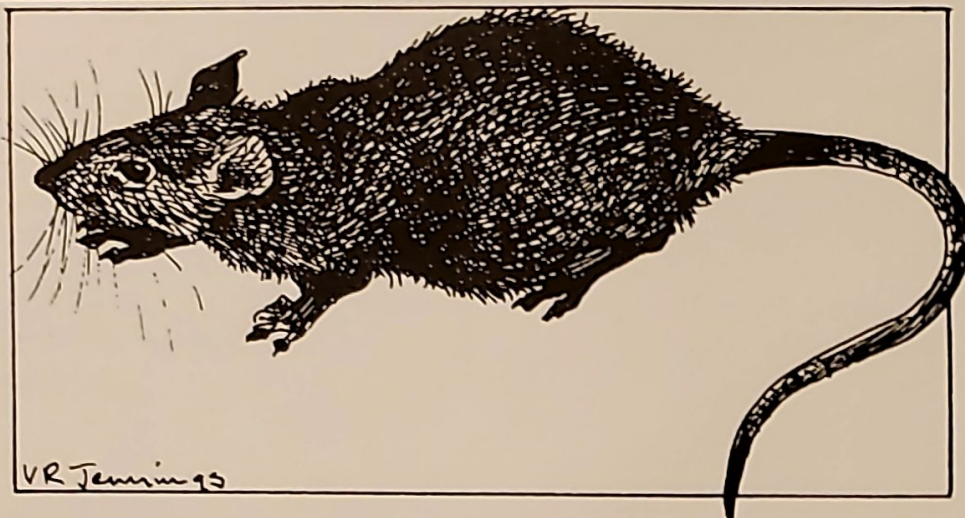
Eight volunteers are needed for the project's first work day on Saturday, October 24, 1987 at 10:00 a.m. We will be installing a water line to the garden area, planting coyote brush and seeding planter boxes along the side of the building. If you are experienced with water pipe installation or just willing to do a little planting and digging, please call Pat Dubois at (408) 395-4264. We also need trees! If you could donate a native tree or bush (15 gallon size or larger), please contact Jane Hawkey at (408) 244-5010 or Judy Wiley at (408) 945-0926. ■

Part II of the Avian Botulism report has been delayed and will appear in the December newsletter.

MAMMAL OF THE MONTH

House Mouse *Mus musculus*

by Vicki R. Jennings



I've wondered why the house mouse is not more appreciated; after all, it is very much like ourselves-- a tough, adaptable, prolific immigrant. But no, most of us dislike the house mouse to the point of murder, all because it has the temerity to share our homes with us! Few of us are aware that this little rodent also successfully manages an undomesticated existence, far from the warmth and abundant food of our homes.

Mus came to this country with us, stowaways on the ships leaving the Old World. The mouse has been as successful as we in colonizing America; from urban areas to rural, from coast to mountains, the house mouse shares this country with us.

Found most abundantly in association with human settlement, the house mouse is an opportunist, benefitting from the food and nesting materials and shelter we so generously provide. However, satellite populations occur in areas not as bountiful--such as the marshes ringing San Francisco Bay.

In some parts of the South Bay that I have live-trapped, *Mus* dominated the captures. This was the case at Artesian Slough, where 90% of total captures were of this animal. House mice are mediocre swimmers, so areas they inhabit in marshes must contain levees or other higher--elevation spots for them to retreat to

during high tides. Artesian Slough, with its steep banks and dense vegetation, is obviously suitable. However, I have seen their delicate tracks in the mud of the slough itself at low tide, indicating that they forage beyond the levee vegetation, and even beyond the band of bulrush that lines the channel there.

House mice are familiar to almost everyone, but I doubt many of you have taken the time to really look at one, or to compare it to our native mice. *Mus* is generally easy to distinguish from deer mice (*Peromyscus*) and harvest mice (*Reithrodontomys*) by the overall buff to gray coloring of the body (lacking the neat two-toned coloration of the natives) and the naked, scaled tail that is usually much longer than the tails of the others in proportion to the body. Sometimes the belly of a house mouse may be quite pale (but never white), and the back dark, but there is usually a gradual transition between the two colors, rather than a sharp break. The ears of the house mice are large, thin, and very mobile, and the eyes are smaller than those of either deer or harvest mice. *Mus* is not an endearing rodent, over all; it is aggressive and fast-moving, has a tendency to climb pant-legs (on the inside) when released, and is downright smelly (you can tell if a live trap contains a house mouse simply by sniffing the outside of the trap--an esoteric skill you can now use to

impress all your friends).

Mus is omnivorous, apparently eating anything even remotely edible, including seeds, fruits, vegetation, insects, mollusks, crustaceans, and other small mammals (cannibalism is not rare). Female house mice may have their first litters at six weeks, and may have five litters of four to eight young a year. Juvenile mortality is high (thank goodness) due to the young's dispersal "enthusiasm" that takes them to unfamiliar areas and exposes them to more predation. (In one study, I had a teenage male mouse travel 410 meters in one night, which seems to me an incredible distance, given a little creature scarcely three inches long.) Adult male dominance and aggression provide the impetus for this subadult wandering, and pheromonal inhibitors prevent ovulation and pregnancy in young females until they have successfully established themselves away from their natal areas. Life is short and nasty for these little rodents; their populations in the wild are characterized by much instability, in numbers, space and social structure.

Interestingly, part of this instability may be due to the cyclic populations of the first mammal in this series of articles, the meadow mouse *Microtus californicus*. Researchers have found that when *Microtus* numbers are high the reverse is true of *Mus*. When *Microtus* populations decline, those of *Mus* rise. *Microtus* is behaviorally dominant, too, with *Mus* retreating in 98% of encounters. A long term study of the two rodents at a location such as Artesian Slough would be interesting (yes, biologists are strange.).

The house mouse is a successful opportunist, flexible and prolific. It is not a native species, and it's too bad it is as well-established as it is. We're not going to get rid of it, obviously, and in some areas it may well negatively influence the numbers and well-being of native rodents. Nevertheless, one must admire the toughness and strategies of the wee beastie; we human immigrants share the same characteristics, after all. •

Memories Of That Coral-Pink Pentstemon

by Ed Roberts

Pentstemon newberryi, called Mountain Pride, is a common flower of the Sierra Nevada, growing in rocky or gravelly places from 5,000 - 11,000 feet. Typically, it is rose-red in color, although I have seen specimens which were nearly true red.

While backpacking several years ago, I found a beautiful variant of the species which had soft coral-pink blooms. I checked with several pentstemon specialists after I returned home and they told me that, while my find was not likely to lead to a new revision of Munz and Keck's *A California Flora*, it was nevertheless interesting enough and rare enough that a return trip to collect cuttings or seeds from the single plant I had stumbled across would be worthwhile.

I returned to the Madera Creek region this past August. Armed with propagation equipment, I hiked up the creek in search of that single plant of coral-pink pentstemon. I had first seen the plant during the early season when there was still lots of snow on the ground. Our group walked cross country, following Flat Lake Creek to its confluence with Madera Creek, then sought a place where we could cross the boiling whitewaters of the spring flood. Last August, late season in a low water year, Madera Creek had been quite a different stream, barely a trickle in some places. As I clambered over jumbles of downed trees and picked my way over the rocky outcroppings which lined the creek banks I wondered whether I would recognize the spot again. But there it was - a Volkswagen-sized rock, cracked down the middle, with a small lodgepole pine growing in the crack. The creek was not flowing around both sides of the rock as it did in early spring, but there was no mistaking that rock. This was the place.

The coral-pink Mountain Pride was gone. I found a few dried leaves, the thin mat of soil which had clung to a depression in the granite and allowed purchase for the roots, but the plant was dead; dried beyond possible revival.

My only hope is to return next year during the blooming season and canvas the area

to see if seeds might have been washed downstream or carried by birds or rodents, (assuming that the plant reproduces itself true to color from seeds), or to see if there might be another specimen of the same color variation growing nearby. The odds are not good. I've been looking at Sierra wildflowers for close to forty years and I've never seen another plant even close to that color. The chances are that I've lost my coral-pink pentstemon forever.

The painful object lesson of that experience has stayed with me since that day. I had delayed going back up to collect cuttings from that plant. Each year there had been some rationalization as to why I should put off that trip until next year, yet the plant was nowhere near a trail and in a place not likely to attract the typical mountain traveler. I was the only person who knew where it was and I was negligent in taking steps to perpetuate the beauty of that wildflower. If I ever again need to be reminded, memories of that coral-pink pentstemon will remain as a sad, personal example of our need to conserve and to be aware of the environmental hazards which so many plants and animals face.

Conservation is a responsibility which all of us must accept. I believe that it is a special responsibility of the biologist to also be a conservationist. There is an ethical issue involved: the biologist must be objective in the studies which he or she does and must not allow preconceived notions to cloud factual observations. Evidence is too strong that habitat and species are being lost at to rapid a rate for biologists to hide behind a false cloak of objectivity and take a live and let die attitude.

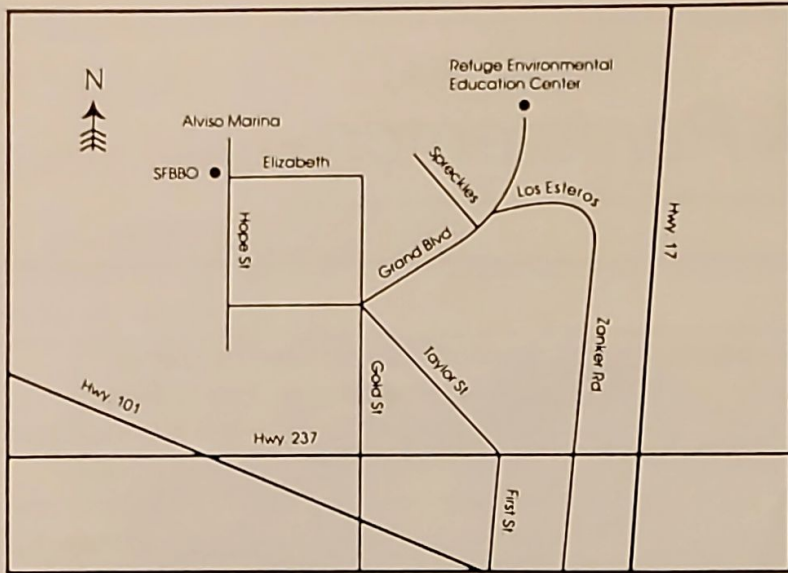
We don't have to look as far away as the Amazon rainforest where new species are being discovered at a rate slightly lower than known species are being lost. SFBBO studies of California Clapper Rails, Least Terns, and Salt-marsh Yellowthroats all indicate that habitat loss places these species in precarious positions. Talk to Dr. Joe Marshall who met with a group of us last fall to discuss a proposal that Salt-marsh Song

Sparrows be classified as another endangered species. Talk to Jean Takekawa, biologist for the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge about studies she did on Apple Snail Kites in the Florida Everglades. At home or abroad, it is loss of habitat which continues to threaten species after species. And the biologist is the person best suited - and thus most responsible - to convey this message to the public. To do so is not an option, it is a duty.

The amateur biologist as well as the professional takes up this responsibility when they venture out to do field studies. Amateurs simply must proceed with open-eyed objectivity, spend time in the library, and seek counsel from the pros as they go. In fact, it is a tradition in biology for there to be amateurs who regularly contribute to the body of biological knowledge, perhaps more so than in any other branch of science. In a subsequent newsletter, we'll describe the activities of some Bay Area amateur biologists who have made significant contributions to our understanding of our local environment.



Pentstemon newberryi



The Bird Observatory office is located at 1290 Hope St. in Alviso. The office is open from 1-5 pm weekdays and some weekends. But before stopping in, call (408) 946-6548 and check the schedule.

The General Membership meetings are held on the first Thursday of the month at 7:30 pm at the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Education Center in Alviso. (see map) The Board meetings are open to the membership and are held monthly. Call the Observatory for dates and times.

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

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

GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

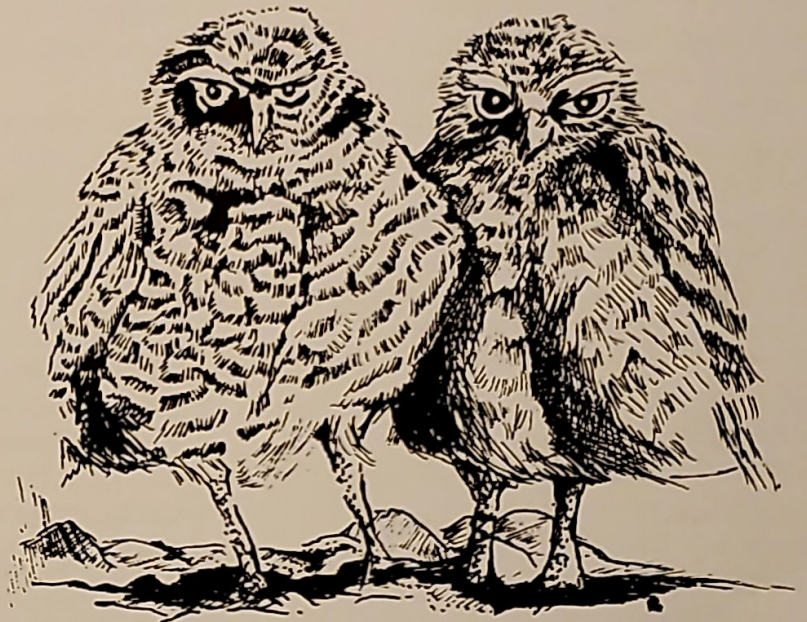
Thursday, **November 5, 1987**

Refuge Environmental Education Center
in Alviso

7:30 pm

FEATURED SPEAKER: Roger Harris, wildlife biologist with the environmental consulting firm of LSA Associates and Project Manager of the Burrowing Owl Relocation Project.

TOPIC: Roger will give a slide show presentation on the Burrowing Owl Relocation Project in Alameda. This was a joint effort by SFBBO, Harbor Bay Associates, the City of Alameda, a local citizens conservation group, and the California Department of Fish and Game in relocating Burrowing Owls that were at risk from development. They pioneered new methods for relocating Burrowing Owls using artificial burrows. This successful project is a model for demonstrating the mutual benefits of cooperation by developers, conservationists, and governmental entities in a wildlife rescue effort.



HAVE YOU MOVED?

If you have moved recently, please send your new address change to the office promptly so that you will continue to receive your newsletter.

Editor, Susie Formenti



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(408) 946-6548

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

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

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

* Single payment becomes part of an endowment fund.