SAN FRANCISCO BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY NEWSLETTER

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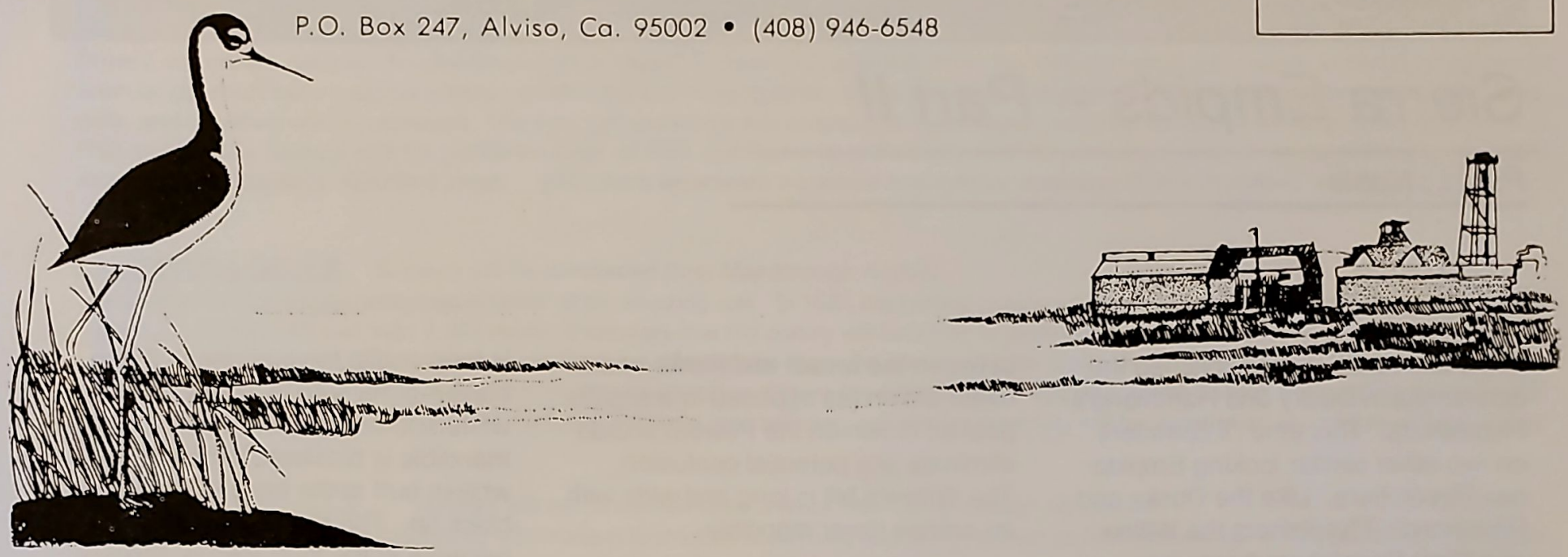


Volume 8, Number 3 May/June 1989

THE KNAPP STUDY

If you are interested in shorebird identification and our threatened wetland environment we are in need of volunteers to help us census ponds in our "back yard" -- the south bay.

SFBBO's new five year project entails seasonal and annual effects of water chemistry and water levels on bird use within four salt ponds located in the south San Francisco Bay. These ponds which total approximately 1,600 acres are located near Alviso and include lands owned by the San Franciso Bay National Wildlife Refuge (SFBNWR) and the Leslie Salt Company. Approximately 75% of the total number of shorebirds counted during the Point Reyes Bird Observatory fall Shorebird Census of 1988 were found in the South San Francisco Bay. We have found in our past studies that a good portion of water birds (shorebirds, waterfowl, waders, etc.) are found in an area that is called the Knapp Tract. Why do over 200,000 water birds prefer certain salt ponds within the bay? With this new project we hope to find out why. It is important that the relationship of bird use and water quality in this vital and unique habitat be closely studied so that informed management decisions can be made by the SFBNWR as well as Leslie Salt Company personnel.

Surveys will be conducted twice a month. By monitoring water level, temperature, and salinity , as well as weather conditions we hope to better understand how changing conditions effect bird populations residing in and migrating through this pond system.

Survey dates are scheduled everyother weekend starting at 9:00 a.m. No matter what your level of experience, your help will make a difference. As recent events in Alaska have shown, preparedness and evaluation mean survival for our ecosystem. If you are interested in this study, contact the Bird Observatory office at 946-6548. Listed below are dates scheduled through August 1989.

Sunday	May 7
Saturday	May 20
Sunday	June 4
Saturday	June 17
Sunday`	July 2
Saturday	July 15
Sunday	July 30
Saturday	August 12
Sunday	August 27

The Knapp Fund

A fund has been set up to help finance scientific equipment and supplies needed for this project such as salinity and oxygen meters, and instruments for a weather station. All contributions will be used for the five year project described above. If you are unable to volunteer your time, please show your support with a contribution to this important study. Make checks payable to SFBBO and indicate donation to be used for the "The Knapp". All contributions are tax deductible.

S C O P E

Sierra Empids - Part II

Paul L. Noble

In the last newsletter I explained the differences in Dusky and Hammond's Flycatchers. This time I'll comment on two other similar looking Empidonax Flycatchers. Like the Dusky and Hammond's Flycatchers the Willow and Gray Flycatchers have very similar plumages, but these two species have much different habitat requirements and, thus, are rarely encountered together in the same area during their breeding season.

The Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*) is very habitat specific. That is it's found breeding in a particular habitat and nowhere else. Like it's name implys, it's habitat largely includes Willow (*Salix spp*) as a major plant component. In the California Sierras this habitat occurrs in moist meadows or streams from 3-6 thousand feet on the west slope to 6-7 thousand feet on the east slope. Within these elevations this small brownish flycatcher chooses to dwell in semi-open rather than timbered situations in the vicinity of water. Even small patches of willow in isolated meadows may harbor this bird.

Plumage wise this empid is brownish dorsally with pale white or light brown underparts with a whitish chin. It lacks an eye ring -- an important feature to note, as this is the only empid that lacks such a feature. The lack of an eye ring in combination with a large general size is where the unsuspecting birder might confuse the Willow Flycatcher with a Western Wood Pewee. The Willow's dirty white breast without any contrast between the breast and flanks and a flatter crown (as opposed to a slightly peaked crown on the Pewee) should eliminate any potential confusion. The Willow's bill is long and wide with an orange lower mandible.

Behaviorally, the Willow is a tail twitcher, flicking the tail upward. It makes feeding forays often and will return to the same perch. Typically singing from the top of a willow thicket, the bird often throws its head back singing its "burry song". The song consists of two elements. The first is an introductory note "prrip". This is followed by a two noted down-slurred "fitz bew". Singing is most intense just after dawn. By noon the bird calls infrequently or not at all.

The Gray Flycatcher (*Empidonax wrightii*) prefers a much different habitat than the Willow, and is typically found breeding only east of the Sierran crest. Among spice scented sagebrush, junipers and pinyon pines, this drab empid spends most of its time perched on low branches sallying for insects, often going to the ground unlike any other empid. The Gray Flycatcher is the drabest of the empids. It is similar in color to the Dusky, but is even paler and grayer and shows even less contrast. The underparts are whitish with a rather faint grayish wash on the sides and a very pale yellowish wash on the lower belly. The paler gray upper parts provide only a weak contrast for the narrower white eye ring and wing bars.

The wings are medium long. The tail is long and in fresh plumage the narrow outer web is almost pure white and conspicuous. The lower mandible is bicolored peach or whitish buff at the base with an abrupt black tip. The head is small, perhaps because of the long narrow and straight sided bill.

The Gray's song is simple; the first note is full voiced, the second thin: "chualup! seeal". The call is a loud "whit". Like the Willow flycatcher the Gray sings most actively in the early morning before the Great Basin heat sets in for the day.

Typical locations to find the Willow Flycatcher in Yosemite are Hodgdon Meadows, Westphall Meadows, and Mcgurck Meadows. The Gray Flycatcher can be found just about anywhere east of the crest in sage-brush county, such as the area around the Mono Craters. Good sources of Epidonax identification can be found in the following publications: *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding* Vol. 2, *The National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America* and *Western Birdwatcher* 1983. ▪

Project Update

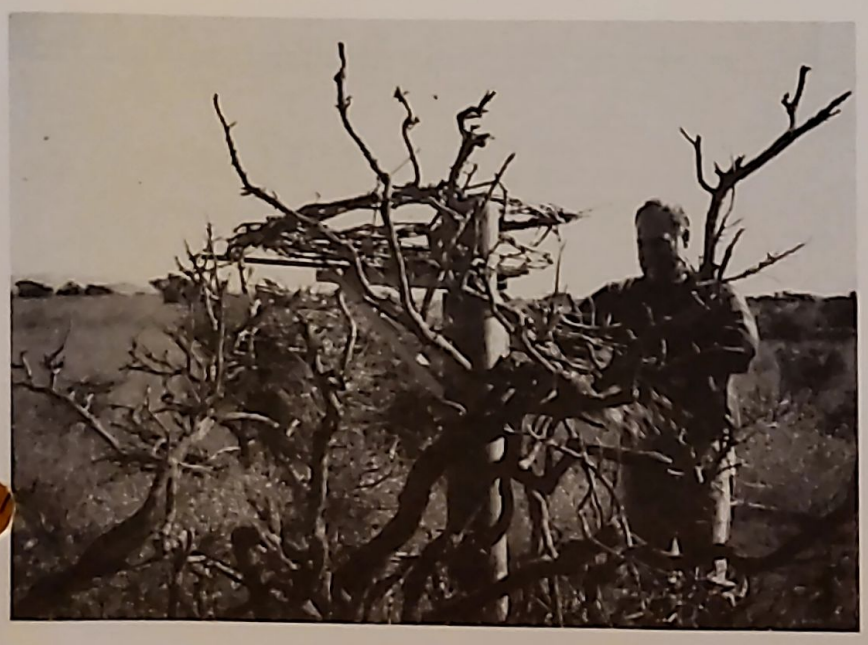
COLONIAL BIRDS *Surveys are conducted bimonthly from April through August.*
Have you ever wondered what exists on the lands at the edge of the bay? In one of SFBBO's on-going projects, the Colonial Nesting Bird Survey, volunteers not only observe thousands of migrating shorebirds and waterfowl, but they also have a chance to experience these vast open lands which have become a haven for hundreds of nesting birds. All known nesting sights of such species as; herons, egrets, terns, gulls, and swallows will be censused. The data gathered from this project has been a very important source of information for both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Dept. of Fish and Game to understand bird movements and populations within the bay area, especially in potentially disturbed areas. With more volunteers we would expand our coverage of this important ecosystem.

CALIFORNIA GULLS *Surveys will be conducted from May through August.*
The California Gull colony continues to grow at an amazing rate. In 1981 the colony consisted of approximately 30 pairs. During the 1988 season our surveys totaled over 2,000 nests. It appears that the colony will continue to grow because of an abundance of food source and potential nesting habitat. Various other researchers throughout the west are more than interested in this colony. We have agreed to cooperate in a comparative study with other investigators to see if there are differences in egg energetics as well as fledgling success. We will be building enclosures to study the fledgling success, and banding gull chicks (banding will be conducted at night to reduce colony disturbance).

BOTULISM PROJECT *Surveys will be conducted once a week from June through November*
Avian Botulism is a disease caused by a bacteria (*Clostridium botulinum*) commonly known as food poisoning. Clostridium botulinum type C is found naturally occurring in soils, however, suitable environmental conditions are necessary for bacterial reproduction, growth and toxin production. These conditions include prolonged spells of warm weather, enlarged areas of shallow stagnant water, alkalinity, an abundance of aquatic invertebrates, and oxygen depletion associated with large amounts of rotting vegetation and other organic matter. It has been demonstrated by past SFBBO studies that conditions in the south bay are suitable for outbreaks of avian botulism during the summer months. These outbreaks have been know to kill hundreds of waterfowl in the south bay. The most effective way to control the spread of the disease during an outbreak is to collect the sick and dead vertebrates.

BAIR ISLAND
For the past few years SFBBO has been aware of the deteriorating condition of the coyote brush (*Baccharusd pilularis consanguinea*) on Bair Island. The plants themselves are dying off and no new seedlings seem to have taken root. These plants have been used for nesting by Great Blue Herons on Bair Island since at least as far back as 1967. Thus, the shortage of nesting substrate was getting alarming. In 1987 SFBBO personnel and volunteers with the help from both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Dept. of Fish & Game constructed artificial nesting platforms. These platforms were dispersed throughout the colony site within the historic Great Blue Heron nesting area. The first nesting season after the installation of the platforms showed that the Great Blue Herons perferred to roost on them rather then nest on them. In 1988 we decided to enhance the platforms by adding nesting material used by Great Blue Herons in nests found in the coyote brush. Again they did not nest on the platforms. Although we did find, much to our delight, that they made use of the nesting material that we provided, but for their own historic nest sights in the coyote brush. In early February of this year volunteers constructed artificial nests made of grape vines donated by Mirassou Vineyards and Congress Springs Vineyards. These nests were then wired to the platforms to again entice the herons to nest on the them. We are anxiously awaiting the results of this new management effort

The 1989 breeding season is getting underway and schedules and plans are being made for the above projects. If you would like to volunteer your time for any of these studies please give the Bird Observatory a call at 946-6548.



Tom Esperson securing grape vine nest to a platform (Photo by Peg Woodin)

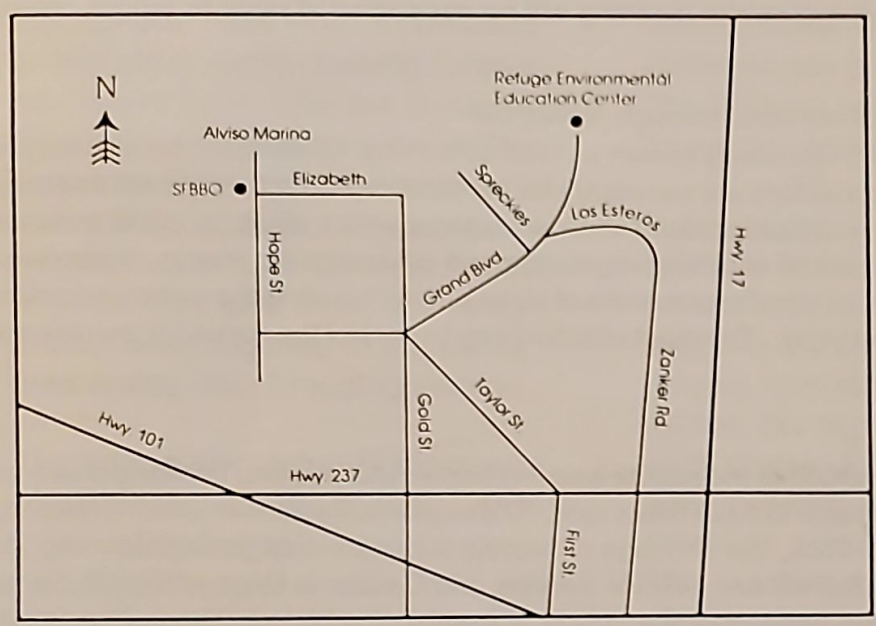
Paul Noble adding more nesting material to a grape vine nest. (Photo by Peg Woodin)

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 typically held on the first Thursday of the month, but are sometimes changed due to the availability of the speaker. The program starts 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 is a bimonthly publication. 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.



DONATIONS

Our sincere thanks to the Sequoia Audubon Society for their generous donation to our general fund. Unsolicited donations such as this is heartwarming and shows that other organizations support our work.

Don Starks
Executive Director

SFBBO GENERAL MEETING PROGRAMS FOR 1989

General membership meetings are held on the first Thursday of the month (unless otherwise noted) at 7:30 p.m. at the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Education Center in Alviso. (see map)

June 8, 1989 *	**Dr. Charles Collins** Long Beach State University Topic: Status of the California Least Tern.
July 6, 1989	**Felix Smith** Environmental Assessment Specialist, US Fish & Wildlife Service.
August 3, 1989	**Brenda Johnson** - UC Davis Topic: Burrowing Owls **Janis Taylor** Topic: Update on Burrowing Owl Colony at Mission College
September 7, 1989	**Jill Hedgecock**, Rain Forest Action Network. Topic: Birds of the American tropical rain forest and problems they are encountering because of deforestation.
October 5, 1989	**ClarkBlake**, Research Geologists U S Geological Survey Topic: Geology of the South Bay and Surrounding Territory.
November 2, 1989	**David Suddiian** Topic: Santa Cruz Breeding Bird Atlas.

* Denotes meetings not held on the 1st Thursday of the month.

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

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____STATE____ZIP_____

PHONE (____) _____

Make checks payable to SFBBO. Your gift membership is

Student/Senior	$10
Regular	$15
Family	$20
Associate	$50
Contributing	$100
Sustaining	$200
Life	$400 *
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