

# BAY BIRD REVIEW

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION ON THE SCIENCE AND CONSERVATION OF BIRDS AND THEIR HABITATS



SAN FRANCISCO BAY  
BIRD OBSERVATORY

## Director's Message

Spring is in the air in the San Francisco Bay Area, and by the time this issue of the Bay Bird Review comes to print, nesting season will be in full swing. It is a busy time for Bird Observatory biologists as they prepare for another field season monitoring the locally breeding birds. It is also a time of excitement and wonder. Every breeding season, we discover something new and exciting – a new colony of herons or egrets, the discovery of a banded California Gull breeding at a local colony, or a new species migrating through the riparian woodland of the Coyote Creek Field Station. In these programs, and many more, volunteers are integral in helping to document changes to breeding bird populations as well as making those exciting new discoveries.

Our volunteers are a large part of what makes spring such an exciting

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE *continued on page 2*



A CALIFORNIA GULL PAIR *nesting in the A6 Colony.*

PHOTO BY MICHAEL KERN

## Waterbird Science Report

### Thirty Years of Research Documents California Gull Population Explosion

California Gulls are the most common breeding waterbird in the San Francisco Bay. Since 1980, San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory biologists have monitored California Gull populations in the South San Francisco Bay, and documented a dramatic increase from less than 50 breeding birds in 1980 to over 43,000 breeding gulls in 2009 (Figure 1). California Gulls are generalist foragers (dietarily flexible) and, in the South Bay, feed on fish, brine flies and brine shrimp, refuse from local landfills, and the eggs and chicks of Caspian Terns, Forster's Terns, American Avocets, and Black-necked Stilts. In addition, California Gulls depredate the nests and chicks of the federally endangered California Least Tern. In 2009, Bird Observatory biologists documented the first case of California Gulls depredating federally threatened Western Snowy Plover eggs and chicks using nest cameras (see Winter 2009 *Bay Bird Review*). Finally, California Gulls may also exclude these species from nesting sites when competition for nest space develops.

Every year since 1980, Bird Observatory biologists and volunteers walk through South Bay California Gull colonies to count nests. In 2009, for the first time in years, the number of California Gulls nesting in the South Bay decreased. This decrease in California Gulls may be due to a change in available food resources. For instance, in 2008, Newby Island Resource Park in Milpitas started a gull abatement program at their landfill which significantly reduced the number of gulls foraging on the refuse. The decrease of breeding gulls may be linked to the success of this program.

In addition to the change in available food resources in the South Bay, California Gulls may soon face a limitation in their available nesting habitat. The South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project is restoring up to 16,000 acres of salt ponds into tidal marsh and other tidal habitats. The area to be restored includes the A6 salt pond in Alviso (also known as the Knapp Tract), which is

GULL POPULATION *continued on page 5*

PHOTO BY MICHAEL KERN



CARA THOW counts California Gulls and their nests.

## DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE *from cover*

time at the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory. Each spring, our biologists recruit, coordinate, and train over 75 volunteers to help conduct fieldwork for the Colonial Waterbird, Snowy Plover Recovery, California Gull, and Avian Disease Prevention Programs. Add these individuals to those who volunteer year-round to assist with the Coyote Creek Field Station, enter data, or help out around the office, and we are looking at a small army of volunteers, all dedicated to the conservation of birds through science and outreach. Even more impressive is that some of these individuals have been volunteering for the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory since 1983.

So, each spring is not only a celebration of breeding birds at the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory, but a celebration of our dedicated volunteers. Without your help, the Bird Observatory could not achieve all that we do to conserve birds and their habitats. Our volunteers are one of our greatest assets, not only to help us complete our work, but to create community around our mission and organization. I hope that if you are a current, former, or new Bird Observatory volunteer, you will join us for our annual Volunteer Appreciation Party this May. I look forward to seeing you there!

By Jill Bluso Demers,  
Executive Director



THANKS TO SFBBO VOLUNTEERS, nesting birds like California Gulls are being monitored.

## SFBBO Joins the Oiled Wildlife Care Network

The San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory is proud to join the Oiled Wildlife Care Network (OWCN). OWCN is a statewide collective of wildlife care providers, regulatory agencies, academic institutions, and wildlife organizations that work to rescue and rehabilitate oiled wildlife in California. OWCN is recognized as a world leader in oil spill response, rescue, rehabilitation, and research. As a participating organization, the Bird Observatory will provide trained staff and volunteers during an oil spill response. Our staff biologists have begun attending the trainings, including the 24 hour HAZWOPER training (Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response) needed to handle oiled birds. We are excited to be part of OWCN and to work proactively to safeguard birds and their habitats during oil spill events.



AN OILED SURF SCOTER during the Cosco Busan Oil Spill, November 2007.

## Staff Migrations

Announcing our new Development Director,  
Melanie Kimbel



The Bay Area has been my home for more decades than I want to count. I love my home and have dedicated my entire career to improving the quality of life in our community and our natural environment. I am a northern Californian by birth and an activist by nature. You and I may have crossed paths when I worked to preserve the redwood forests of the Santa Cruz Mountains with Sempervirens Fund, motivated people to plant trees with Our City Forest in San Jose, or maybe when I worked in the office of Congressman Don Edwards. I've built my life and my career on motivating people to take action on the issues of most importance to them. I am truly looking forward to developing a strong program of philanthropy at the Bird Observatory so that avian research thrives and community engagement in the protection of our ecosystems endures. I encourage all of you to contact me at [mkimbel@sfbbo.org](mailto:mkimbel@sfbbo.org) or 408.946.6548, or visit the office so I can meet you and learn what inspires you to work with the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL KERN

# Volunteering...Is for the Birds!

Volunteers are a crucial part of our work. Each year you give thousands of hours of valuable work to SFBBO. We appreciate that when we put out the call for people to help – surveys, bird banding, data entry, habitat restoration, net repair, or office work – you respond with enthusiasm and commitment! The work of SFBBO is for the birds, but it's also for the humans who share their environment, to provide opportunities for people to be directly involved in the nature and science of the San Francisco Bay Area.



JULIETTE BRYSON, member since 2000, volunteered at the WBBA conference and likes bird banding.



TOM GOODIER, member since 1989, participates in gull surveys and bird banding.



ALLISON CONNOR, member since 2006, loves bird banding, donates art to Fall Challenge fundraiser.



BARBARA McDOW, member since 2007, does Snowy Plover and gull surveys, and bird banding.



DEBBIE WONG, member since 2000, likes bird banding, net repair, and Snowy Plover surveys.



GERRY ELLIS, member since 1991, is a former SFBBO board member and Fall Challenge fundraiser.

## The Bird Observatory Loses a Friend

On January 6, 2010, Kris Olson, volunteer, member, and friend of San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory passed away unexpectedly. In 2003 Kris volunteered her time on Snowy Plover surveys at the ponds north of the Dumbarton Bridge in San Mateo County. Kris later spent time helping with the development of the new logo for the Bird Observatory. Kris was an avid and enthusiastic birder who regularly attended workshops and outings sponsored by the Bird Observatory. On October 11, 2009, Kris took many record photos during the California Fall Challenge Pelagic Pirates outing, when a Short-tailed Albatross was sighted for the first time in San Mateo County waters. Kris will be missed by many who knew her for the time and energy she contributed to projects at the Bird Observatory and within the larger San Francisco Bay Area birding community.

By Leonie Batkin, SFBBO Board of Directors



KRISTEN OLSON



AMERICAN AVOCET in winter plumage.

## Donate to San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory

WE ARE THANKFUL for our members, who believe that research and stewardship are essential to the health of our community. Your support makes our programs possible. Here is a sample of what we do throughout the year:

- Locate, document, and protect foraging and nesting sites of the federally threatened Western Snowy Plover.
- Help to prevent the spread of botulism by collecting dead, sick, and injured birds in South Bay sloughs as part of the Avian Disease Prevention Program.
- Maintain our Coyote Creek Field Station to collect information on the bird community within one of the South Bay's largest remaining riparian habitats. You are welcome to visit the field station or join us for a "Bird in the Hand" banding demonstration. Learn about bird banding, see the birds only inches from your eyes, and participate in the research that serves as vital indicators of the ecosystem's health.

Please reaffirm your commitment today to the mission of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory to protect birds and their habitats! Your gift will further our scientific research and monitoring programs, and provide priceless opportunities for people to engage in the unique beauty of the San Francisco Bay ecosystem.

Please send your gift today.

# Declines in San Francisco Bay Double-crested Cormorants

The year 2009 was a tough one for many fish eating birds and sea lions. As a seabird biologist for PRBO Conservation Science, monitoring seabirds is a good way to measure changes in the ocean ecosystem.

Since the 1980s, PRBO has monitored breeding Double-crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) on two bridges in the San Francisco Bay: the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge (RSRB) and the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge (SFOBB). Since 2003, Mark Rauzon (PRBO Research Associate), Eric Lichtwardt (LSA and Associates), Jason Minton (Ganda and Associates), and I have conducted boat surveys once a year (timing it near peak nesting) and counted nests on the beams and structures under the roadways of these bridges. In 2009, we documented that these colonies experienced sharp declines in peak nest counts (a proxy for breeding pairs). From 2008 to 2009, the reductions were quite large, with 36% fewer breeding pairs in the RSRB colony and 73% fewer breeding pairs in the SFOBB colony.

And it wasn't just cormorants on the Bay's bridges that suffered in 2009. Cormorants on Southeast Farallon

Island (SEFI), located ~25 miles west of San Francisco, were also observed in reduced numbers. After consulting with Caitlin Robinson-Nilsen, the Waterbird Program Supervisor at the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory (SFBBO), we confirmed that Double-crested Cormorant colonies in the South Bay also dropped in breeding pairs (Figure 1).

So what are the reasons for the decline in the numbers of Double-crested Cormorants?

One factor could be disturbance, especially at the bridge colonies. Construction of the new east span of the SFOBB could be causing cormorants to abandon this once attractive nesting area; however, there was relatively little construction activity in 2009. Cormorants were excluded from nesting in areas of maintenance and retrofitting activities on the RSRB, yet there was no evidence that they relocated. The fact that colonies in the South Bay and on the Farallones also dropped in numbers suggests that bridge construction disturbance cannot be the only reason.

Contaminants could be another reason. In the summer of 2009, the International Bird Rescue Research



A DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT carries nest material.

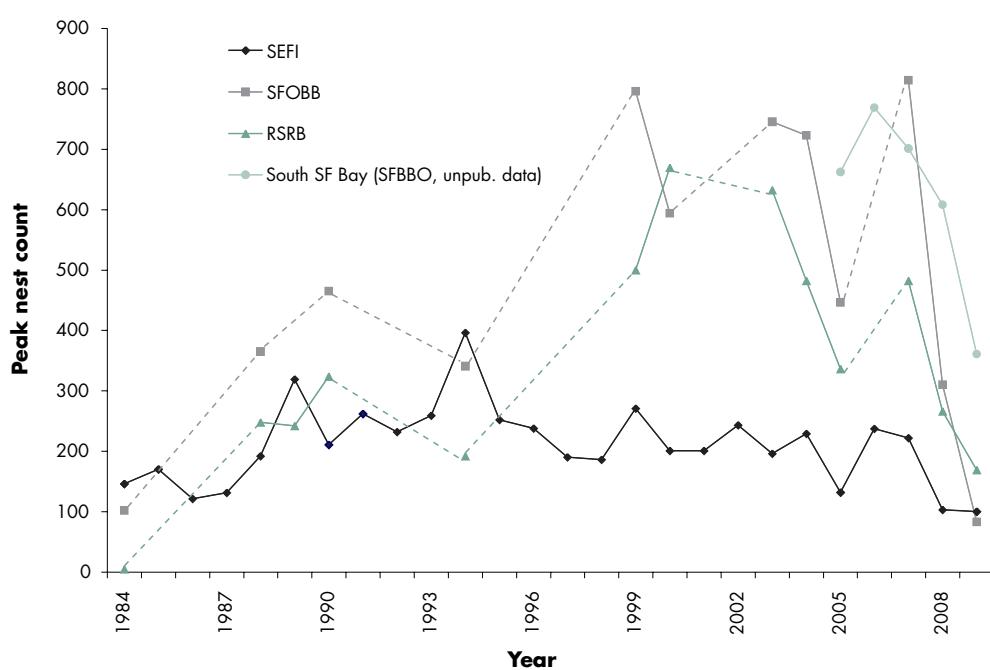
Center in Cordelia received several Double-crested Cormorant chicks and eggs from the South Bay to be reared. Four chicks were discovered with spine or bill deformities, which are historically signs of contaminants; however, we cannot confirm whether these deformities were the result of exposure to toxic chemicals. We hope to learn more about this issue, as biologists from U. S. Geological Survey and the San Francisco Estuary Institute investigate this further.

Prey is probably the main reason. Kathy Hieb, with the California Department of Fish and Game's San Francisco Bay Study Project, provided some insight into the prey issue by showing that the catch of northern anchovy (*Engraulis mordax*), particularly larger anchovy (>100 mm), was the lowest since the study began in 1980. We know from past studies that anchovy was a part of their diet, and the near disappearance of this once abundant, energy-rich forage fish from the Bay could be a factor in the decline of the Double-crested Cormorants.

Long-term monitoring by PRBO and SFBBO is essential to noting trends, abnormalities, and gradual shifts over time. PRBO will continue monitoring the cormorants and working closely with our partners to see how the San Francisco Bay cormorants fare in the future. For more information on PRBO's research, conservation, and outreach programs visit [www.prbo.org](http://www.prbo.org).

*By Meredith Elliott, Biologist, PRBO Conservation Science*

FIGURE 1. Numbers of Double-crested Cormorant breeding pairs in San Francisco Bay regional metapopulation, 1984-2009.



## GULL POPULATION from cover

the site of the largest California Gull breeding colony in the South Bay, with over 24,000 gulls nesting there in 2009. Restoring this area will likely cause many of these gulls to move to other California Gull colonies in Newark, Fremont, Mountain View, and Palo Alto. However, they may also colonize other nesting sites and, in doing so, may displace the current populations of breeding waterbirds. The restoration of A6 is scheduled to begin in winter 2010-2011.

One method to determine where displaced California Gulls disperse after A6 is restored is by marking individual gulls. In 2008 and 2009, in anticipation of the restoration of A6, Bird Observatory biologists, with the help of dedicated volunteers, captured breeding California Gulls at the A6 colony and individually marked them with field readable bands (black bands with white numbers). By marking the birds, we will be able to determine where A6 gulls disperse after the restoration. These data will aid in management of this species along with the other waterbird species nesting in the South Bay.

Bird Observatory biologists and volunteers have banded more than 10,400 California Gulls in the South Bay colonies since 1983. The majority of these gulls were chicks banded at the Alviso A6 salt pond. Over the past two years, we have deployed teams of volunteers to search the South Bay for these



PHOTO BY KEN PHENICIE

A BANDED CALIFORNIA GULL released by biologist Carley Schacter.

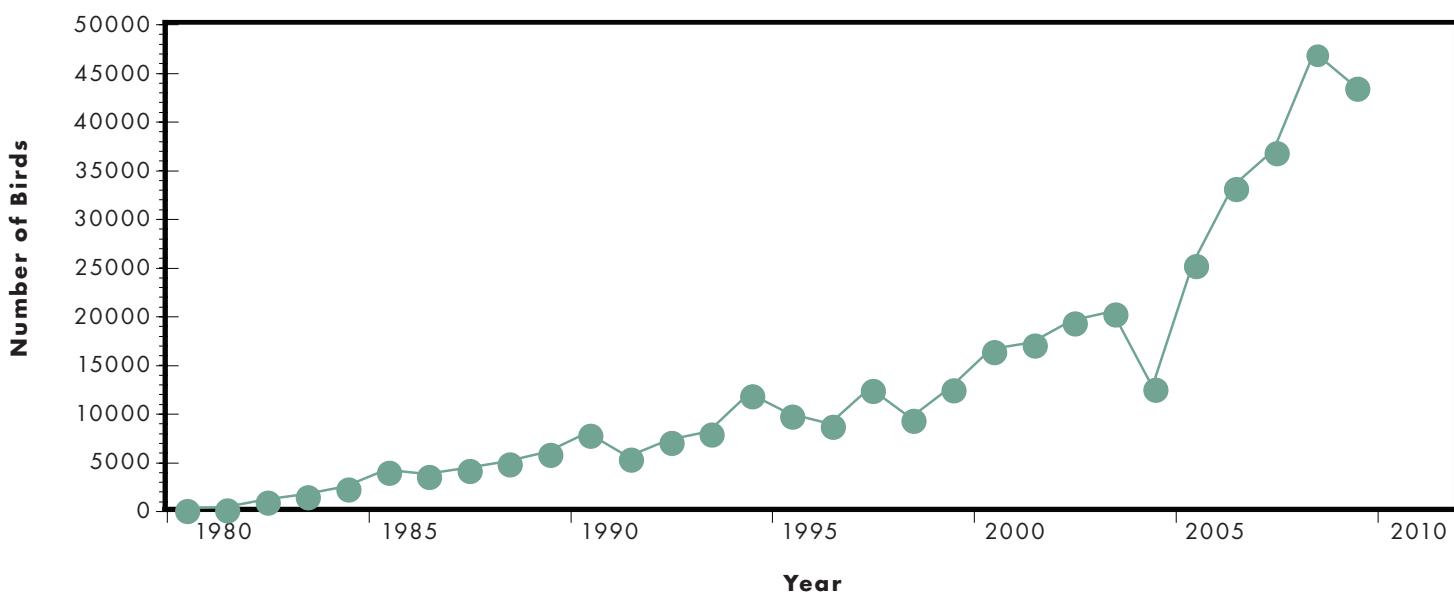
banded gulls. In addition to locating recently banded California Gulls from the A6 colony breeding at other colonies, our volunteers have spotted the gulls in other roosting sites around the Bay and along the coast. Tom Goodier, a Bird Observatory volunteer, sighted the oldest known California Gull on record! We banded that particular bird in June 1983, and Tom re-sighted it in Redwood City during the winters of 2008 and 2009.

In 2010, the Bird Observatory will continue to track the population of breeding California Gulls, band gulls at the A6 colony, and monitor gull use

of South Bay landfills. Also, to better understand how California Gulls impact breeding waterbirds in the South Bay, we are continuing to monitor Western Snowy Plover nests with remote camera systems and are collaborating with the U.S. Geological Survey to radio-mark Forster's Tern chicks as part of a gull predation study. Additionally, as the population of California Gulls expands beyond the South Bay, the Bird Observatory and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will be monitoring the gull colony at Alameda National Wildlife Refuge, also home to the largest

GULL POPULATION continued on back page

FIGURE 1. The number of California Gulls breeding in the South San Francisco Bay.



# Calendar

Saturday, April 24, 8:30 am–10:30 am

RSVP

## A BIRD IN THE HAND

SITE: COYOTE CREEK FIELD STATION  
(MILPITAS)

Tour the Bird Observatory's banding station and meet the Coyote Creek Field Station Manager, Josh Scullen. Learn about the Bird Observatory's bird banding research and see several different species up close. We will tour mist nets, watch a bird banding demonstration, and explore a restored riparian habitat. Please join us and learn why bird banding is so important for protecting birds and their habitats. RSVP required. We will meet at the Borders bookstore parking lot in McCarthy Ranch, Milpitas. In the event of rain, the tour will be cancelled.



ALLEN'S HUMMINGBIRD.

Saturday, May 22, 7:30 am–11:00 am

RSVP

## TOLMON PEAK TRAIL

SITE: GARIN/DRY CREEK PIONEER PARK  
(HAYWARD)

Join Bridget Greuel on a walk through the oak savannah and riparian habitats of Garin/Dry Creek Pioneer Park. We can expect Lazuli Bunting, Black-headed Grosbeak, Wilson's Warbler, Brown Creeper, Hooded Oriole, California Quail and possibly Grasshopper Sparrow. These are just a few of the dozens of species we can see on this trip... this place is a bird-a-palooza! Expect to walk 2 miles in moderately strenuous terrain.



Thursday, May 13, 6:30 pm–8:30 pm

RSVP

## VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION PARTY

SITE: TO BE ANNOUNCED

Save this date for the Bird Observatory's Annual Volunteer Appreciation Party. This is our day to celebrate YOU and all of your hard work! We couldn't complete our work without our volunteers. Please come and celebrate all of our shared achievements with the Bird Observatory staff and fellow volunteers. Enjoy good food, great people, and of course, our local birds. Location to be announced.



**WALK:** RSVP to outreach@sfbbo.org or 408.946.6548. Space is limited to 20 people. Free for members; \$10 for non-members.

**ACCESSIBLE:** Please contact the Outreach Specialist so that we can coordinate with you.

**SPECIAL EVENT**

**VOLUNTEER ACTIVITY**



PHOTO BY BONNIE JOY SEDLAK

SNOWY EGRET *on a windy day.*

## Workshops for the Birder and Naturalist - 2010

WITH: Alvaro Jaramillo, SFBBO Senior Biologist

SITE: Sobrato Center for Nonprofits in Milpitas

Monday, March 8th and Wednesday, March 10th (instruction),  
6:30 – 9:00 pm;

Sunday, March 14th (field trip)

### DIURNAL RAPTORS

There is no doubt that if you were to pick the birds with the most intense fans, it is the hawks, eagles and falcons, the diurnal raptors. This workshop will teach you how to identify the raptors, as well as to understand more about their behavior and biology. The close relationship that raptors have to prey, and therefore to habitat will be explored, in addition to their migration and population booms and busts. The Bay Area is rather diverse for raptors, particularly in winter, and this workshop aims to give a richer appreciation for these amazing hunters which share our home with us. Great for the beginning birder and up. We may do some walking in grassy fields, and on trails with some slope to them. A \$150 fee is required to attend the workshop.



Tuesday, April 6th and Thursday, April 8th (instruction),  
6:30 – 9:00 pm

Saturday, April 10th (field trip)

### UNDERSTANDING AND ENJOYING MIGRATION

A new adult education workshop with Alvaro Jaramillo! Nothing in birding and ornithology is as exciting as migration! Since ancient times, birds have migrated throughout the world capturing our imaginations. Fortunately, today we have many technologies at our disposal to understand migration. This course is an introduction to and a summary of bird migration, with a focus on recent study techniques and what birds are teaching us. Also, we will learn about our local birds and get a sense of where they go in winter, and how they accomplish it. Great for the beginning birder and up. The field trip will require walking and standing on flat surfaces. A \$150 fee is required to attend the workshop.



# Our thanks to these supporters of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory!



Thank you to our new and returning members and generous donors.  
October – December 2009.

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*BAY BIRD REVIEW is published quarterly by the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory. Deadline for submissions is five weeks prior to the start of the quarter. Contact the editor at outreach@sfbbo.org for submission guidelines. Please send address changes to the office.*

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*Return service requested*

GULL POPULATION *from page 5*

California Least Tern colony in the San Francisco Bay. Here, we will begin a study to determine whether artificial egg replacement in gull nests during the egg laying period will reduce the number of eggs laid, and therefore reduce the number of chicks produced in a year.

The data collected by the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory are vital to understand California Gull population growth and expansion in the San Francisco Bay. We thank the volunteers who, since 1980, help count gull nests, band gulls, and survey for banded gulls. This work has been supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California State Coastal Conservancy, Republic Services, Inc., and the membership of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory. Most importantly, it is through the support of our membership that we have been able to maintain this dataset for 30 years. We sincerely thank you for your generosity, and urge you to continue supporting this important work with your gifts.



CALIFORNIA GULLS nesting in the A6 colony.

Have you seen a banded California Gull or are you interested in volunteering for our gull projects? Email Caitlin Robinson-Nilsen at [cnilsen@sfbbo.org](mailto:cnilsen@sfbbo.org).

*.....*  
By Caitlin Robinson-Nilsen, Waterbird Program Supervisor

## Wingbeat, our Monthly E-Newsletter

Every month we send out *Wingbeat*, our electronic newsletter. It contains updates on our research and monitoring projects, and other information you don't get in the quarterly *Bay Bird Review*. You'll find new activities, links to online resources, and stories about the birding world. Send us your email address to start receiving your monthly report. We promise we'll never, ever share your email address. Contact [mkimbel@sfbbo.org](mailto:mkimbel@sfbbo.org) to sign up for *Wingbeat*.