

# 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 here, and with it comes the excitement of the breeding season for many Bay Area birds, and also the hustle and bustle surrounding the onset of seasonal fieldwork at SFBBO. It's always a busy time of year for our staff and volunteers, and this year is no exception as many of SFBBO's research programs are expanding and our staff are taking on new responsibilities. Our waterbird research and associated staff are growing, thanks to increased support from long-time partners at the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge and Republic Services. Likewise, our Snowy Plover program is expanding in 2014, including carrying out intensive research on plover reproductive success. This work is conducted in collaboration with new partners at the Institute for Wildlife Studies.

In addition, SFBBO's long-term, volunteer-based Colonial Waterbird Program is getting a facelift this year! Based on helpful input from our volunteers, we have decided to make changes to the program's training

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE *continued on page 2*



GREAT EGRET CHICKS.

PHOTO BY LEE AURICH



RECOVERY of the Western Snowy Plover (above) is still a priority for SFBBO scientists.

PHOTO BY SUSAN TEEFY

## Science Report

### Important New Developments in Western Snowy Plover Research

On a brisk winter morning in the South San Francisco Bay, you might find a group of 30 drab, sparrow-sized birds loosely flocked together. They might be among the thousands of wintering shorebirds and waterfowl that utilize the Bay during the winter months along the Pacific Flyway, or they might be the only birds peacefully roosting on 200 acres of dry salt panne. These curious birds are Western Snowy Plovers.

Western Snowy Plovers, *Charadrius nivosus nivosus*, are a geographically distinct subspecies from their relatives in the interior states. From Washington State to Baja California, they breed on sandy and rocky coastal beaches and in the San Francisco and San Diego Bay areas, on artificially created salt panne habitat from former salt evaporation ponds. Due to coastal habitat loss, human encroachment, and increasing predation pressure, this population has decreased considerably. In 1993, the Western Snowy Plover was listed under the Endangered Species Act as feder-

ally threatened, and a recovery plan was created to conserve this struggling population. The San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory (SFBBO) is very excited to be a part of two important developments involving Western Snowy Plover recovery.

At the time of listing, a population viability analysis (PVA) was designed for the Western Snowy Plover in order to statistically predict this particular population's health and risk of extinction. Its results were used to inform the original Western Snowy Plover recovery plan criteria along the Pacific Coast, including: 1) maintain a population size of 3,000 breeding adults for 10 years (500 individuals in the SF Bay area); 2) maintain a yearly average productivity of at least one fledged chick per male; and 3) establish recovery unit working groups for the development and implementation of federal and state recovery requirements.

Currently, researchers at the Institute

SCIENCE REPORT *continued on page 2*

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE *from cover*

and community outreach activities in 2014. This will include revamped training sessions and the addition of mentors, veteran volunteers who will provide season-long support for our new volunteers. We are also expanding our Ambassadors Program, launched in 2013, to extend the project's community outreach initiatives.

Simultaneously, our long-term research to study landbirds at the Coyote Creek Field Station continues at full speed ahead, with new graduate student research projects launching, ongoing projects wrapping up, and veteran and new volunteers working together with SFBBO staff to keep our banding station humming along. Finally, our Habitats Program staff continues to work hard during the "rainy" season to implement habitat restoration at several sites in the Bay Area.

As you can see, SFBBO is growing, taking on new scientific research and outreach initiatives, and increasing its impact on bird and habitat conservation. Our staff cannot accomplish all of this alone, and we are incredibly thankful for the support of our volunteers, without whom much of our work simply would not happen! This spring we celebrate the dedication of our volunteers, and their contributions to our mission. I hope you'll join me in thanking our volunteers at our Annual Volunteer Appreciation Party on Thursday, May 15th (page 3)!

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*By Cat Burns, SFBBO Executive Director*



GOLDEN-CROWNED SPARROW.

SCIENCE REPORT *from cover*

for Wildlife Studies are working on an updated PVA, which when complete will identify the most current needs for the conservation of this subspecies and will improve management and recovery efforts on a rangewide scale. SFBBO was one of the organizations that contributed valuable, multi-year monitoring and research data to this effort. This analysis will also provide insight into the health and importance of each breeding population along the entire Pacific range.

Standard banding and re-sighting methods have proven difficult for estimating Snowy Plover reproductive success and dispersal, particularly for this cryptic species in vast expanses of panne habitat in the SF Bay. These methods can also be time consuming and relatively invasive to plovers during the sensitive breeding cycle. In response, the Institute for Wildlife Studies has designed a method for estimating Snowy Plover reproductive success using statistically valid estimates of a variety of measures, based on limited mark-resight and repeated count data, rather than on intensive unique color banding. SFBBO will be working to field-test this new method in 2014. Ultimately, these estimates would also be applicable throughout the species' range and would allow SFBBO and others to better understand our breeding plover population in the SF Bay.

During the upcoming 2014 season,

SFBBO will continue to monitor all known Western Snowy Plover breeding activity in the South Bay, including breeding adults, nests and chicks. Predation accounted for 32% of nest failures in 2013, and has been the leading cause of nest failure since 2008. Preliminary studies have shown that at Eden Landing Ecological Reserve, habitat enhancement using oyster shell as a camouflaging treatment material appears to positively affect plover nest and fledging success. SFBBO will continue to work with the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge staff and U.S. Department of Agriculture staff toward reducing the prevalence of predator species in close proximity to known plover nesting areas, and will continue to investigate the effects of oyster shell habitat enhancement on plover nest and fledging success.

SFBBO will also continue to work closely with stakeholders and researchers of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project to achieve the important balance of preserving suitable plover habitat from former salt evaporation ponds and restoring valuable tidal habitat for other Bay wildlife species, to ensure a diverse and healthy ecosystem in the future.

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*By Karine Tokatlian, Plover Program Director*

*To read a recent KQED article about a Western Snowy Plover banded by SFBBO in 2009, please visit our website at [www.sfbbo.org](http://www.sfbbo.org).*

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## Upcoming Events

*Tuesday, April 22nd, 2014*

*9:00 am – 12:00 pm*

**EARTH DAY BIRDING AT PICCHETTI WINERY WITH LISA MYERS**

SITE: PICCHETTI WINERY

Join Lisa Myers on Earth Day for a morning walking the trails around the historic Picchetti Winery. All birding skill levels welcome. RSVP: [outreach@sfbbo.org](mailto:outreach@sfbbo.org).

*April 2014 (Date and time TBD)*

**BIG SIP**

SITE: TBD

SFBBO will throw our Big Sip this spring, and details are coming soon! The event will be an exclusive opportunity for our Major Donors to hear speakers, celebrate our accomplishments, and learn the latest about our work. To become a Major Donor, please make a donation to SFBBO of \$150 or more. For information, please contact [outreach@sfbbo.org](mailto:outreach@sfbbo.org).

## Volunteering...Is for the Birds!

For more than 30 years, SFBBO has relied on our volunteers to help us conduct research and outreach activities to conserve birds and their habitats. Every year, they donate thousands of hours to help us conduct surveys, band birds, enter data, restore habitat, repair nets, work in the office, and share information about our work with the public. Thank you to all of our current volunteers for their help. We'd also like to say a special thank you to the following volunteers who have helped us in our science, outreach and fundraising initiatives.



**Brian Fulfrost** is a member of our Board of Directors. He leads the Board's Fundraising Committee, has served on our Science Committee, and has supported SFBBO's Habitats Program.



**Kathi Kendrick** is a regular volunteer in the office at SFBBO helping with donor stewardship. She was also an active volunteer at events during our 2013 California Fall Challenge.



**Richard Casserley** has been an active volunteer in SFBBO's Avian Disease Prevention Program, helping with boat surveys since 2007.



**Byron Ryono** is a volunteer at the Coyote Creek Field Station and also helped with the 2013 Shorebird Survey.



**Pati Rouzer** is a former SFBBO Board member, helped with our Shorebird Survey, solicited prizes for the 2013 California Fall Challenge, and led our first youth bird-a-thon team.



**Mike Rogers** volunteers as a monitor in SFBBO's Western Snowy Plover Program and also leads trips for our annual California Fall Challenge.

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## Volunteer Appreciation Party

On Thursday, May 15th, we'll be hosting our Annual Volunteer Appreciation Party at the Lucy Evans Nature Center at the Palo Alto Baylands Preserve. This is our day to honor YOU and all of your dedication and hard work. We couldn't complete all of our observing, monitoring, counting, capturing, and banding birds without our volunteers. Please come and celebrate all of our shared achievements with staff and fellow volunteers, and enjoy good food, great people, and a bird walk to visit with our local birds. The bird walk is at 5:30 pm and the party is at 6:30 pm. Please RSVP to outreach@sfbbbo.org.

## How Will You Help This Year?

SFBBO is a nonprofit organization that relies on support from the public to meet our mission. We could not conserve birds and their habitats through science and outreach without help from our generous membership and donor community. In response to feedback from our donors, we want to clarify how our membership program coordinates with our other fundraising strategies.

### Membership

People can become members of SFBBO by making an annual membership donation. Once a year, on their membership anniversary, we ask our individual, family and corporate members to renew their membership with SFBBO. This helps us sustain our programs and gives members exciting benefits, including our Bay Bird Review newsletter; opportunities to volunteer as a citizen scientist; invitations to free banding demos and bird walks; access to ecosystems not open to the general public; and opportunities to take workshops from renowned international ornithologist Alvaro Jaramillo.

### Donations

By donating to some of our fundraising campaigns at other times of the year—i.e. our Spring and Year End Appeals, Corporate Matching Gifts, Tributes and Memorials, and the California Fall Challenge—donors can help SFBBO grow. For instance, in 2014, we are expanding our research on Bay Area waterbirds; increasing the use of our bird banding data; carrying out new work to protect the Western Snowy Plover; and broadening our outreach initiatives to engage families and corporate groups in bird conservation, and empower volunteers to speak to their communities about our work.

To become a new member, renew your membership, or make a donation, please visit [www.sfbbo.org](http://www.sfbbo.org).

# 2013 Colonial Waterbird Monitoring Program—Year in Review

Colonial waterbirds are essential components of wetland and aquatic habitats. They play key roles within their ecosystems, require specific habitat types, and can be viewed as biological indicators of environmental health and function. Monitoring several species and addressing long-term, geographically vast research goals can be challenging and citizen science programs provide essential support for these efforts.

Initiated in 1982, the Colonial Waterbird Program is one of SFBBO's longest-running citizen science programs. In 2013 it engaged 52 volunteers, who monitored 70 waterbird nesting sites in the San Francisco Bay Area from March through August.

They focused principally on colonies of California Gull, Forster's Tern, Caspian Tern, California Least Tern, Great Blue

Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, and Double-crested Cormorant. Additionally, they monitored American Avocets, Black-necked Stilts, Black Skimmers, and Black-crowned Night Herons when they were found nesting with other species of interest.

Newly discovered and re-initiated colonies included those at the Sunol Water Temple, Redwood Shores Nob Hill Market, Coyote Creek Field Station, and Purissima Canyon in Half Moon Bay. Some colony sites were not accessible due to salt pond restoration, levee maintenance or access difficulties, and therefore were not surveyed, including Bair Island, Bunting Pond-Niles, Dumbarton ponds N2/N3, Eden Landing ponds E8A and E9, Elmwood Correctional Facility, Greco Island and Portola Valley.

In addition to monthly observational surveys, SFBBO staff and volunteers conducted single walkthrough counts of California Gull colonies in the South Bay between May 18 and May 28, 2013, as we have done annually since the early 1980s. This yielded valuable information on the size, location and growth of the rapidly increasing California Gull population in the San Francisco Bay Area.

California Gull numbers have grown incredibly quickly in the San Francisco Bay Area for more than 30 years and reached an all-time high of 53,458 breeding individuals in 2013. Breeding gulls generally recolonize the same areas every season, but we observed fluctuations in colony sizes at some locations between 2012 and 2013. These changes indicate the potential redistribution of breeding gulls among established colonies, which may be in response to a suite of factors, including access to natural or anthropogenic food sources or the alteration of breeding habitat. Please see the full report on our website at [www.sfbbo.org](http://www.sfbbo.org) for details about gulls and the other colonies we surveyed.

SFBBO's Colonial Waterbird Program also provides opportunities to educate the community. In 2013, we piloted a new Ambassador Program to give volunteers a chance to conduct outreach activities in the neighborhoods surrounding the colonies they monitor. In May, volunteers gave a presentation at Alameda Library about the egret colony on Bay Farm Island, and led a Great Blue Heron viewing at Sycamore Grove Park in Livermore. In the fall, a volunteer organized a Lunch 'n Learn presentation at Codexis, Inc. about the heron and egret colony that nests near the company in Redwood City. We hope to grow our Ambassador Program activities in 2014, and are looking for interested volunteers. For information, or to get involved, please contact [outreach@sfbbo.org](mailto:outreach@sfbbo.org).

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*Karine Tokatlian, Plover Program Director and Kristin Butler, Outreach and Communications Director*

## 2013 Colonial Waterbird Program Season Highlights

Below are the combined peak nest counts for all colonies monitored by SFBBO, detailed by species. The colony with highest seasonal peak nest count is identified in parenthesis.

### Gull/Tern (GUTE) Program

- American Avocet: 119 nests (97 at New Chicago Marsh)
- Black-necked Stilt: 36 nests (all at New Chicago Marsh)
- Caspian Tern: 96 nests (70 at Coyote Hills)
- Forster's Tern: 367 nests (115 at Moffett A2W)
- Black Skimmer: 5 nests (1 each at Alviso A7, Hayward Shoreline, Moffett A2W, New Chicago Marsh, and Redwood Shores)
- California Gull: 26,828 nests (53,458 breeding adults, highest number since 1980)

### Heron/Egret (HEP) Program

- Double-crested Cormorant: 780 nests (170 at Steinberger Slough)
- Great Blue Heron: 130 nests (19 at both Ovation Court and Sunol Water Temple)
- Great Egret: 108 nests (25 at Ruus Park)
- Snowy Egret: 186 nests (102 at Lakeshore Park)
- Black-crowned Night Heron: 143 nests (72 at Lakeshore Park)

Total Colonial Waterbird Volunteer Hours in 2013: 616 hours

# Thirty Years of Change in Bay Area Waterbirds

SFBBO has studied Bay Area waterbirds since 1981. Since 2005, much of our research focused on birds that use the South Bay’s salt ponds (see map) and centered on ponds managed for salt production, while other researchers focused on ponds that are managed for wildlife.

Collectively, our aim is to provide information that helps managers—like those at the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) and the California Department of Fish & Wildlife (CDFW)—make informed decisions and plan for a diverse and abundant waterbird community.

We also aim to provide information that assists in development of the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project, the largest tidal marsh restoration project on the west coast. Researchers from SFBBO, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (US FWS), the University of California at Davis, and the U.S. Geological Survey teamed up in 2012 and 2013 to investigate how waterbird communities in the Bay Area changed over the past 30 years. With funding from the US FWS, we compared data from surveys that were conducted in the 1980s with surveys conducted recently.

The complicating factor was in the methods used to survey waterbirds, which included surveys conducted from the air in the 1980s and from the ground more recently. To enable us to make a meaningful comparison we needed to be able to convert the historical aerial count data into values that were directly comparable to the recent ground count data. So, we partnered with scientists from UC Davis to calculate a conversion factor. This factor was determined by comparing data collected on many different occasions on the same day from the air and from the ground to identify systematic differences in sampling technique and correct for it in the historical data.

We found that many types of birds, such as diving ducks and Eared Grebes, exhibited substantial declines in numbers across the South Bay since the 1980s. At the same time, the abundance of other types of birds increased, includ-

ing gulls and, in some locations like Eden Landing, shorebirds.

In addition, some species, such as Canada Goose and Brant, were never detected in the 1980s, but were sighted regularly in recent surveys. Overall, the total number of waterbirds using the Bay Area’s salt ponds has not changed significantly over time, but the composition has. There are more birds of some types than there used to be, and less of others. This tells us that waterbird communities are changing over time, and that there appear to be some “winners” and some “losers.” It doesn’t, however, tell us why.

The causes of the observed changes are undoubtedly complex, and likely include development, changes in climate, altered management practices as ponds were converted from active salt ponds to ponds managed for wildlife, and others.

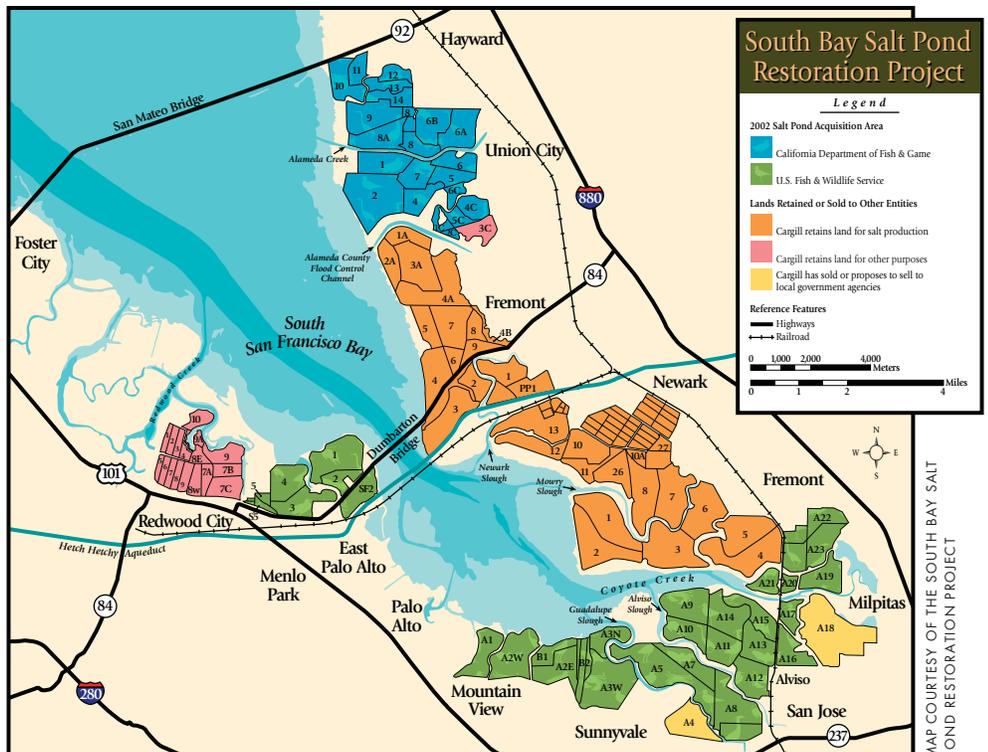
### Next Steps

We are working with Refuge and CDFW managers and others to identify strategies to ensure that waterbird diversity and abundance is maintained. This means continuing to manage ponds with a variety of conditions and keeping

a close eye on species—like California Gulls—that are increasing rapidly and may have a negative impact on other species. As the South Bay Salt Pond Restoration Project moves into its second phase of restoration, more of the managed ponds will become tidal wetlands. These ongoing changes in waterbird habitat call for long-term monitoring of waterbird communities and adaptive management as restoration proceeds.

Thanks to support from the US FWS, SFBBO is taking on an expanded role in monitoring the area’s waterbirds in 2014. Our past surveys focused primarily on the 25% of South Bay salt ponds that are still actively managed for salt. In 2014, we will carry out surveys at nearly all of the South Bay salt ponds, including those that are managed for wildlife. As a result, our waterbird team has grown (see Migrations). The information that we gather will be provided to our partners to aid in making short and long-term management decisions that help protect Bay Area birds.

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By Cat Burns, SFBBO Executive Director



MAP OF PONDS surveyed by SFBBO and partners for the Historical Waterbird Study.

# Warm Springs Western Burrowing Owl Habitat Enhancement: First Year Results

In the South San Francisco Bay, population numbers of Western Burrowing Owls (WBO), a California species of Special Concern, have dropped dramatically in the last 10 years due to degradation and loss of habitat to urban development. For conservation of this species in this area, it is important to prioritize conservation and habitat improvement on the few remnant sites historically used for nesting by WBOs. WBOs have utilized the South Bay's Warm Springs managed grasslands for many years. The 700-acre Warm Springs Unit is part of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge (the Refuge) and is managed for several special status species. In fall 2012, SFBBO partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (US FWS), with funding from the San Francisco Bay Wildlife Society, to launch a pilot revegetation study at Warm Springs to investigate methods and materials for WBO habitat improvement.

Low grassland vegetation structure is a major element defining habitat quality for WBOs. The focus of the study is a field experiment testing the effects of several soil treatments on the seeding success of selected native species to create WBO habitat. Equally important is the assessment of weed recruitment such as mustard that may deteriorate habitat quality. Lastly, we are particularly interested in the performance of natives that stay green during the summer and support insect populations

that increase the prey availability for the owls. A factorial split-plot design was applied to investigate how topical application of compost and native soil preparation methods such as disking and mixing organic compost in disked soil affected seeding success and target weed recruitment. Rigorous monitoring took place during 2013 to collect quantitative data.

Our first year's data analysis indicates that two inches of topical compost application may be the single most beneficial treatment for the recruitment of spring native grass species. However, native soil treatment had a significant effect on the recruitment of warm season natives. Specifically, both treatments that involved disking had a negative effect on the performance of native and seeded species. Conversely, non-native grasses performed best on plots that were disked. Infestation by target weeds such as mustard was highest on the plots that were disked and had no topical application of compost. Overall the first year results suggest that disking should be avoided as a soil preparation technique when it comes to revegetation with native plants at Warm Springs. A 2" topical application of compost can be beneficial to native grasses like meadow barley and in some cases may also hinder the recruitment of invasive weeds like mustard.

Other elements of the funded project included weed management control and planting root stock of selected species for further habitat enhancement. The study area was characterized by very sparse grass coverage which allowed infestation by Black mustard and Italian thistles. From spring to fall 2013, we removed mustard and thistles after each monitoring session. Plot treatments and the exclusion of grazing for one year supported extensive growth of grasses. We also produced container stock with desirable natives to plant in the buffer areas between the seeded plots. As of the time this article was written, volunteer



BULLDOZERS disk the area and disperse organic compost soil treatments.

PHOTO BY AIDONA KAKOUIROS

planting events are set to take place after the next major rain event. A highlight of the project was the use of seeds from local native species when possible. Seed collections took place at Warm Springs. Some of these seeds were used to seed the experimental plots and for nursery root stock production, while others were delivered to the Refuge for future use.

While the first year's study results show the success of various methods in producing desired revegetation outcomes, it is very important to note that final habitat restoration and management recommendations should be based on data from a lengthier period of time. We are currently seeking funding to perform a second year of monitoring. We also have started to establish a plan to apply several management actions on sites with good WBO nesting potential at the Warm Springs Unit. Volunteer participation will be a key element in accomplishing those, so please stay tuned!

Special thanks to the San Francisco Bay Wildlife Society for funding this project, and to Zanker for donating the organic compost for this study. Thanks also to all SFBBO and US FWS volunteers that participated at several stages of the project. A very big thank you to Ivette Loredó, Warm Springs manager, for her support, guidance, and wonderful collaboration.

By Aidona Kakouros, Ecologist in SFBBO's Habitats Program



SFBBO'S experimental plot to test ways to enhance Western Burrowing Owl habitat in Warm Springs, Fremont.

PHOTO BY AIDONA KAKOUIROS

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



*Thank you new and returning members and generous donors October–December, 2013*

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SNOWY EGRET in breeding plumage.

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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](mailto:outreach@sfbbo.org) for submission guidelines. Please send address changes to the office.

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## Staff Migrations

### *Congratulations New Landbird Program Director Josh Scullen!*

SFBBO's Josh Scullen takes on a new role as our Landbird Program Director this year! Many of you know Josh from his work as a biologist at our Coyote Creek Field Station. You'll still find him there, and as Director he will also be in charge of all of our landbird program activities, database management, and research permits. In January he celebrated five years with SFBBO!

### *Congratulations to Plover Program Director Karine Tokatlian!*

Karine Tokatlian is our new Plover Program Director and will oversee all of our plover-related research and monitoring activities. She works closely with partners at the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to make sure our data informs on-the-ground management decisions. She will continue to be active in our Colonial Waterbird monitoring program, as well as other SFBBO programs, and in March she celebrated four years at SFBBO!

### *Welcome Waterbird Program Coordinator Natalie Washburn!*

Natalie Washburn is SFBBO's new Waterbird Program Coordinator. She

has a B.S. in Wildlife, Fish and Conservation Biology and an M.S. in Avian Sciences from the University of California, Davis. Natalie's graduate research focused on wetland management techniques for waterfowl in the Sacramento Valley. Since April 2013, Natalie has worked on several of SFBBO's waterbird programs: California Gull research and monitoring, avian use of salt ponds, avian disease prevention and the San Francisco Bay Shorebird Survey. In 2014, Natalie has taken on additional responsibilities, including oversight of many of SFBBO's waterbird research projects.

### *New Waterbird Field Biologist Jason St. Pierre!*

Jason St. Pierre is SFBBO's new Waterbird Field Biologist. Jason has a B.S. in Wildlife Biology and an M.S. in Biology from the University of Michigan in Flint. He has worked on numerous bird-related projects including breeding bird surveys at Bandelier National Monument in New Mexico and in the Sierra Nevada, and surveys of migrating waterbirds at Isle Royale National Park and Whitefish Point in Michigan. Most recently, Jason worked for Michigan State University and the USDA studying bird damage to fruit crops in an effort to



SFBBO BIOLOGISTS (L to R) Jessica Gonzalez, Jason St. Pierre, Natalie Washburn, Karine Tokatlian, and Josh Scullen.

understand trends in bird damage and to determine how birds can be safely deterred from making a serious impact on crop harvest. Jason has relocated to California from Michigan for his position at SFBBO, and has quickly become an integral part of our research team.

### *New Waterbird Program Intern Jessica Gonzalez!*

Jessica Gonzalez is our new Waterbird Program Intern. Jessica finished her Bachelor's degree at San Jose State University in 2012. You may already know Jessica—she worked at SFBBO as a Snowy Plover Intern in 2011, and currently volunteers at CCFS as one of our banders. We are looking forward to continuing to work closely with Jessica in 2014!

