THE
GULL

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY // VOL. 99 NO. 4 FALL 2014

WELCOMING OSPREYS TO SAN FRANCISCO BAY

BY ILANA DEBARE

Ospreys have started nesting along the shores of San Francisco Bay in significant numbers, and Golden Gate Audubon is working with other bird lovers to make sure they find a warm welcome here.

CONTINUED on page 5

Ospreys on the new nest platform at Point Molate, Richmond
Allen Hirsch/allenh.zenfolio.com

Nancy Johnston

GGAS members cleaning up MLK Jr. Shoreline in August.

COASTAL CLEANUP: MORE THAN ONE DAY EACH YEAR

BY CINDY MARGULIS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As an avid shoreline birder, I'm always heartened to see so many people turning out for Coastal Cleanup Day each September. But I'm especially proud that for Golden Gate Audubon, coastal cleanup isn't just one day a year. We work at it year-round—and it matters!

Our volunteers and partners work on both the west and east shores of San Francisco Bay one Saturday morning *every month*! We're removing weeds and trash and renewing these ecosystems with native plants that sustain birds and other wildlife.

San Francisco's Pier 94 had been an unofficial dump site owned by the Port. Now American Avocets and Killdeer feed and nest along the tidal wetlands that have flourished since GGAS began restoration work in 2002. This year, our volunteers are also revitalizing uplands so birds like Anna's Hummingbirds and White-crowned Sparrows gain habitat too.

At Martin Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline in Oakland, we joyfully partnered with International Bird Rescue in June to release rehabilitated juvenile Black-crowned Night-Herons…in a renascent wetland operated by the East Bay Regional Park District that GGAS has been helping restore for more than a decade.

Although we receive grant funding to support the science and supplies for habitat restoration, it's GGAS volunteers whose hands accomplish most of the task. Come join us one of these Saturdays: You can renew crucial habitat while spotting many of the birds who benefit from your efforts.

Maybe you'd also like to join us for THE classic Audubon volunteer event—the Christmas Bird Count. On Sunday, December 14 we'll hold our 74th annual Oakland CBC, while Tuesday, December 30 will be our 32nd consecutive San Francisco CBC. Whether you're a beginner or a proven veteran at bird surveys, you can help increase our understanding of bird populations through this world-renowned citizen science project. Then celebrate with us at the festive dinner after each count. Register by November 28 at goldengateaudubon.org/cbc.

From bird counts to habitat restoration, field trips to conservation initiatives, Golden Gate Audubon activities are always happening. Make sure you don't miss out on any of them by keeping your membership up to date. In the next few weeks, you should be receiving a reminder letter about membership renewal for 2015. You can renew by mail or online. It's one vital way that you can help conserve the wonderful birds and vital habitats right here in the heart of the Bay Area.

NEWS BRIEFS

Prevent Window Collisions

Live in San Francisco? Help prevent bird-window collisions with just a few minutes each week. The city is seeking volunteers to monitor the outside of their home once a week for dead or injured birds. For information, call (415) 575-9017 or see goldengateaudubon.org/sfmonitors.

Travel with GGAS

Add to your life list, explore beautiful places, and make new friends through Travel with GGAS. In 2015, we are offering expert-guided tours to Panama, Colombia, Taiwan, Newfoundland, Alaska, Texas, Arizona and Oregon. Plan ahead before trips fill up! For details, see goldengateaudubon.org/travel.

Field Trips e-Newsletter

GGAS offers over 100 free bird walks each year, and upcoming ones are listed on our website and in our monthly Field Trips e-newsletter. If you don't currently receive the Field Trip emails, let us know at ggas@goldengateaudubon.org. You can also receive notices of our upcoming trips through Meetup.com.

Restore Habitat for Birds

Help welcome our fall migrants with clean and flourishing habitat! Come to our monthly volunteer work days at Pier 94, Crissy Field, and Golden Gate Park in SF; MLK Jr. Shoreline Park in Oakland; and the proposed Alameda Wildlife Reserve. Dates and locations at goldengateaudubon.org/volunteer.

Ilana DeBare

Bob Lewis/flickr.com/photos/boblewis

Clockwise from left: Middle Harbor Shoreline Park; Western Sandpiper in breeding plumage at Middle Harbor Shoreline; Semipalmated Sandpiper at Middle Harbor Shoreline.

MIDDLE HARBOR SHORELINE PARK

BY MAUREEN LAHIFF

Once the depot closed, birds quickly rediscovered the area.

Come see a really good mudflat. Come see a really good restored mudflat.

From late July to early April, Middle Harbor Shoreline Park in Oakland hosts a wealth of water birds. The encircling "arms" of the park make it easy to observe the mudflat fairly close up even when the tide is out, though having a spotting scope is helpful.

Owned and operated by the Port of Oakland, Middle Harbor is one of the East Bay's newest parks. If you didn't know it was there, you'd never think to look for it in the middle of the sprawling container ship port.

Middle Harbor and its surrounding area were originally tidal wetlands and estuarine marshes. As cities and shipping expanded rapidly on both sides of the bay, the harbor became a transportation hub and its once-shallow wetlands were dredged to a depth of 40 feet.

Dredged material was used to build the Oakland Naval Supply Depot. But once the depot closed in 1998 and the park opened in 2004, it didn't take birds long to rediscover the area. A variety of water birds now feed in the restored shallow water area. Other birds feed and nest in the restored dunes, transition zone, and trees.

Shorebirds live by the tides, so it's a good idea to look at the tide cycles and heights when planning a visit to Middle Harbor. Don't limit yourself to the mudflat. The southern "arm" jutting into the water is close to the shipping channel and often has diving birds, while the rocky shoreline at its end may host Black Oystercatchers and Black Turnstones.

On a Golden Gate Audubon field trip in early August, we saw dozens of Semipalmated Plovers and about half a dozen dowitchers. Forster's Terns and Caspian Terns were diving and bathing. We found Black-bellied Plovers, Western Sandpipers, and Sanderlings, all still in partial breeding plumage. The real surprise was a Wandering Tattler on the rocks.

Middle Harbor Shoreline is an urban gem—valuable not just to birders but to West Oakland residents who, until its opening, had few nearby spots to enjoy the shoreline. The success of the restoration at Middle Harbor gives me hope for the future of Bay wetlands.

For a longer, more detailed version of this article, including directions to Middle Harbor Shoreline Park, go to goldengateaudubon.org/blog-posts/middle-harbor-shoreline-birding-hotspot/.

Have a favorite birding site you'd like to share? Contact idebare@goldengateaudubon.org.

FALLEN SPARROW SPURS A BIRD-FRIENDLY SCHOOLYARD

BY ANTHONY DECICCO

Imagine you are a Golden-crowned Sparrow. You hatched in 2013 on an island off the coast of Alaska. You were banded on September 15 of the same year, and started your natural journey southward along the Pacific Flyway.

Two thousand miles later, you stop at the lush garden of Verde Elementary School in North Richmond, California. The view south looks promising—but what appeared to be a sunny horizon turns out to be the reflection from a large classroom window. You collide. The impact is too much, and you fall and pass away.

The third graders in Golden Gate Audubon's Eco-Education program found "Goldie" and noticed the tiny metal "ring" on its leg last January, during a schoolyard habitat survey. We reported the band to the U.S. Geological Survey, which sent the students a certificate with details of the bird's banding:

"This record is actually quite unique and documents one of the longest movements for Golden-crowned Sparrow in our database."

We explained to the students that up to one billion birds die annually in North America as a result of window collisions like Goldie's.

The children were both fascinated and sad. They wanted to prevent future window strikes—so we helped them create a flock of beautiful bird silhouettes and place them on school windows to avoid collisions.

The Verde students' experience with Goldie fit perfectly into GGAS's evolving focus on creating Bird-Friendly Schools.

Since its start in 1999, our award-winning Eco-Education program has worked with up to 700 low-income students and their families each year in Richmond, Oakland, and San Francisco. The program introduces children to nature and watersheds in their community, with field trips to creeks, bay shore, and ocean.

Last year in Richmond, we added a pilot program aimed at helping children create Bird-Friendly Schools. That included activities such as:

- Window treatments to prevent collisions.
- Planting more native flora for habitat.

Anthony DeCicco

Verde Elementary students add silhouettes to a window.

- Installing and monitoring bird feeders and water sources.
- Building nest boxes for Western Bluebirds and chickadees.
- Advocating for "lights out during migration" and a ban on rodenticides and pesticides on school grounds.

This year, we hope to turn these pilot efforts into a more formal curriculum. We feel the Bird-Friendly Schools idea has tremendous potential. GGAS Eco-Ed students have always done habitat restoration at nearby creeks and shorelines, but protecting wildlife at their own school offers even deeper engagement.

Armed with Bird-Friendly School scorecards and action projects, and driven by a strong desire to care, our Eco-Education students can be empowered to make important changes on their school grounds. Future generations of "Goldies" will thank them.

Do you know a company or foundation that might support our Bird-Friendly Schools initiative? Or would you like to become an Eco-Ed volunteer? Contact adecicco@goldengateaudubon.org.

UPCOMING EVENTS

The Lost Bird Project Film Screening
Berkeley
Sunday, October 19
Artist Todd McGrain set out to memorialize five extinct birds such as the Passenger Pigeon and Great Auk with bronze sculptures at the sites where they last lived. Meet Todd at our Speaker Series on Oct. 16. Then on Oct. 19 see the film about his project. Film from 7 to 9 p.m. at Ed Roberts Campus, across from Ashby BART. $5.

Christmas Bird Count
Oakland and San Francisco
December 14 and 30
Join tens of thousands of birders across North America for Audubon's 115th annual Christmas Bird Count. Both beginning and experienced birders welcome. Take part in the Oakland area count on Sunday, December 14, the San Francisco count on Tuesday, December 30, or do both! Last year's Oakland count involved 256 field observers and 17 feeder observers who tallied 182 species, while San Francisco drew 144 participants who tallied 184 species. Can't spend the day? We also need volunteers for the festive dinner after each count. Register online before November 28 at goldengateaudubon.org/cbc. To help with the dinner, email nweeden@goldengateaudubon.org.

OSPREYS from page 1

Twenty-seven Osprey pairs built nests along the Bay in 2014—including 21 successful nests that produced a total of 40 young. That's a dramatic increase from the late 1990s, when there were only one or two known nests here.

"According to historical records, San Francisco Bay was not a major breeding site for Osprey, at least as far back as the early 20th century," said Tony Brake, a volunteer with Golden Gate Raptor Observatory who monitors the Osprey nests. "We had no reported nests before 1990."

It's not that Ospreys are rare in Northern California. Although threatened by DDT in the 1960s, the species recovered once the chemical was banned. Breeding pairs have been common at Kent Lake in Marin County. Adult Ospreys have long been sighted around San Francisco Bay during migration or winter.

But for reasons that are not clear, Ospreys didn't nest by the bay until recently. Brake suggests that improvements in water clarity—including the gradual decrease in sediment washed down from 19th century hydraulic mining—may have made it easier for them to fish here. "Also, the decommissioning of the Mare Island naval base in Vallejo probably opened up a lot of nesting sites," he added.

Mare Island and Vallejo have indeed become a local Osprey breeding hotspot, with more than a dozen nests on top of light poles and decommissioned maritime cranes.

Tony Brake

Nest platform installed by PG&E in Rodeo.

Eric Dugan/ericduganphotography.com

Osprey parents and chicks in Vallejo in 2012.

It's our responsibility to make sure Osprey have the safe nesting sites they need in order to thrive.

While Osprey traditionally nest on open-topped trees and dead snags, they've adapted in recent decades to human-made structures such as utility poles and nest platforms. In Chesapeake Bay, the share of Osprey nesting on human structures rose from 68 percent in 1973 to 93 percent in the 1990s.

Along the Bay Area's highly developed shoreline, finding a secure nest site is one of the species' biggest challenges. In 2013, the Port of San Francisco dismantled a nest on a crane needed for the America's Cup. Similarly, a partially completed nest was removed from a ship at Alameda Point. Last year an incubating nest on a utility pole in Rodeo collapsed and caused a power outage.

To help the bay's breeding Ospreys, Golden Gate Audubon joined with GGRO and other conservation groups in 2013 to form the Bay Area Osprey Coalition. The coalition is involved in monitoring local nests, educating the public about Ospreys, and working with shoreline land owners to provide secure nest sites.

Four nest platforms were erected in 2014—one by PG&E in Rodeo to replace that hazardous utility-pole site, and three in Richmond by Chevron and the city of Richmond.

"Once Ospreys have identified a nesting territory, they'll keep nesting in the same place or a nearby pole, so it's in the interest of someone who doesn't want them nesting on their equipment to provide an alternate structure," Brake said. "Hopefully having these four nest platforms as examples will encourage other land owners to install them too."

Along with ensuring safe nest sites, Golden Gate Audubon and its partners are working to share the beauty of these dramatic raptors with the Bay Area public. In June, GGAS co-sponsored the second annual S.F. Bay Osprey Days festival at Mare Island. About 1,000 people attended three days of bird walks, naturalist presentations, and other fun Osprey-focused activities.

"It's exciting that these magnificent birds are breeding along the Bay," said GGAS Volunteer Coordinator Noreen Weeden, who helped promote the festival. "Now it's our responsibility to make sure they have the safe nesting sites they need in order to thrive."

ART AND ENVIRONMENTAL MOBILIZING

TODD MCGRAIN AND ANDREW STERN

LOCATION / DATE

Berkeley
Thursday, October 16
7 p.m. refreshments
7:30 p.m. program

Sculptor Todd McGrain and filmmaker Andrew Stern created The Lost Bird Project to raise public awareness through art of five bird species that went extinct over the past 150 years. They share a conviction that art can touch us in ways that ideas and intellect alone cannot. At our Speaker Series on October 16, Todd and Andy will discuss the role that the arts can play in mobilizing people to address our current environmental crisis. Then on Sunday, October 19, GGAS will show their film *The Lost Bird Project* from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Ed Roberts Campus across from Ashby BART in Berkeley.

Todd McGrain, a sculptor for over 25 years, is artist-in-residence at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Andrew Stern, a practicing Zen Buddhist and neurology professor at the University of Rochester, devotes himself to raising awareness about the environment through The Lost Bird Project.

EARLY BIRD RENEWAL

Renew your GGAS membership now for 2015! You should receive a membership renewal packet in the mail soon. Or save time and renew online now at goldengateaudubon.org/join.

Benefits of being a GGAS member include this quarterly *Gull* newsletter; our monthly field trip e-newsletter; free admission to our Speaker Series; discounts on birding classes and pelagic birding trips; and discounted subscriptions to Bay Nature magazine. And of course…belonging to a community that cares about and works to protect Bay Area birds.

THREE BIRDS, THREE OUTCOMES

JOEL GREENBERG

LOCATION / DATE

San Francisco
Thursday, November 20
7 p.m. refreshments
7:30 p.m. program

Three different birds, three different outcomes at the hands of humans. The Passenger Pigeon once numbered in the billions, yet human exploitation drove it to extinction a century ago. The Kirtland's Warbler had dwindled to fewer than 200 singing males in 1971, yet today we know how to maintain healthy populations. The Whooping Crane was down to 23 individuals—twice—and its fate still remains an open question. What can these three birds tell us about how to coexist with other species?

Joel Greenberg is a Research Associate of both the Field Museum and the Chicago Academy of Sciences. He is author of *A Feathered River Across the Sky: The Passenger Pigeon's Flight to Extinction,* and has been a leader in Project Passenger Pigeon, marking the anniversary of the species' extinction.

2015 BIRDS OF THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA CALENDAR

Bring amazing owls, orioles, loons, and other Bay Area birds into your home each month with our 2015 photo calendar. It features over two dozen of the Bay Area's most talented wildlife photographers, including Glenn Nevill, whose Peregrine Falcon is on the cover. The calendar makes a great holiday gift. Supply is limited, so order now. Calendars are available for $20 at the GGAS office and our speaker events, or order securely online at goldengateaudubon.org/store.

San Francisco: First Unitarian Universalist Church and Center, 1187 Franklin Street (at Geary). Public transit, street parking, and parking in a lot for a fee are available. Directions: Visit www.uusf.org/visitors_faq.html, and use the Map It! link on the left.

Berkeley: Northbrae Community Church, 941 The Alameda (between Solano and Marin). Directions: www.northbrae.org/directions.html.

Thank you for your generous donations to support our many conservation, education, and member activities!

Donations from June 1 through August 31, 2014

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The Golden Gate Audubon Society was founded January 25, 1917, and became a chapter of National Audubon in 1948. Golden Gate Audubon Supporting Membership is $35 per year. Renewals should be sent to the Golden Gate Audubon office. The board of directors meets six times per year (schedule can be obtained from the office).

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BACKYARD BIRDER

Allen Hirsch/allenh.zenfolio.com

Spotted Towhee.

SPOTTED TOWHEE

BY MARJORIE BLACKWELL

The distinct, buzzy trill or "meuw" call of a Spotted Towhee coming from an oak tree on a hillside, in shrubby blackberry bushes, or in a wooded area is delightful to hear any time of year, but especially in summer when so many other songbirds have headed north. The Spotted Towhee says, "I'm still here and still singing."

While easy to hear, these shy sparrows are often hard to see. When you do see one, its jet-black head and back (female grayish), spotted with white, against contrasting rufous flanks and brilliant white belly are striking indeed. Spotted Towhees often are easier to see on the ground as they scratch and kick, looking for insects and seeds in leaf litter.

The name "Towhee"—according to the *Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds (Eastern Region)*—was given in 1731 by naturalist Mark Catesby in imitation of its call note, which he heard in the Carolinas. However, the Eastern Towhee's song, often mimicked as "drink your TEA," little resembles that of our western bird. Eastern and Western Towhees originally were considered the same species—the Rufous Sided Towhee—but today are identified as separate and distinct.

Spotted Towhees nest on the ground or in low bushes. The female builds a nest of bark, twigs, and grasses and lays three to five eggs in each of two broods per season.

The East Bay population of Spotted Towhees is more or less stable, with Oakland Christmas Bird Count numbers averaging 272 between 2004-2013.

However, the CBC numbers fluctuate considerably from year to year and there is a slow downward trend, probably due to decrease in the shrubby ground cover they need.

The San Francisco CBC Spotted Towhee count is far lower, with a total of 187 seen in the past four years, almost all on San Bruno Mountain in San Mateo. According to CBC co-compiler Dan Murphy, the species is on the verge of extirpation in San Francisco.

While you're more likely to see Spotted Towhees in regional parks, they can be attracted to yards with shrubby areas or brush and leaf piles, and if seed is sprinkled on the ground, they may even venture out to eat.