The first thing you notice is the sound, a cacophony of squawks, clicks, and chirrups that rises above the normal city din of horns and engines. Then you see movement in the trees—a flash of white, a hint of beak amid the dense foliage, and suddenly a heron or egret shooting out into flight.

Welcome to downtown Oakland’s nesting colony of Black-crowned Night-Herons and Snowy Egrets.

CONTINUED on page 5
“BIRD BRAINS” PROVIDE CREATIVE PROTECTION FOR WILDLIFE

BY CINDY MARGULIS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Whoever thinks that being a “bird brain” is an insult has never encountered the creativity and initiative of our Audubon chapter members.

This spring, Golden Gate Audubon Society undertook a number of crucial efforts to protect local birds. Sometimes these efforts get a lot of attention, like our multi-faceted Night-Heron project. (See this month’s cover story.) Other times, important projects don’t gain as much media coverage.

One project was born when we were appalled to learn definitively that more than 47 percent of all pelicans brought in to International Bird Rescue’s California centers suffer from injuries associated with fishing line!

Determined to prevent such suffering, GGAS rallied volunteers to build specialized line-recycling bins for fishing areas. We reached out to multiple agencies and landowners to install these specialized containers and commit to recycling the monofilament.

The collected monofilament will be melted down and transformed into artificial reef-like structures (called “fish hab”) that revitalize degraded fishing spots. Instead of killing birds, it will help restore fisheries on which both wildlife and people depend.

We’re preventing this nearly invisible, treacherous hazard from injuring and killing many local species, such as pelicans, grebes, terns, diving ducks, and Ospreys.

Relying on a single small grant, GGAS will double the number of monofilament recycling sites in all of Alameda County! In addition, GGAS’s commitment inspired the City of Alameda to build a bunch of its own bins and initiate even more line-recycling on the island.

Ingenious “bird brains” benefit other species too, not just birds. Earlier this year, GGAS teamed up with other wildlife fans to protect a pod of harbor seals that had been hauling out for over a decade on a derelict East Bay dock. When a public development project threatened the seals’ secret siesta spot, GGAS spoke out.

We advised the developer to fund an alternate platform to be designed in consultation with a reputable harbor seal biologist—and the developer listened. Within days, they deposited $100,000 in an escrow account for a floating haulout visible from the Bay Trail, and within weeks an active “seal working group” including GGAS and other citizen scientists began conferring on design specs and scouting location sites. With a little luck, current and future generations will get to rejoice at the sight of shy harbor seals loafing comfortably in quiet East Bay waters.

Even the tiniest bird brain contains tremendous innate and acquired wisdom. As lovers of wildlife, we must strive to be as resourceful as our favorite creatures are!

NEWS BRIEFS

International Bird Rescue wins 2015 Elsie Roemer Award

Golden Gate Audubon awarded its highest conservation honor to International Bird Rescue, the Fairfield-based nonprofit that responds to oil spills threatening birds throughout the globe. When “mystery goo” started killing birds in San Francisco Bay in January, IBR treated 323 contaminated water birds and successfully released 165 back into the wild. The source of the “goo” still has not been identified.

Elsie Roemer (1893–1991) was an educator and activist who successful worked to protect wetlands in Alameda. The Elsie Roemer Bird Sanctuary there is named in her honor.

Herb and Randi Long win 2015 Paul Covel Award

Herb and Randi Long—pillars of Golden Gate Audubon’s award-winning Eco-Education program—were awarded the 2015 Paul Covel Conservation Education Award. Herb and Randi have volunteered with Eco-Ed since 2009. Their kind, gentle spirit has inspired both students and other volunteers. They are generous with their time and also with their optics!

Paul Covel (1909–1990) was a park naturalist and educator who inspired many children and adults through his pioneering interpretive programs at Lake Merritt. He was a recipient of the 1989 Elsie Roemer Conservation Award.
HERON’S HEAD PARK: BIRDING HOTSPOT
BY DOMINIK MOSUR

Imagine salt, brackish and freshwater marshes and associated upland covering hundreds of thousands of acres. Then imagine that reduced by 90 percent, with the lost areas converted into modern humans’ idea of development. This is the story of San Francisco Bay.

Visitors to Heron’s Head Park in southeastern San Francisco can—with a little patience and focus—transport themselves back a few hundred years in the past and observe a tiny slice of what would have once been all around us.

Heron’s Head Park had its genesis in the early 1970s, when the Port of San Francisco started trucking landfill to India Basin for a new shipping terminal. The terminal was never built. But in the meantime, aquatic plants took root and grew into a vibrant salt marsh. In 1993, Golden Gate Audubon successfully petitioned the Port to preserve and enhance the area as a wetland.

In 1999, the area officially became 23-acre Heron’s Head Park, named for its shape when viewed from above. The resulting tidal marsh and upland has matured into one of the prime bird habitats in the city of San Francisco—a hidden oasis within the surrounding industrial area.

Heron’s Head is the only site in the city of San Francisco to host nesting Bryant’s Savannah Sparrows, a state Species of Special Concern. Two Ridgway’s Rail chicks were found there in summer 2011, although now only a single Ridgway’s Rail is thought to remain in the park. American Avocets have nested continuously since 2009.

An hour of careful observation can yield a minimum of 30 species almost year round. The park is best birded from the clearly marked main trail, which covers less than a mile. My typical pattern is to walk out to the point on the main trail and return via the side trail, which splits off to the south and allows a closer peek into the inner marsh.

While visiting Heron’s Head, stop at the EcoCenter, which provides environmental education programs and is a LEED platinum-certified green building. It’s open from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., Wednesdays through Saturdays, with family science programs on most Saturdays.

As with any urban birding, it’s safest to bird with a friend and make sure you don’t leave any valuables in your car.

For more about Heron’s Head Park, see our blog at goldengateaudubon.org/categories/hotspots.
Bob Lewis trained as a chemist and worked for Chevron for 33 years. He’s taught birding classes in the Bay Area for over 20 years, and is chair of Golden Gate Audubon’s Adult Education Committee. Currently he’s co-teaching a popular Master Birding class at the California Academy of Sciences with Jack Dumbacher and Eddie Bartley. He loves to travel and photograph birds, and has just returned from a trip to Southeast Asia, chasing the brightly colored birds of that area.

As travel to Cuba opens up, Americans are gaining access to a fantastic birding destination. Cuba is safe, birdy, with much protected habitat, and much to be discovered. In fact it may be the place where the Ivory-billed Woodpecker still lives! Alvaro Jaramillo will share some of Cuba’s gorgeous bird life and wildlife biology, as well as its culture.

Born in Chile, Alvaro Jaramillo was trained in ecology with a focus on bird behavior. He writes the Identify Yourself column in Bird Watcher’s Digest, runs Alvaro’s Adventures birding tour company, and has birded in Cuba on six different occasions.

Golden Gate Audubon Society will hold our annual membership meeting on Thursday, July 16, at 6:30 p.m., immediately prior to the Speaker Series in Berkeley. Join us to hear the latest on our conservation activities and our plans for the coming year. Share your ideas. Enjoy some snacks. Then stay for Bob Lewis’s talk.
OAKLAND HERONS CONTINUED from page 1

The herons made national news in 2014 when a tree trimming incident at the U.S. Postal Service left several young birds injured and homeless.

In the wake of that incident—and the viral media frenzy it provoked—Golden Gate Audubon launched a multifaceted campaign to protect nesting birds. Like many debacles, the attention offered some golden opportunities, including a teachable moment to connect people of all ages and backgrounds with the marvel and vulnerability of wildlife in our communities.

We started with the need to educate tree care professionals about nesting birds. We produced brochures on “Healthy Trees, Healthy Birds” in both English and Spanish, then organized a series of trainings for professional arborists in conjunction with the Western Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture.

This spring, as heron nesting began, we mounted a campaign to teach Oaklanders about their herons and how to help downed birds. We placed durable posters in prominent places such as the Metropolitan Oakland Chamber of Commerce, as well as Chinese-language versions in Oakland’s Chinatown, adjacent to the nesting colony.

We led free public bird walks of the heron colony, in partnership with the City of Oakland and Oakland Public Library. We organized guided tours for nearby schools and civic groups. And we marshaled a pilot team of docents to monitor the heronry and teach passersby about the birds.

One of the most exciting moments was our very first Eco-Art Flash Mob in April. We convened local artists at daybreak to create big sidewalk chalk drawings of the herons. The images were fabulous, but equally fabulous were the conversations they sparked with people passing by on their way to work or school. (View a short video of the Art Flash Mob at vimeo.com/ggaudubon.)

All this education and outreach has made a big difference in awareness and appreciation of Oakland’s herons. Yet the downtown rookery continues to experience high mortality when chicks fall from the nest onto concrete or fledglings wander into traffic. It’s a bit daunting to protect such a sizable colony in a downtown environment.

GGAS hoped to follow the lead of Madrone Audubon, which faced a similar challenge with an urban rookery in Santa Rosa. Officials there cordoned off the nest trees and placed straw underneath to provide a soft, safe, and contained landing area for young birds who tumble from the trees.

Oakland officials declined to replicate that proven solution, claiming it was too complicated and costly. But this isn’t the end of the story. The educational work we did this spring is cultivating a constituency to protect the herons during future nesting seasons.

In the coming year, we plan to mobilize more volunteers for Oakland’s herons and expand our tree care educational initiatives too.

Oakland’s nesting herons present an inspiring story of nature’s persistence even in a gritty urban core. Such large and fascinating birds make terrific ambassadors for connecting everyone with wildlife. They are a fitting symbol for Oakland itself—dramatic and beautiful birds, different species living together in harmony, overcoming adversity to launch the next generation. In addition, Black-crowned Night-Herons are found on every continent except Antarctica. No matter where Oakland’s diverse residents come from, there is most likely a heron in their cultural heritage.

They are such a fitting symbol of Oakland that perhaps they should be named the city’s official bird!

Want to help protect and educate about the Oakland herons next spring? Contact GGAS at ggas@goldengateaudubon.org.

Black-crowned Night-Herons are a fitting symbol for the city of Oakland.

*Ilana DeBare*
Thank you to both our general donors and supporters of Birdathon 2015!

Donations from March 1 to May 31, 2015

GOLDEN EAGLE ($1000 or more)
Barbara & Carlo Alexander, Holly & Martin Bern, Robert Clark, Jacqueline Craig, Jan Deming, Lindsay Dixon, Frances Dupont, Rich & Terry Horrigan, Dennis Kelly, Claire Lash, Bruce Mast, Kelly Purcell, Judith Pynn, Rosemary Reilly, Delil Reyos, Joan Ross, Diane Ross-Leech, Anne Rowe, Ruth & Alan Tobey, Kristen Van Dam

PEREGRINE FALCON ($500 to $999)
Barb & Gary Bard, Daryl Anne Goldman & Jeanette Nicholas, Patricia Greene, March Conservation Fund, Carolyn McMillan

LEAST TERN ($250 to $499)
Katherine Branstetter, Andrea Burhoe, Wendy DeValle, Marjore Fletcher, Jonathon Franzen, HAE Now Organic Tees, Harry Fuller, Emily Goldberg, Jerri Harris, Christine Hayamizu, Diane Ichisayu, David Krimm, Barry Mast, Kelly Purcell, Judith Pynn, Rosemary Reilly, Delil Reyos, Joan Ross, Diane Ross-Leech, Anne Rowe, Ruth & Alan Tobey, Kristen Van Dam

RIDGWAY’S GULL ($100 to $249)

GIFTS
Your generosity allows us to share the joys of nature with over 700 schoolchildren each year in our Eco-Education program.
**BIRDATHON 2015 HITS GOAL—THANKS TO YOU!**

Birdathon 2015 not only hit its goal of raising $50,000. We soared past it and raised slightly over $60,000!

Along the way, Golden Gate Audubon members and friends had some memorable wildlife experiences—from witnessing hummingbird banding at Point Blue’s field station in Bolinas, to sighting California Condors along the Big Sur coast, to meeting the Oakland Zoo veterinarian in charge of treating condors for lead poisoning.

A quick summary of Birdathon 2015 by the numbers: 25 guided birding trips; 200+ trip participants; 600+ donations; 63 participants who raised over $1,000; and over $60,000 raised for GGAS’s conservation and environmental education programs!

That total includes donations we made to some of our partner conservation groups that co-hosted Birdathon trips—Ventana Wildlife Society, East Bay Regional Park District, Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, and Point Blue.

This year’s top Birdathon awards went to:

**Most Species in Six Hours:** Glen Tepke, whose team found 104 species in Oakland in pouring rain, and renamed themselves the Soggy Sloggers.

**Most Species in 24 Hours:** Bob Power, who with Eli Gross found 159 species in Alameda County.

**Best Bird:** Alan Hopkins, for a Harlequin Duck in San Francisco, during his self-guided “Big Walk” aimed at finding 100 species within walking distance of his home. (Alan’s Birdathon quest got written up in the San Francisco Chronicle! Read the story at http://tinyurl.com/ov8spnj.)

**Fundraising Awards**

1st place: Dan Harris ($2,526 — from 67 separate donors!)

2nd place: Anne Leong ($2,125)

3rd place: Chris and Gary Bard ($2,075)

4th place: Jane Hart ($1,700)

5th place: Carolyn McMillan ($1,550)

6th place: Daryl Anne Goldman and Jeannette Nichols ($1,350)

None of the trips, fun, or fundraising of Birdathon 2015 would have been possible without you…donors, trip participants, fundraisers, field trip leaders, corporate sponsors, and Birdathon organizers/volunteers.

We thank you. And, more importantly, the birds of the Bay Area thank you.

Got ideas for Birdathon 2016? We’ll start planning next year’s events in the fall. Email Ilana at idebare@goldengateaudubon.org.