

THE GULL



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON SOCIETY // VOL. 102 NO. 1 WINTER 2018

PRESERVING HABITAT ON SAN FRANCISCO'S SOUTHERN WATERFRONT

BY ILANA DEBARE

Long before San Francisco's southeastern shoreline became a busy industrial hub, it was tidal marshland habitat for ducks and shorebirds, shellfish and grizzlies. Mission Bay alone had 500 acres of wetlands. Today the southeastern waterfront is morphing from shipyards and warehouses to condos and offices, and its wetlands are just a whisper of their former selves. But these remaining pockets still host a wealth of bird life—shorebirds galore, ducks, grebes, gulls, terns, songbirds, Ospreys, and more.

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American Wigeon at Pier 94
Bob Gunderson





Double-crested Cormorants are among the birds that nest at Lake Merritt.

PROTECTING LAKE MERRITT FROM A BAD STADIUM PLAN

BY CINDY MARGULIS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Last September, the Oakland A's dropped a bombshell announcement: They planned to build a new 35,000-seat baseball stadium along the Lake Merritt Channel, on land owned by the Peralta Community College District.

Our East Bay Conservation Committee had been studying the siting for a new A's stadium for several years, and had formally commented against the lakeside site back in 2010. So we were ready to leap into action as soon as the A's Lake Merritt stadium plan was announced.

We issued an immediate statement

opposing that prospect. A 35,000-seat professional sports stadium doesn't belong in a spot that jeopardizes the iconic birdlife of the nation's oldest wildlife refuge.

The Lake Merritt Channel, which connects the lake with the Oakland estuary, is the essential wildlife corridor that allows the lake's nesting colonial waterbirds—herons, egrets, and cormorants—to travel to and from the Bay 10 to 12 times per day to get enough forage to provision their broods.

A ballpark on the channel would subject these breeding birds to bright stadium lights, roaring crowds, a huge volume of

trash, and toxic runoff from increased traffic. Oakland voters approved \$200 million in Measure DD bonds in 2002 to restore Lake Merritt and the Channel, and all that work would be undone by a stadium project.

Our speedy response earned Golden Gate Audubon prominent coverage in newspapers and broadcast media, and an op-ed in the *East Bay Times*. We collaborated with community groups and faculty/student groups who also opposed the site. Our East Bay Conservation Committee activists met with members of Peralta's Board and Oakland city officials, and GGAS members responded to our Action Alert by filing comments with the college district.

We were encouraged in early December when the Peralta Community College District Board told the Chancellor to end talks with the A's. We're hoping that a Lake Merritt stadium site is permanently off the table, and that the A's will choose to renovate or rebuild at the Coliseum, which has much more buildable space than the Peralta property.

The Oakland-Alameda Coliseum Complex was established before CEQA, and many acres of wetlands were sacrificed to build that venue. Vast public dollars have been invested there to provide freeway access, parking, and public transit. With its own BART station only minutes from downtown Oakland, it satisfies the A's vision for a transit-first ballpark.

Oakland has awesome wildlife and vibrant neighborhoods. The A's can help to preserve both if they'll stay rooted in Oakland...at their familiar home base.

NEWS BRIEFS

Renew Your Membership for 2018

If you haven't joined or renewed your GGAS membership for 2018 yet, now's the time! Members get free admission to our monthly Speaker Series, discounts on birding classes and boat trips, and more. Be a full part of the wonderful GGAS community. See goldengateaudubon.org/join.

2017 Annual Report Is Online

In fiscal year 2017, Golden Gate Audubon habitat restoration volunteers planted 1,388 native plants and removed 512 30-gallon bags of trash and 444 bags of weeds at eight public land sites in San Francisco, Alameda, Richmond, and Oakland. Read more highlights from 2017 in our Annual Report at goldengateaudubon.org/ar2017.

Travel with GGAS in 2018

See the birds of the world with us! Our expertly guided birding tours will take you to South Texas, Costa Rica, Peru, Oaxaca, Baja California, Alaska, and Oregon during 2018. We just added a second session to South Texas in April. Our Baja trip includes a boat trip for close viewing of migrating grey whales! See goldengateaudubon.org/travel.

Are You Receiving our Emails?

Each month we send out our Field Trip schedule and other event listings by email. If you're not receiving these emails, please contact our office at ggas@goldengateaudubon.org and we can add you to the list so you don't miss any field trips, birding classes, guest speakers, volunteer opportunities, or other birding fun.



MORCOM ROSE GARDEN: BIRDING HOTSPOT

BY BLAKE EDGAR

LOCATION

700 Jean Street
Oakland

A wonderful site for beginning birders or birding by ear.

In a sunken amphitheater between two of Oakland's busiest boulevards, a pair of resident Wild Turkeys has been delighting visitors in recent months as the tom persistently pursues his intended with a fully fanned tail.

The Morcom Rose Garden—home to those courting turkeys—is less well known than nearby birding hotspots like Lake Merritt and Mountain View Cemetery. But it's a wonderful site for beginning birders or those seeking to practice birding by ear in a place where it's fairly easy to see who's singing and calling.

The central area is a formal Florentine-style garden, while the surrounding slopes have mature scrub and woodland habitat. Some of the access involves stairways, with options for those who prefer level paths or gradual inclines.

And if the birds aren't cooperating, there's ample reward in stopping to smell the roses. With some rare heirloom varieties on display, this is considered one of the best public collections in the country and has been accredited as an All-American Rose Selection.

On land earmarked for open space in 1911, the garden was constructed in 1932 under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration and named for Oakland's then-mayor Fred N. Morcom.

Although parking is limited, the easiest access is

from the south via Jean Street, just a block from bustling Grand Avenue. Past the colonnade, continue straight on a paved path to the reflecting pool frequented by Mallards, or the cascading fountain that also serves as a fancy birdbath.

From here, head upslope along the paved or dirt paths. Dominated by mature oaks, redwoods, and pines, the east side may provide a sighting of a Northern Flicker, a Cooper's Hawk, or a Red-shouldered Hawk. Also keep an eye out for Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Bewick's Wren, Oak Titmouse, warblers, and California Towhees scratching in the leaf litter.

On the west side paths, you might encounter White- and Golden-crowned Sparrows drawn to the seed scattered daily by a visitor. This can also be a good area for Black Phoebe, Mourning Dove, and those roving turkeys. After dark, a Great Horned Owl often calls from high in a conifer.

Corvid fans can expect to find Western Scrub-Jay, Steller's Jay, and American Crow. Common Ravens have nested near the top of the northeast stairway in recent years, and last spring a friend watched a raven flush a Cooper's Hawk from its perch and chase it across the garden.



(From left) Cedar Waxwing at Morcom Rose Garden; White-throated Sparrow; Morcom Rose Garden. Photos by Rick Lewis.

Read more about this and other birding hotspots at goldengateaudubon.org/hotspots.

GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON AND THE 1,300 ACRES

BY WILLIAM HUDSON AND ILANA DEBARE

The new two-mile McCosker Loop Trail in Orinda is a short trail with a long story—a story that could easily be called “Golden Gate Audubon Society and the 1,300 acres.”

The story began in the 1980s, as open spaces around the Bay Area came under increasing development pressure. One such area was Gateway Valley—beautiful oak woodlands that were home to endangered California red-legged frogs and Alameda whipsnakes, as well as majestic Golden Eagles. The area, just south of Highway 24 and east of the Caldecott Tunnel, was a key link in the north-south wildlife corridor that runs from Wildcat Canyon to Lake Chabot.

In the mid-80s, developers proposed a 978-acre residential subdivision with a 27-hole golf course. Local opposition was widespread and well organized. Residents formed a group called Save Open Space–Gateway Valley. Together with Golden Gate Audubon and other environmental groups, they spoke at numerous public meetings and wrote constantly to the relevant government bodies.

Opponents managed to halt plans by three successive development groups between 1987 and 2002—at one point, even holding a successful referendum to overturn plans approved by the city. Then, in 2002, Farallon Capital Management acquired development rights to the Gateway area. Farallon approached GGAS’s then-Executive Director, Arthur Feinstein, and asked him to bring SOS into discussions towards a compromise.

Farallon was familiar with Arthur’s successful track record in brokering similar agreements elsewhere. On the strength of Arthur’s role as one of their closest and longest-term advisors, SOS joined GGAS and the Sierra Club at the negotiating table with Farallon.

GGAS also provided a second necessary ingredient—funding for the attorney who represented the conservation alliance during two years of bargaining.

The effort was successful. The conservationists agreed not to oppose 245 houses together with playfields, roads, etc. on 230 acres. Farallon eliminated the golf course, agreed to permanent protection for over 1,300 acres (the balance of the 978 acres plus adjacent land



Ilana DeBare

GGAS field trip on the McCosker Loop Trail in October 2017.

acquired for mitigation in previous years), and provided \$1 million for additional conservation.

Removal of the golf course significantly reduced habitat disruption from grading. For example, builders could work between existing creeks and work did not have to take place as high up the hillsides as initially proposed.

Today the area is known as Wilder. The 1,300 protected acres are managed by the East Bay Municipal Utility District, East Bay Regional Park District, and a small Geologic Hazard Abatement District funded by Wilder homeowners.

Last spring, EBRPD opened the McCosker Loop Trail on part of its property there.

And in October, GGAS led a field trip along the trail as part of our Centennial celebration. Over 50 participants watched circling Red-tailed Hawks and flitting Western Bluebirds, and marvelled at the beautiful hillside habitat that might not exist without Audubon’s work.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Master Birder Class

California Academy of Sciences,
San Francisco

February through December 2018

Our acclaimed Master Birder class is back! This year-long advanced class includes 11 monthly classroom sessions and field trips, along with field journaling, research, and access to the Academy’s ornithology collection. See goldengateaudubon.org/classes.

San Francisco Bay Flyway Festival

Mare Island, Vallejo
February 9-11

Celebrate the splendor of our winter birds at the 22nd annual San Francisco Bay Flyway Festival at Mare Island, home to many Osprey nests. Bird walks, slide shows, boat trips, raptor shows, kids’ activities, museum tours, and more. Please visit sfbayflywayfestival.com in late January for further details.

Family Day at MLK

MLK Jr. Regional Shoreline, Oakland
February 17, 9:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Families of all ages are welcome to join us along this beautiful shoreline that we helped protect from development. Learn about the birds that depend on bayside habitat. Then help birds by cleaning the shoreline and planting plants. See goldengateaudubon.org/volunteer for directions and info.

As San Francisco's southeastern shoreline changes and develops, the key issue is whether we will continue to have areas for birds and wildlife.

WATERFRONT CONTINUED from page 1

Golden Gate Audubon Society has worked hard over decades to preserve and restore the shoreline between Candlestick Point and AT&T Park. Here are some of the natural highlights of this area.

Candlestick Point/Yosemite Slough

Yosemite Slough, a 34-acre slice of marsh and upland between Candlestick Point and the Hunter's Point shipyards, was plagued for decades by toxic run-off and dumping. However, clean-up is underway as part of the Candlestick Point State Recreation Area, and 21 acres have been restored so far.

In 2003-04 and again in 2012-13, GGAS partnered with local youth in a bird survey that documented 80 species at Yosemite Slough. More recently, a newly-built bird island attracted nesting Killdeers and American Avocets.

Heron's Head Park/India Basin

This spit of land was created decades ago when planners were considering a shipping terminal or another bay bridge crossing. When those ideas were abandoned, GGAS petitioned the Port of San Francisco to create the park, which is now a popular walking trail and birding hotspot. Ten years ago, GGAS members and the Port created the guide *100 Birds of Heron's Head Park*. Last summer our volunteers conducted citizen-science monitoring of nesting Black Oystercatchers there.

GGAS continues to provide recommendations for supporting wildlife at the planned India Basin Shoreline Park and development at Hunter's Point, across India Basin from Heron's Head.

Pier 94

The Port of San Francisco contracted GGAS to restore this five-acre parcel as wildlife habitat in 2002. Since 2010—with support from the state's Prop 84, S.F. Dept. of Environment's Carbon Fund, the

Port, and Salesforce—GGAS volunteers have planted over 4,800 native plants and thousands of native seeds, pulled 872 large bags of non-native weeds, and removed 91 bags of trash. Today Pier 94 hosts 146 bird species, 20 butterfly species, and wetland plants including endangered Sea Blite.

Warm Water Cove

At this park at the end of 24th Street, you can still spot warblers and shorebirds. Even tiny pockets of natural shoreline provide important oases for wildlife. "After the Cosco Busan oil spill, we found quite a few oiled birds here," said GGAS member Eddie Bartley. "They came to any bit of shoreline where they could get out of the water."

Agua Vista Park

This tiny park, across from the future home of the Golden State Warriors, offers only a ripped shoreline. At one time 40 pairs of nesting Caspian Terns occupied an abandoned pier offshore, but a few years ago it partially collapsed and was removed. Since then, with input from GGAS, the Port of San Francisco built a replacement nesting platform and placed Caspian Tern decoys there to promote nesting. This spring, audio recordings of terns will be used together with the decoys in hopes of reestablishing that breeding species in San Francisco.

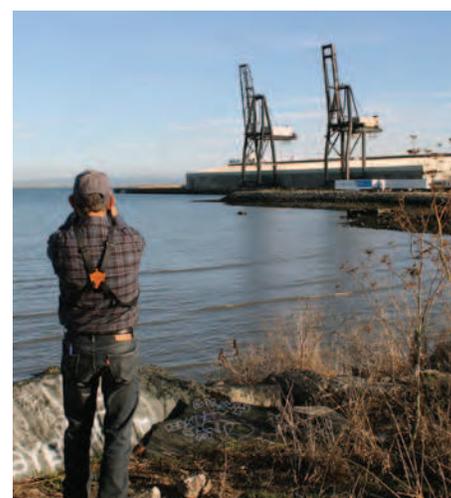
"Throughout the southeastern shoreline, the key issue is whether we will continue to have areas for birds and wildlife," said GGAS Volunteer Director Noreen Weeden. "Development has devoured or degraded so many habitats. It's incumbent on us to ensure some safe places for wildlife to thrive in our city."

Come to a Pier 94 work day on the first Saturday of each month. Or join our SF Conservation Committee to advocate for wildlife-friendly planning along the shoreline. See goldengateaudubon.org/volunteer.



Salt marsh at Heron's Head Park, across from Hunter's Point development.

Ilana DeBare



Birding amidst the maritime cranes and warehouses.

Ilana DeBare



Blood Pheasant in Bhutan.

Josh Engel

BIRDING WITH BUDDHA: NATURAL HISTORY OF BHUTAN

JOSH ENGEL

LOCATION / DATE

San Francisco
Thursday, January 18
6:30 p.m. refreshments,
7 p.m. program

There is an air of mystery about the Kingdom of Bhutan, nestled in the rugged Himalayas, where legends of dragons and yetis abound. Despite being sandwiched between the world's two most populous countries, it maintains a fierce independence and a unique culture deeply rooted in its Buddhist heritage. Bhutan is also a country with a strong conservation ethic and an extensive system of national parks that protects the many birds and mammals unique to the eastern Himalayas.

Imagine searching for hornbills, wren-babblers, rosefinches, laughingthrushes, pheasants, and other Asian avian delights with a backdrop of snow-capped mountains and traditional architecture! This presentation will take you from the lowland forests at the Indian border to the high mountain passes strewn with prayer flags.

Josh Engel, the founder of Red Hill Birding, has led birding trips on four continents and conducted research around the world. He is also an ornithologist at the Field Museum in Chicago.

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 uusf.org/contact.

Berkeley: Northbrae Community Church, 941 The Alameda (between Solano and Marin). Directions: Visit northbrae.org/contact--find-us.html.

STATUS AND CONSERVATION OF COMMON LOONS IN WASHINGTON

LOCATION / DATE

Berkeley
Thursday, February 15
6:30 p.m. refreshments,
7 p.m. program

DANIEL POLESCHOOK, JR.
AND GINGER POLESCHOOK

Common Loons are a charismatic species that faces many reproductive challenges. While 50 years ago they bred in northern California, today northern Washington is the southwestern edge of their North American breeding range.

The Poleschooks started out photographing Washington state loons in 1996, and their work turned into a large-scale conservation effort. Cooperation between government agencies, Audubon groups, and individuals has led to successful outcomes there.

Daniel Poleschook, Jr. and Ginger Poleschook have been studying Common Loons in Washington for more than two decades. They also photograph other waterbird species and provide their images to scientific journals and other publications.



Daniel Poleschook, Jr.

ISLANDS IN THE SUN: BIRDING IN THE CARIBBEAN

LOCATION / DATE

San Francisco
Thursday, March 15
6:30 p.m. refreshments,
7 p.m. program

BOB LEWIS

A Golden Gate Audubon trip to Cuba plus trips to Hispaniola, Trinidad, and Tobago provide an overview of Caribbean avifauna. Several endemic families are found here and some species are quite endangered. In the wake of hurricanes Irma and Maria, *Birds*

Caribbean is working to survey bird populations, provide hummingbird feeders and birdseed where the flowering plants and seed crops were destroyed, and help recovery of Important Bird Areas.

Bob Lewis has taught birding classes for over 25 years, and his life bird list is over 4,800 species. Bob received the American Birding Association's 2016 Chandler Robbins Award for Education and Conservation.



Bob Lewis

DONATIONS

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

Donations from September 1, 2017 through November 30, 2017

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(\$1000 and above)

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Diane & Tom Bennett,
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ABOUT GOLDEN GATE AUDUBON

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).

The Gull is published four times per year. Special third-class postage paid in Oakland, CA. Send address changes to the office promptly. The post office does not forward *The Gull*.

Learn about upcoming Golden Gate Audubon events every month! Send your name and email address to ggas@goldengateaudubon.org to receive our monthly e-newsletters with upcoming events and other news.

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www.goldengateaudubon.org

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**3 Bay Area Hotspot:
Morcom Rose Garden, Oakland**

The Morcom Rose Garden offers meandering paths, songbirds, and—of course—roses.

4 Saving 1,300 Acres in Orinda

Over two decades, GGAS and local residents worked successfully to protect oak woodlands that make up an important wildlife corridor.

6 Speaker Series

January: Birding in Bhutan. February: Common Loons in Washington State. March: Birds of the Caribbean.

BACKYARD BIRDER



Rick Lewis

Snowy Plover (in front, with the incomplete neck ring) and Semipalmated Plovers.

THE BAY AREA'S FOUR PLOVERS

BY LINDA CARLONI

The island of Alameda, where I live, has terrific shorebirds. Among my favorites are our four plovers.

Plovers are chunky shorebirds with a short neck, large eyes, and relatively short bills. Unlike sandpipers, they are visual feeders. As you watch them, they run, stop, and then peck to get their prey. Their large eyes let them forage in low-light conditions.

Of our four plovers, the Killdeer is here year-round. Although it prefers fields and gravelly patches, you can also find it on the beach. Killdeer parents do distraction displays—feigning injury and calling

loudly to draw a predator away from the nest. Like the Snowy and Semipalmated Plovers, it is brownish-tan on top and white below. Distinctively, it has two full dark neck rings.

The Semipalmated Plover, on the other hand, joins us in autumn and is largely gone in spring and summer to breed in the north. Both the Killdeer and the Semipalmated have “disruptive coloration,” striking patterns that break up the silhouette of the bird—in the Semipalm’s case, one full dark neck ring. These field marks help us distinguish one species from the other, but make it more difficult for predators to see the bird as a whole against a variegated background.

The Snowy Plover is a much smaller and whiter version of the first two. It has only one neck ring, broken in the front. The Western Snowy Plover is threatened due to habitat loss, predation, and disturbance, so we were delighted when, thanks to prodding by Golden Gate Audubon Society, East Bay Regional Parks installed symbolic fencing and educational signage alerting Alameda beachgoers to avoid disturbing the resting birds.

Our fourth and largest plover is the Black-bellied Plover, which in winter generally has a *white* belly and mottled grey back. If you see a male in breeding plumage when it arrives in late summer from its northern breeding grounds, or just before it leaves us in the spring, you may see the striking black underparts that led to its name. The Elsie Roemer Bird Sanctuary on the Alameda shoreline is filled with these plovers; from August through March, it’s the most common plover of the northern California coast. The 2016 Oakland Christmas Bird Count found 1,056 Black-bellieds, versus 190 Killdeers, 137 Semipalms, and 25 Snowies.