



The Blue Heron

News from San Francisco Nature Education ♦ October 2016

Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

We are gearing up for our 2016-2017 school program: classroom visits and field trips to the San Francisco Botanical Garden and Heron's Head Park. We are preparing to introduce K through fourth-grade students throughout the city to the wonders of birds and nature in their own local parks. Our school program starts this month and continues through the end of May.

Our public programs feature 24 annual nature walks, including monthly birding walks at the San Francisco Botanical Garden, four trips to Heron's Head Park and Crissy Field, trips to the Chain of Lakes in Golden Gate Park and to Lake Merced, and of course our spring program at Stow Lake: Heron Watch.

Our annual fundraising campaign starts soon. Please take the time to give generously to fund our school and public programs. Every membership subscription or renewal includes an emailed link to our monthly online newsletter.

Thank you so much for your support.

Best regards,

Nancy

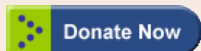
Nancy DeStefanis

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SF Nature Education
membership: Adults, \$35;
Seniors 65+, \$30;
students 21 or under, \$20.



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A Chick Fledges at Late Heron Nest Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director



I'm pleased to report that one **Great Blue Heron** Chick fledged in mid-September from late-season nest #5 at Stow Lake.

In early July we observed two chicks in the nest. Shortly after, only one chick was visible. We observed the nest weekly during the summer and watched as the single chick continued to grow taller.

I found that the easiest way to observe the activity in nest no. 5 during the summer was from a peddle boat generously provided by the Stow Lake Boathouse. On my weekly trips on the water, I was delighted to



Above: The last heron to hatch at Stow Lake in 2016. Right: Double-crested Cormorants.

see **Black-crowned Night Herons**, **Black Phoebes**, female **Hooded Mergansers**, and **Double-crested Cormorants**. The resident **Muscovy Ducks** were usually on the path around the lake.

On September 15th, I observed the newly-fledged heron chick catching tiny fish on the bank of the island by the waterfall. The parent stood nearby. A few minutes later the parent flew up into the nest. Generally, the parents continue to feed their young for several weeks after chicks' first flights. After some time parent and chick will go their own ways.

In 2015, the number of chicks that have fledged since 1993, when the colony began, was 167. Eleven chicks fledged in June of this year. This last fledgling brings our grand total to 178—a whopping average of 7.7 chicks per year. The colony is thriving!



Photos: Nancy DeStefanis

On the pages ahead:

- 2 Birding for Everyone, September 10th
 - 3 Heron's Head Park—Migration Is Underway
 - 4 Great Egrets in their Nests—in Texas
 - 5 In Memoriam: Jim Sullivan, our friend
 - 6 Red-tailed Hawk vs. Squirrel, a photo essay
 - 7 Pygmy Nuthatch Chicks, a photo essay;
- Upcoming Events

Birding for Everyone, September 10th

Sarah Barsness, Naturalist



Brrrrr!!! The sunshine of early September vanished just before our Birding for Everyone outing. A group of a half dozen regulars was joined by a birder new to San Francisco, but not to birds—having spent most of her adult life in Kenya. Our birds were a new experience for her, and it gave us another chance to appreciate the birds exclusive to our part of the world.

Our hopes for fall migrants were high, and we were happy to find that the Monkey Hand Tree at the entrance to the gardens was busy with newly-arrived **Yellow Warblers**, as well as resident

Pygmy Nuthatches. The white sky created a strong backlight that dulled their colors and made identification challenging. We talked about the importance of recognizing different silhouettes—in this case, we could easily distinguish the short-tailed, rounded nuthatches from the longer forms of the warblers.

Silhouettes are not as helpful in distinguishing between a **Yellow Warbler** and an **Orange-crowned Warbler**. Since a young Yellow Warbler has dull green plumage similar to an adult Orange-crowned Warbler, how we could be sure we were looking at Yellow Warblers? A key to bird ID, I have been told by experienced birders, is their eyes. Yellow Warblers have a “blank” expression—they have no markings near the eye. Orange-crowned Warblers have a subtle but distinct line through the eye area.



Allen's Hummingbirds have headed south for the winter,

but **Anna's Hummingbirds** were in good supply in the Exhibition Garden, where they sleep, and in the Fragrance Garden, where a female bathed herself in the water pooled in the hand of the St. Francis statue.

We noted a number of **Steller's Jays** on our way to the Succulent Garden. This bird is normally relatively scarce in the Arboretum, while the California Scrub Jay is very common. Both are intelligent and confident, like many of the Corvid family. They are songbirds, with a syrinx capable of producing complex sounds. The Steller's Jay is a great mimic, and will “fool” other birds into fleeing by copying the call of a Red-tailed Hawk.



The century plants in the Succulent Garden were teeming with **Pygmy Nuthatches**, likely the same young birds who were nestlings here just a few weeks ago. They were plentiful in the conifers on the edge of the Children's Garden as well, and we stopped to watch their astonishing acrobatics. They are as comfortable upside on a branch as right side up, and can move in quick circles around a branch in their search for insects.



While the occasional bird burst into song, autumn means a break from nesting behavior, so songs are rarer. A few young **Song Sparrows** sang, but their awkward, odd songs revealed their youth and inexperience. One **Pacific Wren** crossed our path, chirping loudly and briskly in a two-note pattern. Also silent were an early **Hermit Thrush** and a handful of **White-crowned Sparrows**.

The last leg of our outing was dotted with resident birds, including **Chestnut-backed Chickadees**, **California Towhees**, and **Dark-eyed Juncos**. A **Great Blue Heron** flew overhead, with its unique combination of awkwardness and elegance, looking as if it had flown directly out of a past millennium.

As small and mortal as most birds are, they are also a direct reminder of the very distant past, well before our own arrival. Let's hope the birds stay on into the distant future, well past our own departure.



SF Botanical Garden
09/10/2016
Compiled by Sarah Barsness
Birds: 29 species
 Great Blue Heron – 1
 Turkey Vulture – 1
 Canada Goose – 1
 Mallard – 2
 Red-tailed Hawk – 2
 California Gull – 4
 Rock Dove – 4
 Mourning Dove – 1
 Anna's Hummingbird – 10
 Black Phoebe – 3
 Steller's Jay – 7
 California Scrub Jay – 5
 American Crow – 1

Common Raven – 2
 Chestnut-backed Chickadee – 4
 Pygmy Nuthatch – 15
 Pacific Wren – 1
 Hermit Thrush – 1
 American Robin – 14
 Orange-crowned Warbler – 1
 Yellow Warbler – 10
 Dark-eyed Junco – 6
 Song Sparrow – 6
 White-crowned Sparrow – 2
 California Towhee – 4
 Brewer's Blackbird – 1
 House Finch – 7
 Purple Finch – 1
 Lesser Goldfinch – 2

Clockwise from far left: young American Robin;
 Pygmy Nuthatch; Flowering Abutilon (Chinese Lantern);
 Pygmy Nuthatch on a flowering agave century plant.

Photos by Bill Hunnewell

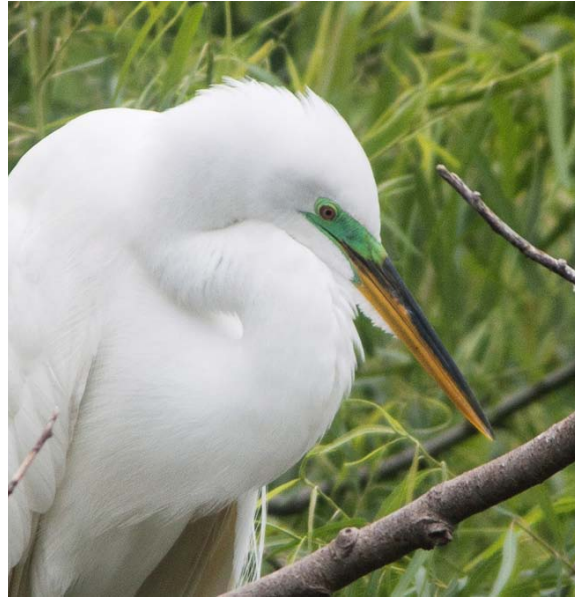


Migration Gets Underway at Heron's Head Park

Photos by
Bill Hunnewell

Clockwise from above:
(both photos) Elegant Terns;
Black-necked Stilts;
Black Oystercatcher;
Marbled Godwit and Black-necked
Stilt; Western Gull with
a hatch-year juvenile.





Great Egrets in their Nests

Photos & commentary by Len Blumin

Above: The Smith Oaks Sanctuary rookery near Houston was teeming with nesting **Great Egrets**. Many pairs already had chicks in their nests, but a few were still in high breeding plumage. The bird in back has yellow lores, while in the bird in the foreground the yellow has changed to day-glow green, indicating a readiness to mate. The lores are the bare areas of unfeathered skin between the eye and the bill.

Above center: Closer view of the same bird. The color will fade in a few weeks as the hormonal surge abates.

Above right: Many of the Great Egrets were already feeding the chicks, but this one may have started late, as it was tending at least one egg. Note how the bright green lores have faded to a soft gray-green, like the color of the egg.

Below right: Four chicks jousting. The smallest chick, in the center, may not get enough food to survive, or may be pushed from the nest by its siblings.

Below center: The largest chick grabs the bill of the parent while two others look down at the runt.

Below left: The process of stimulating the parent to regurgitate is not gentle. At first the young eat directly from the oral cavity, but as they get larger the adult may deposit the meal in the bottom of the nest, which likely minimizes the risk of injury to the parent. The runt has moved away a bit to reduce harassment from the others. Photos were taken in less than two minutes.





In Memoriam: James N. Sullivan, 1937–2016

by Nancy DeStefanis

Jim Sullivan was an incredible nature photographer. Shortly after he retired as vice chairman of Chevron in 2000, he approached me about taking photos of the Great Blue Heron colony at Stow Lake. For the next several years Jim documented the colony, from the arrival of the herons through the chicks' first flights. He was taking photographs almost every week, five months a year.

His heron pictures grace the photo galleries on our website and appear in many of our monthly newsletters. He allowed us to showcase his photos on postcards for sale, with all proceeds benefitting SF Nature Education.

In 2005, he made a special trip to Audubon Canyon Ranch to photograph nesting egrets for a documentary I made about the ranch and its field ornithologist Helen Pratt, *Above the Nests*. Jim also photographed our student bird-calling contests of 2006–2008.

A few years ago Jim donated the copyrights to all his Great Blue Heron photos to SF Nature Education. Jim was a major donor to our school programs. His love for nature lives on in his beautiful photographs.

He leaves his wife Arlene, five children, and many grandchildren.

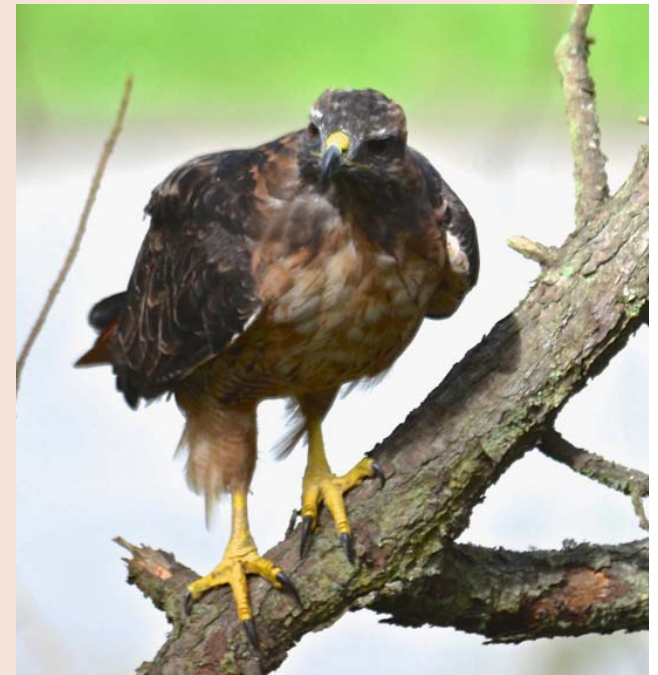
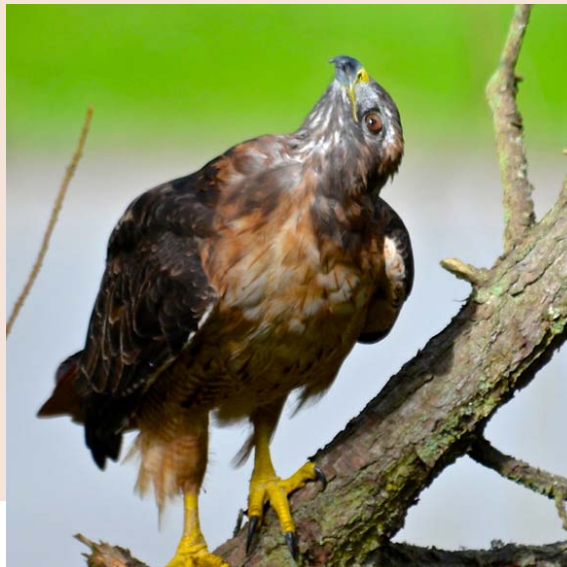


All photos by Jim Sullivan for San Francisco Nature Education
www.sfnature.org



This **Red-tailed Hawk** was chasing a squirrel from tree to tree. It was a thrill waiting for the next move this hawk was going to make. It almost caught the squirrel once. I watched as the hawk was flapping its wings, and then it made a free-fall drop as the squirrel ran down the trunk of the tree and escaped.

Photos & commentary by Sandi Wong





Four **Pygmy Nuthatch** chicks wait impatiently to be fed in their snug tree-trunk nest near Stow Lake.

Photos by **Sandi Wong**



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UPCOMING EVENTS

SF Nature Walks: From 10 am to noon; rain cancels all walks. Please bring binoculars if you can, and a pencil. For directions see our [events calendar](#).

Birding for Everyone: First Saturdays from 10 am to noon in the SF Botanical Garden. Next: Oct. 1, with Sarah Barsness; also Nov. 5, and Dec. 3.

Meet at SF Botanical Garden bookstore, 9th Ave. near Lincoln. SFNE members FREE. \$10 per nonmember adult, children welcome (free).

SF Botanical Garden: Free for SF residents with proof of residency; non-residents pay a fee.

Heron's Head Park with Megan Prelinger: Nov. 12
Meet at trailhead. Volunteers will have spotting scopes for close-up views.

Chain of Lakes with Alan Hopkins: Dec. 10

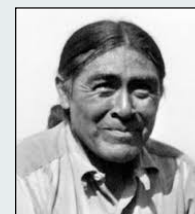
SFNE members FREE. \$10 per nonmember adult, children welcome (free).

FREE PROGRAM

Wednesday, Nov. 9th @ 7:00 p.m.
Merced Branch Library
155 Winston Drive, SF 415 355-5651

ISHI—THE LAST OF HIS TRIBE, 100 YEARS LATER

Lecture/slideshow by Nancy DeStefanis



Ishi (1861-1916) was widely acclaimed in his time as the "last wild Indian" in America. Ishi lived most of his life in hiding near Deer Creek in Tehama County, CA. In 1911, he left his hiding place after his family died. He hiked to Oroville, where he was captured.

Rather than move to a reservation he chose to live at the Anthropology Museum (at the current site of UCSF Parnassus).

On the 100th anniversary of his passing his story is an important reminder of the impact of the Gold Rush on California Indians. - 7 -