



The Blue Heron

News from San Francisco Nature Education • September 2016

Executive Director's Corner

Dear Friends,

We hope you had a very enjoyable summer.

Thanks to all who contributed to our \$5,000 matching grant; I'm happy to report that we reached our goal at the end of May.

Our fall and winter field trips are listed on page 6. We have some special trips planned for Heron's Head Park and Chain of Lakes in November and December.

All eleven chicks that hatched in April successfully fledged in June. The outcome for the newest nest is still uncertain—see story at right. We'll keep you posted on future developments in our next newsletter.

We are looking for volunteers to serve as assistant field trip leaders. We provide training and mentoring. If you are interested, just send an email to info@sfnature.org and add to the subject line: field trip leaders. We will contact you shortly.

I hope you'll join us on one of our upcoming field trips. Thanks so much for your continued support.

Best regards,

Nancy

Nancy DeStefanis

New address and phone:

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



www.sfnature.org

Fifth Heron Nest Seen at Stow Lake!

Nancy DeStefanis, Executive Director



In early June, SFNE volunteer Laura Kaminski spotted a pair of Great Blue Herons building a new nest at the very top of the tree where great blues had earlier built four nests. On June 11th, she observed an adult heron sitting on the new nest; then she observed nest relief where one heron flew in and replaced the sitting heron.

On July 16th, Laura observed two chicks in the nest at the top of the Monterey pine tree. The nest is visible only from Huntington's Waterfall, as it is located at the back of the tree. However, since August 6th, Laura and I have seen only one chick in the nest and no adults flying in to feed it.

So what's happening? Sometimes, Great Blue Herons build nests very late in the season—in this case June—instead of in February, the normal period, when the four earlier nests were constructed. Because it takes three months for the newly-hatched chicks to fledge—in this case approximately mid-October—the parents abandon the chicks, because their breeding period begins anew in January. As a result the chicks die from malnourishment.

When we look at the chronology of the nests at Stow Lake over the years, we find that in 1999 and 2000, parents abandoned chicks in August. It's a sad phenomenon but normal for the parents to feel it's time to prepare for a new breeding season. We will keep you posted in the next newsletter.



Photo: Laura Kaminski

Nest no. 5 on August 20, 2016; below: five nests in the pine tree.



Photo: Nancy DeStefanis

On the pages ahead:

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Courtship in June at Nest No. 5

Photos by Laura Kaminsky

Cool Facts about Great Blue Herons:

- Great Blue Herons may live up to 15 years in the wild.
- They are serially monogamous—they go their own way after the breeding season, but may pair up again the following year if breeding was successful.
- Nesting success is limited by food availability and quantity.
- The mortality rate is high in juvenile herons. In the first year it is 69–71%, decreasing thereafter.

What a Heron Season!

Nancy DeStefanis, Exec. Director

No one could have predicted such a banner year for **Great Blue Herons** at Stow Lake! By opening day in April, we had four active nests with eleven chicks. The public came out in droves to see the highly visible nests full of chicks! There was always incredible activity—adults flying in to feed the nestlings, chicks strutting their stuff in the nests, and ultimately chicks taking their first hops out of the nests.

Three of the nests had three chicks each; the fourth nest had two. All eleven chicks had fledged by mid-June.

The number fledged (not including the chicks in late nest no. 5) brings our total number of heron chicks fledged at Stow Lake since 1993 to a whopping 178! The average of eight chicks per year is truly outstanding.

Meanwhile, our volunteers on the weekly nature walks were busy showing off the **Great Horned Owl** mother and her two adorable owlets. SFNE volunteers excelled at pointing out the variety of birds as well as explaining behavior.

One disappointment was that we could not use our newly-installed Heron Cam to watch the herons. The herons moved abruptly to the new island by the waterfall this year, making it impossible for us to watch them. Despite this setback, we were able to provide an exceptional experience for the public.



Great Horned Owlets at Strawberry Hill; below, a heron nest in mid-April.



Left photo: Laura Kaminsky

Right photo: SFNE



Left photo: Jeff Harter

Volunteer Kevin Koenig observes the newest heron nest from the Waterfall Bridge; below, Great Horned Owlets.



Right photo: Laura Kaminsky

Birding for Everyone, August 6th

Sarah Barsness, Naturalist



Our typical weather persisted on the August 6th walk in the San Francisco Botanical Garden. A small but happy group bundled up and met at the front gate at 10 AM to see if the birds were as intrepid as we were! It was wonderful to have Nancy DeStefanis and interns Kevin and Ileana along. Birds were typically scarce for a cold day in August, but we did not let that discourage us—it gave us the opportunity to pay more attention to other aspects of the park.

Just before the official start of the trip a **coyote** slipped back and forth across my path near the Moon-viewing Garden. I have seen coyotes in the park, but this was the first time I encountered one in the arboretum. I was pleased to notice that he was skittish and seemed glad to escape my sight. There is no reason we cannot happily coexist with these intelligent creatures, but as with all wild animals, it is best if they stay wild. Being shy and cautious near humans is safer for them and for us.

We walked into the Fragrance Garden to look for sparrows and warblers, and stopped to smell the geraniums, sages, and myrtles. Fragrance serves a range of purposes in the natural world: flowers use sweet scents to attract bees and birds, while the spicy smell of shrubs like myrtle discourage those creatures from nibbling.

We took a detour to the Rhododendron Garden to look at a circular bench made from stones from a 13th-century Spanish Cistercian monastery. Nancy regaled us with a marvelous history of the monastery, purchased by William Randolph Hearst in 1931 and gifted to SF in 1941, after he went bankrupt.

Shipped to the US in pieces, a fire laid waste to the design plans shortly after their arrival in SF. Many of these stones remain in the SFBG, and also line Stow Lake and the newly restored Palace of Fine Arts. For more on the many twists and turns in this story, visit www.outsidelands.org/monastery-stones.php.

The Wildfowl Pond was empty but for a single **Mallard** and a young **Black Phoebe**. We entered the Australia Garden, and while looking at the **Cooper's Hawk** nest that was active this spring, we spotted a raptor who turned out to

be one of the young **Cooper's Hawks**. We recognized him (or her) from the distinct tail bands and mottled gray back. We discussed how we would distinguish this bird from a **Sharp-shinned Hawk**, since the field marks are so similar. It is, of course, one of the more difficult birding identifications. I pointed out that the location, time of year, and that we were near a known **Cooper's** nest were as helpful in this case as field marks.

Intern Kevin is relatively new to birding but learning fast. He helped me identify a backlit **Western Tanager** at the top of a tall tree as we headed to the Succulent Garden. A finch to its right helped with relative size, and we confirmed the color and wing bar.

Other than the Tanager, a single **Orange-crowned Warbler**, and a **Hutton's Vireo** calling from a distance, most of the birds we encountered were the "usual suspects"—residents and summer visitors. We saw a high count of young birds, all testing their brand-new flying and calling skills, including many juvenile **Anna's Hummingbirds**. Kevin asked if hummingbirds can really fly backwards. Yes, these little creatures can maneuver in any direction in the air. Their wings can beat up to 100 times a second, often in circles. They expend such enormous amounts of energy that they need to sleep in a near-death state called "torpor."

In June the Succulent Garden had been hopping with nesting activity, with four species raising young in the century plants. Things were quieter today, but many young **Pygmy Nuthatches** were picking insects from the large blooms, and we saw more than one late-season **Allen's Hummingbird**. We found the tiny Allen's Hummingbird nest that in June contained two tiny nestlings. I was happy to see no treasure hunter had walked off with it!

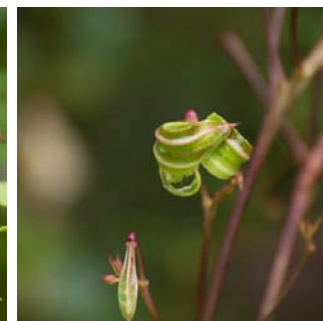
We heard **Pacific Wrens** in the Redwood Grove and a single **Red-tailed Hawk**. We saw a **Steller's Jay** and the newly-named **California Scrub Jay**. We had a view of two young **Lesser Goldfinches**.

During the last part of our outing we paid more attention to etymology and botany than ornithology. Signs at the California Garden warned us to not tread on **California Pipevine Swallowtail** caterpillars. We soon

came upon dozens of them, deep black with orange or yellow spots, on the ground and in the native pipevines. Soon these will become iridescent blue **Pipevine Swallowtail** butterflies!

Heading back to the main gate, Deborah pointed out pods of balsam plants bulging with seed. A light touch will cause these pods to fly open and release their seeds, and we enjoyed being a "vector" for these delicate, fragrant plants, also called Touch-Me-Nots.

A wise birding friend told me always to let field trips take their own direction and flow, and we all felt the benefit of that advice. We had a renewed sense of discovery and awe at the diversity and complexity of the natural world, including plants, bugs, carnivores, and birds!



SF Botanical Garden
08/06/2016
Compiled by Sarah Barsness
Birds: 26 species
 Canada Goose – 1
 Mallard – 1
 Cooper's Hawk – 2
 Red-tailed Hawk – 1
 American Coot – 1
 California Gull – 4
 Rock Dove – 4
 Anna's Hummingbird – 4
 Allen's Hummingbird – 12
 Black Phoebe – 3
 Hutton's Vireo – 1

Steller's Jay – 2
 California Scrub Jay – 4
 American Crow – 1
 Common Raven – 3
 Tree Swallow – 2
 Pygmy Nuthatch – 4
 Pacific Wren – 1
 American Robin – 2
 Wilson's Warbler – 1
 Dark-eyed Junco – 2
 Song Sparrow – 6
 California Towhee – 2
 Western Tanager – 1
 House Finch – 1
 Purple Finch – 1
 Lesser Goldfinch – 2

Clockwise from far left: Allen's Hummingbird nest; Pipevine Swallowtail caterpillar; *Impatiens balsamina*; balsam seed pods; juvenile Lesser Goldfinch.

Photos by Sarah Barsness

Birding for Everyone, June 4th

Sarah Barsness, Naturalist

A group of ten birders gathered at the SF Botanical Garden for our June Birding for Everyone outing. The late spring weather was chilly and foggy, although we all know that just across the bay they are already feeling the heat of summer!

Among our number were many of our regulars, but also three “newbies” who joined the walk after visiting Heron Watch. Also along was our new—amazing—volunteer Ileana, who spent five years working for the Cornell Lab. She added a wealth of insight to our morning, while enjoying being a “newbie” to our western birds!

Starting out, we all noted that it was hard to see the birds for all the **American Robins**. It seemed initially as if they were the only birds in the gardens. We counted at least a dozen digging for worms in the Great Meadow and more in the trees above. Their prevalence gave us an opportunity to really appreciate their range of songs, from the familiar springtime, “cheer-up” to the classic whinny.

The Fragrance Garden and Wildfowl Pond were deserted, so we moved on to Gondwana Circle, where we had the privilege of viewing not just one, but two active **Anna’s Hummingbird** nests! The first was so close to the path that we nearly brushed against it, and I was very upset to hear, from one of our number, that previous visitors had tugged on the branch to look inside. I reminded everyone



Photo: Judy Harter

to keep a distance, to be quiet, and not stay long.

I try to keep in mind that we are peering into the mother bird’s home, with her most precious loved ones tucked beneath her. Unlike in other bird families, hummingbird

females incubate and raise their offspring alone, meaning that the nests are often unattended. When we look, predators notice.

As in May, nesting birds were once again the theme of our walk, and on this visit we had the incredible privilege

of seeing nestlings. We headed to the Succulent Garden, where last month we observed **Pygmy Nuthatches**, **Tree Swallows**, and **Downy Woodpeckers** all nesting in the towering century plants. The woodpeckers seem to have fledged, but there was no shortage of activity here. The nuthatches and swallows were still actively nesting just 12 inches apart, high on the tallest century plant. The nuthatch nest seemed particularly busy, and since these little bird parents often have nest “helpers” (young males from previous broods pitching in) this makes sense. We watched the male and female swallows trading off duties, flying in and out to gather food for their young.

As if all this activity wasn’t fascinating enough, we were amazed to spot a **Nuttall’s Woodpecker** entering a third cavity low on the same plant! This is our very own woodpecker, whose range extends only along the western side of California. We watched both the male—distinguished by his red head—and the female feed a large nestling that popped a head out of the cavity to receive a beak-full of insects.

We worked our way quietly down the hill to check on the **Allen’s Hummingbird** nest we had seen the month before, just off the path on the branch of a desert plant;



Photo: Bill Hummwell

we had worried this location might be too vulnerable. Happily, the tiny nest is not only intact, but contained two tiny nestlings sound asleep. We took quick glances before moving on.

The Children’s Garden was exceptionally quiet, save for a **Western Scrub Jay** at the top of a



Photo: Judy Harter

Left to right: Anna’s Hummingbirds; Red-shouldered Hawk; Nuttall’s Woodpeckers.

willow. We turned to head back, crossing the southern edge of the Succulent Garden.

I noted with surprise that we had not heard a **Wilson’s Warbler** that morning, one of our only summer warblers, and usually very common in the garden. On cue, we heard his distinctive “sprinkler head” song. We had close views of this bright yellow, black-capped warbler that hardly required binoculars.

The Redwood Grove was full of human families, so the Pacific Wrens were hiding, refusing

even to sing. As we emerged onto the Conifer Lawn, we heard the cry of a **Red-shouldered Hawk**, which might also account for the silence in the grove. As he flew over and landed nearby we saw a mature bird, with beautiful red shoulder and breast, and distinctive banding on his tail.

Back at the main gate we summarized the highlights of our outing, especially thrilled with our close encounters with brand new bird life. We were accompanied by the song of a **Purple Finch**, just overhead in a nearby tree, but he refused to be seen. It was a reminder that it is a privilege, not a right, for us to see the birds in their habitats, and I humbly thanked them for allowing us a glimpse into their lives.

San Francisco Botanical Garden 06/04/2016

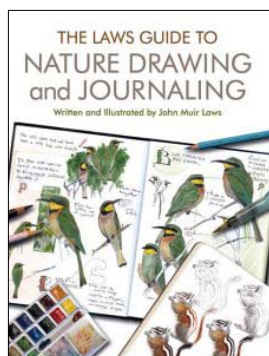
Compiled by Sarah Barsness

Birds: 30 species

Canada Goose – 3
Mallard – 2
Double-crested Cormorant – 1
Cooper’s Hawk – 1
Red-shouldered Hawk – 1
Red-tailed Hawk – 1
American Coot – 1
California Gull – 4
Caspian Tern – 1
Rock Pigeon – 4
Anna’s Hummingbird – 4
Allen’s Hummingbird – 12
Nuttall’s Woodpecker – 3

Downy Woodpecker – 1
Black Phoebe – 3
Steller’s Jay – 2
Western Scrub Jay – 4
American Crow – 1
Common Raven – 3
Tree Swallow – 2
Pygmy Nuthatch – 4
Pacific Wren – 2
American Robin – 20
Wilson’s Warbler – 2
Dark-eyed Junco – 4
White-crowned Sparrow
Song Sparrow – 7
Brown-headed Cowbird – 1
House Finch – 4
Purple Finch – 8

Book Reviews



The Laws Guide to Nature Drawing and Journaling

Written and Illustrated by John Muir Laws

Paperback, 8.5 x 11; 312 pages, full-color and black & white illustrations throughout.

Heyday Books, 2016; \$35.

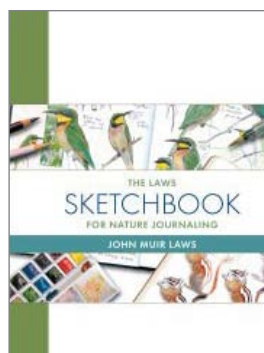
Reviewed by Nancy H. DeStefanis

This is a splendid book for all who are interested in translating their nature experiences into journals, paintings, and drawings. Jack Laws has been drawing and illustrating from an early age. He sketches a page from nature in every issue of *Bay Nature* magazine. He brings a wealth of experience to this guide.

Laws covers a lot of material in a very digestible way. He introduces his readers to the tools necessary for drawing and painting. He gives examples of various field kits and goes into detail on drawing supplies and types of nature journals.

From there, he devotes several chapters to techniques and exercises for drawing animals, wildflowers, trees, and landscapes. Throughout the book there are marvelous illustrations that help you follow his thought process.

I consider this new book to be the definitive guide to nature journaling. *The Laws Guide* would make a great gift for the budding artist in you or someone dear to you.



The Laws Sketchbook for Nature Journaling

by John Muir Laws

Hardcover, 7 x 9, 96 pages, with elastic band closure.

Heyday Books, 2016; \$20.

Reviewed by Nancy H. DeStefanis

This sketchbook is a terrific companion to the *Laws Guide to Nature Drawing and*

Journaling. Included in the 14 pages of information and illustrations are exercises to train you to think like a naturalist, and tools for measuring and quantifying observations.

The sketchbook also includes 80 blank pages suitable for your pen, pencil, and light washers. The author has even included a table of contents option so you can number your pages to keep track of observations and sketches.

The compact sketchbook is a good fit for your backpack when you are heading out on the trail.



Sample pages from *The Laws Guide to Nature Drawing and Journaling*.

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: **Sept. 10** (*no walk Labor Day Weekend*), with Sarah Barsness; also Oct. 1, 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.

Save these future walk dates:

Heron's Head Park with Megan Prelinger: Nov. 12
Chain of Lakes with Alan Hopkins: Dec. 10

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

e-mail: info@sfnature.org
telephone: 415-205-0776
www.sfnature.org

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



John Muir Laws is a naturalist, educator, and artist, with degrees in conservation and resource studies from UC Berkeley; wildlife biology from University of Montana; and scientific illustration from UC Santa

Cruz. He is a 2010 Audubon TogetherGreen Conservation Leadership Fellow, and has received the Terwilliger Environmental Award for outstanding service in environmental education. Visit his website at www.johnmuirlaws.com.

Jack Laws conducts monthly journaling get-togethers. Free; suggested donation is \$20.

For more information about meet-ups: www.johnmuirlaws.com/nature-journal-club



Creatures of Summer: in Air, Water, on Land

Photos by Bill Hunnewell



Clockwise from top left:
Osprey; Western Bluebird; Bald Eagle;
Humpback Whale and Brown Pelicans;
Northern Fur Seals at Pt. Reyes; Juvenile
Elephant Seals; Allen's Hummingbird.

