



# The Blue Heron

News from San Francisco Nature Education • May 2020

## Executive Director's Corner

Autumn Sartain



Dear Friends,

Due to Covid 19 we have suspended all our programs for the time being. We hope to start up again in September with Birding for Everyone, so long as it's safe to gather together.

We have expanded this newsletter to include the best work from our photographers. We hope the photos give you a much-needed lift during these hard times.

**We're off to a late start for our Spring Fundraising Campaign to raise \$20,000 by June 30th in support of our programs. Like other nonprofits, we have sustained a major loss during the pandemic. I hope you will make a special gift at this time. Contributions are tax-deductible to the extent of law.**

Nesting birds are thriving throughout GG Park. The Great Blue Herons now have chicks in five of the seven nests. We can't give you a tally yet because some of the hatchlings are hard to see—but we can hear the chicks!

If you come out to Stow Lake to see them, remember to bring your binoculars and practice social distancing. The fun is about to start with multiple fly-ins all over the heron tree to feed the growing chicks!

Our website features **Activities for Kids**, and our friends at Tree Frog Treks have a free distance learning site as well ([treefrogtreks.com](http://treefrogtreks.com)). Thank you in advance for your support.

Best regards,

*Nancy*

Nancy H. DeStefanis

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Robert Ho



Ian Reid

Heron chicks are growing fast!

### On the pages ahead:

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Ian Reid



Grace Ruth

## Great Blue Heron Incubation and Hatching

There are seven active nests this year in the Stow Lake heron colony on a tree on a tiny island. We generally observe the nests from the path on the northeast side of the lake. Five nests already have chicks.

From our observation site the first two heron chicks were spotted on April 7th in the top left nest. Soon after, three chicks were discovered in the far right nest in the crotch above the ivy. Then three more nests had chicks, but we don't know how many.

Incubation lasts about 30 days. By mid-May, we expect the two remaining nests to have chicks. Adults feed chicks by regurgitating prey into the bottom of nest, not beak to beak. One parent may feed the smallest chicks multiple times from his or her own gullet without waiting for its partner to arrive. Both parents take turns brooding their young for the first four weeks, then both parents need to forage at the same time to feed their growing brood.



Helene Sobol



Ian Reid

Chick clamps down on parent's beak to stimulate regurgitation.



Courtship Activities of Great Blue Herons; Two More Chick Photos



Ian Reid



Norman Chin



Ian Reid



Grace Ruth



Norman Chin



Grace Ruth



Courtship Activities of Great Blue Herons



Richard Drake



Richard Drake

Two pair of herons got a late start at the end of March and in early April. There were many twig presentations during this period. Great blues are colonial waterbirds; they like to nest together.



Herbert B. Goodman



Herbert B. Goodman



## Birding in the Time of Coronavirus Alan Hopkins, Naturalist



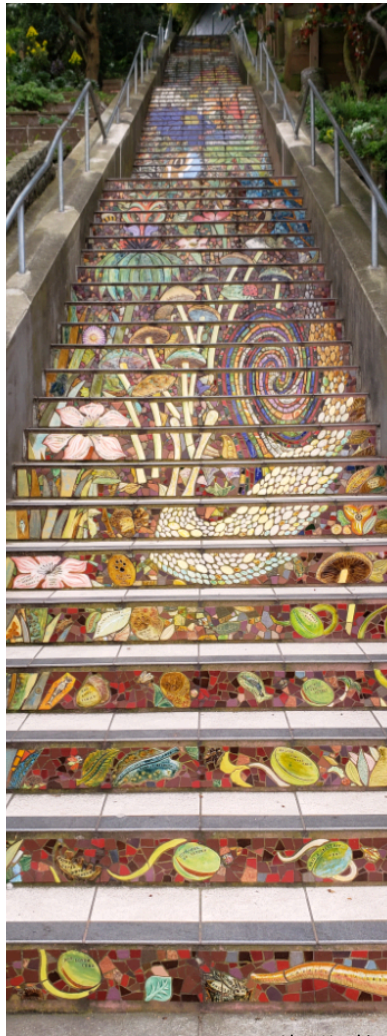
Spring is here and migration is happening! And what? We can't have field trips, and many of our favorite birdwatching sites are closed? These are trying

times, and for many of us, going on a walk to enjoy our free-flying friends is a great stress reliever. So what can we do?

First we will have to learn to bird while wearing a mask. If we are lucky, we will have a friend willing to keep a safe six feet away on a walk. My friend Lisa from Sonoma has suggested birding within a one-mile radius of our homes. Quite a few people have taken her up on this challenge. A large part of Golden Gate Park is within my circle. Unfortunately, because so many people and their children are free from routines, and so many other parks are closed, Golden Gate Park is very crowded.

I visit the park early on weekdays. As Lisa suggested, we should look in places we have rarely checked within our area. My circle covers much of the Inner Sunset and Richmond Districts; it would seem there is not much to find. But there is just enough to keep me busy: the 15th and 16th Avenue steps have native oaks and vegetation around them, and most of the Mount Sutro Open Space Reserve is in my area. These are places rarely visited by other birdwatchers.

The developed areas are worth investigating as well. My friend Pat keeps a record of the falcons that stop on the church steeple across from his Tenderloin apartment. I am checking the palms for Hooded Orioles, and tile roofs for nesting House Sparrows. The sparrows are actually rather interesting. They are social birds, and gather in groups that never seem to stop chattering, except when you are



Alan Hopkins

looking for one. In London, the once abundant bird has all but disappeared for unknown reasons. Maybe we should appreciate them before our birds are gone.

Another of Europe's transplants, the European Starling, will also build nests in tile roofs and other cavities. Excellent mimics, one was made a pet by Mozart when he heard it singing his Piano Concerto No. 17 in G major before it had been performed! Birdwatcher and journalist Lyanda Lynn Haupt has written a fine book, *Mozart's Starling*, about her adventures raising one to further her appreciation of Mozart.

Because of the novel coronavirus there are fewer cars and airplanes on the move and our environment is quieter. Now might be a good time to learn bird songs. Is that bird singing out my window at 5 am a Northern Mockingbird or Robin? There are species recordings you can listen to on many of the field guide apps. But what if you can't see the bird? The Peterson *Western Birding* by Ear CDs list birds by song type, so birds that sing similar songs but look different are placed together for contrast. Recently I read *The Evolution of Beauty; How Darwin's Forgotten Theory Shapes the Animal World Around Us* by Richard O. Prum. He writes about the songs of Manakins in South America and Bower Birds in New Guinea on the website [xeno-canto.org](http://xeno-canto.org). I was able to look up songs of the birds he describes.

With today's technology we can watch wildlife spectacles live-streaming. There are many "cams" set up so we can watch nesting birds. Two great local webcams are PG&E's camera on [Peregrine Falcons](#) in downtown San Francisco, and Golden Gate Audubon Society's Osprey Cam in Richmond: [sfbayospreys.org](http://sfbayospreys.org).

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Alan Hopkins

Golden Gate Audubon



Clockwise from top: 16th Avenue Tiled Steps; Golden Gate Audubon Osprey Cam image; House Sparrow.





Alan Hopkins

Clockwise from above: Hooded Oriole; Mt. Sutro Open Space Reserve; California Academy of Sciences Farallon Islands webcam image.



California Academy of Sciences



Alan Hopkins

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My favorite is the [California Academy of Sciences Farallon Islands Live Webcam](#).

It is possible to remotely move that camera for different views of the islands (however, this can be quite frustrating when people move the view too frequently). There are no close-up views of nesting birds, but you will see gulls, murres, guillemots, cormorants, sea lions—and if you're lucky, migrating land birds or whales. For more bird cams check: [Audubon Bird Cams](#) and [Cornell Lab Bird Cams](#).

I hope you will be able to get to a local park and enjoy the quiet and fresh air that the coronavirus has brought us. Or safely shelter in place with a good bird book or webcam to look at.

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San Francisco Nature Education is in its 20th year of  
delivering comprehensive environmental education  
programs to students from schools in the San Francisco  
Unified School District.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Birding for Everyone: No walks in May or June.**

**Coming up:** Next walks, September 5 and October 3.  
The SF Botanical Garden is currently closed.

**Heron Watch:** All Heron Watch programs in May and  
June have been cancelled.

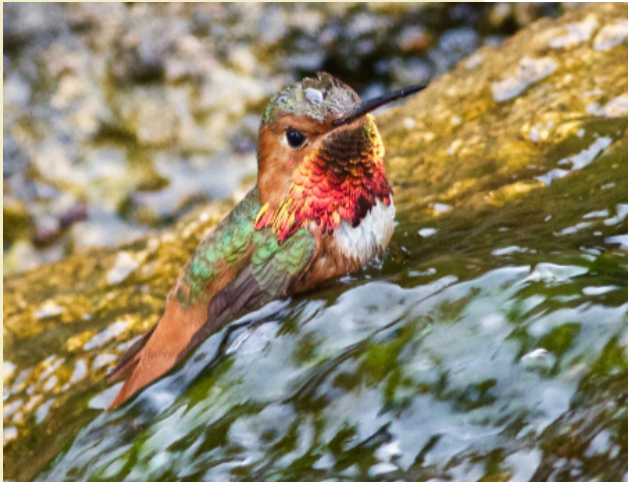
**Get the latest public health guidance online:**  
[\*\*SF Department of Public Health Coronavirus Facts\*\*](#)



Observed Around Stow Lake: Allen's Hummingbird Bathes in the Waterfall



Hummingbirds; Sandi Wong



Clockwise from top left: Allen's Hummingbird (x4); Mallard mother with ducklings; Great Blue Heron with catch.



Norman Chin



Grace Ruth



Observed Around Stow Lake, continued



Norman Chin



Robert Ho

Clockwise from above: Great Blue Heron with gopher prey; Great Blue Heron walking; Pied-billed Grebe; Canada Goose with goslings (x2).



Helene Sobol



Robert Ho

Pied-billed Grebes have an extremely variable vocal repertoire. One of the most commonly heard sounds is a long, loud, rhythmic series of bleating whoops—a song regularly heard at Stow Lake.



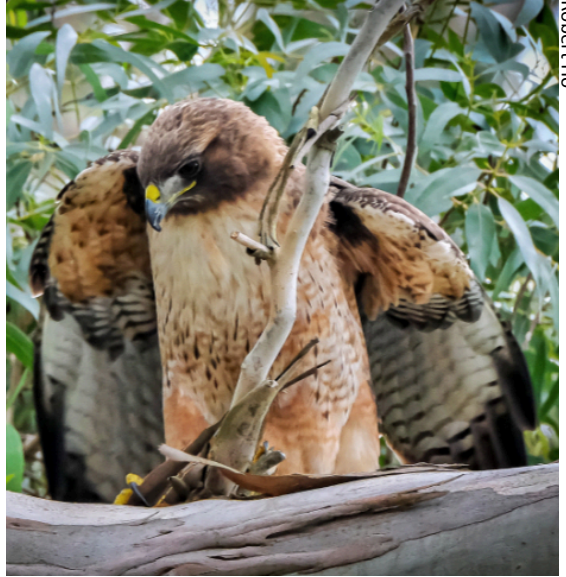
Richard Drake





Robert Ho

## Red-tailed Hawks Stay Busy at Stow Lake



Robert Ho

### Red-tailed Hawks: Cool Facts

Red-tailed Hawks have nested on the island at Stow Lake with the Great Blue Herons since 2017—but in separate trees. However, neither bird is a predator for the other.

They may fly over the other's tree and irritate the birds nesting there, but that's all. Hawklets arrive about thirty days after incubation starts. These hawks mate for life, unlike the herons, which are serially monogamous. We are watching closely and hoping for hawklets in late April or May.

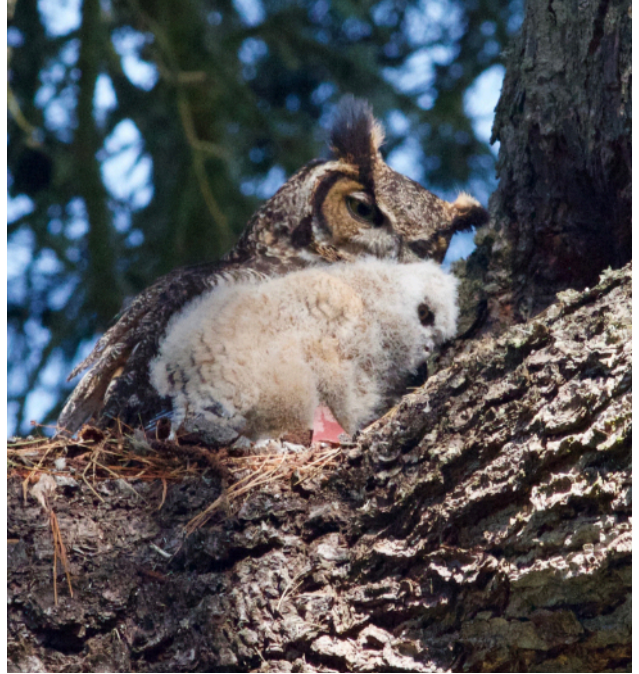


Robert Ho



Richard Drake





A pair of Great Horned Owls has nested in the west end of Golden Gate Park for many years. This year's nest has produced only one owlet. About a month after hatching, the entire family leaves the nest to disappear back into the trees. Other years have produced three owlets. Great Horned Owls have also successfully nested atop Strawberry Island at Stow Lake. The Great Horned Owl is a major predator of Great Blue Herons, but has not attacked the herons' nests in the 27 years that the herons have nested at Stow Lake.