Together we defend our region’s birds, unique biodiversity, and threatened habitats through advocacy, education, and restoration.
Early in my waterbird studies in Mission Bay, I learned that one of our common winter visitors, the Eared Grebe, has a rather uncommon migration story. Before arriving in San Diego, Eared Grebes participate in a molt migration, traveling to far-away sites that provide food and safety from predators. These birds annually make the difficult and treacherous trek, during which thousands may die, to the hypersaline Mono Lake in California and Utah’s Great Salt Lake before arriving in smaller numbers to winter at the San Diego Saltworks in the South Bay and at other areas of the county. While Eared Grebes are foraging for brine shrimp during their molt migration, incredible physiological changes take place, rendering them flightless for months. During this process, they lose not only their flight feathers, but also breast muscle mass to make space for the enlarged digestive organs needed to help them double their weight. They then grow new flight feathers, contract their digestive organs to one-third their normal size (rendering them incapable of eating), and regrow their heart and pectoral muscles to prepare for their nocturnal migration to winter sites. What’s even more impressive: Eared Grebes go through a similar process three to six times annually; meaning they are flightless nine to ten months out of the year—the longest known flightless period for any bird worldwide with the ability to fly!

Here in San Diego, we are fortunate to be able to witness the migration stories of numerous species of birds, such as the Eared Grebe. In addition to the hypersaline environments at the San Diego Saltworks, you can find large numbers of Eared Grebes, in their winter black-and-white plumage, inhabiting coastal waters, as well as smaller populations in freshwater lakes and reservoirs throughout the county. Grebes and other diving birds, such as loons, have legs located at the back of the body, which are perfect for propelling while foraging underwater but nearly useless for walking on land. Watching Eared Grebes expertly navigate underwater is fascinating and delightful. My favorite viewing locations are at Fashion Show Beach on West Point Loma Boulevard, looking down into the water through the fence. This is a favorite foraging spot, and a handful of Eared Grebes may visit the shallows at any given time in the winter. Here, you can get a close view of their underwater acrobatics, which are virtually impossible to see when the birds are in larger bodies of water.

Mission Bay is also my favorite location to watch black-bellied Plovers, the largest plover to visit San Diego County during the winter. In winter plumage, an identifiable feature in Black-bellied Plovers is the black armpits, or “axillaries,” seen in flight, earning them the nickname “black-armed” or “black-axillaries.” This is a good way to distinguish these species from other shorebirds. Commonly seen in coastal areas, Black-bellied Plovers can also be recognized by their foraging behavior, which is typical of all plovers—slow, cautious movements in search of food with rapid, direct strikes of forage items. Unlike other shorebirds such as the Long-billed Curlew, which have Herbst Corpsuses (nerve-endings located in the beak, which help feel around for food), plovers depend on sight rather than feeling to feed. Plovers are totally influenced, too, so paying attention to the tides will increase your chance of seeing them. Egrets, an underappreciated invaluable resource that hosts numerous for fisheries including carbon sequestering species, help mitigate climate change, also serves as a buffer for shorebirds.

During low tide, Black-bellied Plovers forage invertebrates alongside Marbled Godwits and Willets in the exposed egrets along the miles of shoreline in Mission Bay. During high tide, Black-bellied Plovers congregate in dense flocks above the water line in the protected areas of the Kendall-Frost Marsh, which is open to the public on the second and fourth Saturday of each month for “Wander the Wetlands” events. For those who love passerines, the fall arrival of a variety of warblers to the county is a welcome sight. The widespread Yellow-rumped Warbler, affectionately named “butter-butt” for the yellow plumage above the tail, is usually the first warbler beginning birders can identify. Two subspecies converge in San Diego, the Audubon Warbler, which breeds in western Canada, the western United States, and Mexico, and the Myrtle Warbler, which breeds in Canada and the northeastern United States. I find it comforting to hear the ubiquitous “chek” vocalizations of Yellow-rumped Warblers while strolling through Chollas Creek or almost anywhere in the county during the fall. Their widespread presence confirms the relative stability of the population and also represents the stability of western forest birds, a bright spot in an otherwise gloomy forecast for many bird species.

A 2019 study indicated overall losses of 30% of birds over the past 50 years in the United States. To facilitate conservation efforts, data to assess changes in bird populations. Finally, to alleviate additional stresses for our local migratory birds, actions as simple as reducing and eliminating disturbance by respecting spaces for birds could make the small difference needed for an individual bird during its long migration journey.
Unlocking the Secrets of Bird Migration

by LaTresa Pearson, Sketches Editor

On October 13, 2022, a four-month-old Bar-tailed Godwit, dubbed B6, departed Alaska to head for wintering grounds in Australia and New Zealand. Eleven days later, the intrepid young bird landed in Tasmania, 8,245 miles away, breaking the record for the longest documented nonstop flight by any animal, according to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).

We know about this amazing feat because B6 is part of a study by a team of scientists from the USGS, Max Planck Institute, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who set out to track juvenile Bar-tailed Godwits from their breeding sites near Nome, Alaska. First-year birds had never been tracked before, so the scientists wanted to better understand how these juveniles navigate to their wintering grounds thousands of miles away.

To track B6, scientists attached a five-gram solar-powered satellite transmitter to its rump. They also used a USGS metal band and a uniquely coded alphanumeric leg flag to identify the bird. In an interview with Alaska Public Media, USGS Research Wildlife Biologist Dan Ruthrauff revealed that tracking these birds was tricky business. They tried to follow the chicks until they were big enough to strap on a functional transmitter that could be put on an animal. It's something we kind of take for granted now.

You can hear Heisman tell her favorite stories from her book at the San Diego Bird Festival, which will be held February 22-26. She will be the keynote speaker on February 24, 2023. Please register online at www.sandiegobirdfestival.org. Published by HarperCollins, her book can be preordered on Bookshop.org, which supports local bookstores, and other book retailers.

D uring migration, secrets are alive because a deeper purpose is driving the need for change. We have heard of the unfathomable flights of birds such as the Arctic Tern, which migrate 60,000 miles in a year, and approximately 1.5 million miles over their lifetimes. In human terms, we see these as feats of sacrifice, grit, and fearless determination. To navigate to safe harbor across great distances, facing gauntlets of peril, birds instinctively interpret the signs of nature with precision and rely on their full range of uncanny adaptations.

Black-bellied Plovers and Short-billed Dowitchers by David Stump

Edward O. Henry was born in the fall of 1941 in North Platte, Nebraska, a year of many challenges. But Ed was a person who seemed born to thrive in times of challenge. We know him primarily as a steady, thoughtful leader on the SDAS board of directors, including a full term as president, and as an avid and skilled bird photographer whose photos were freely shared for use in Sketches and other chapter publications. We grew to value these abilities in his retirement, but his life was marked by a series of fully realized career moves that collectively spoke of his keen intelligence, passion for life in all its expressions, and a desire to discover a unity within the great diversity of our human family. From his years as an engineering student at the General Motors Institute of Technology to his decades of stories and ongoing effort across multiple generations of scientists to make it happen," says Heisman. "There have been a lot of really cool books written about bird migration already, but this is the first one, that I know of, that goes into how we figured this out, which is an equally wild story to what the birds are actually doing."

I had the opportunity to read a prepublication copy of Heisman's book, and it provides fascinating insight into our quest to understand bird migration. From banding and nocturnal bird-hunting to recording radar and radio isotopes, she tells the captivating stories of the scientists determined to unlock the secrets of bird migration. From the pioneers who drew inspiration from such diverse sources as World War II radar readings and the space race to present-day scientists analyzing radio isotopes from feathers, Heisman paints a compelling picture of their challenges and triumphs.

One of the most interesting characters in the book is Bill Cochran, one of the founders of radio telemetry. Heisman was able to track Cochran down and interview him for the book before his recent passing. "I'm still fascinated by him," says Heisman. "He like he's under-heralded as someone who played a really pivotal role in the history of not just birds, but wildlife tracking in general. He was the first guy who really built a functional transmitter that could be put on an animal. It's something we kind of take for granted now."

We are committed to intensifying our efforts, deepening our impact, and magnifying the call to join the growing movement towards a cleaner and healthier environment for all. Together we can put San Diego on the map as the birdiest, most biodiverse, and "nature first" county in the nation. The journey will be long, resources may appear limited, and the end is beyond the horizon. Yet, with nature as our guide, we will reach our destination.

Travis Kemritz, Executive Director
Late winter through early spring is the time to catch the spectacular migration of Swainson’s Hawks through the Borrego Valley. Beginning mid to late February and peaking mid March to late April, thousands of Swainson’s Hawks migrate through the Borrego Valley from Mexico, Columbia, and Argentina on their way to breeding grounds as far north as Alaska. The hawks feed on flying ants, dragonflies, and the caterpillars of White-lined Sphinx Moths. Citizen scientists can help count the hawks during the Borrego Valley Hawkwatch.

White-crowned Sparrows begin showing up the third week of September, traveling more than 2,500 miles from Alaska to San Diego County’s inland valleys, their numbers growing during the winter when they are joined by migrants. They can be found foraging in mixed flocks with other sparrows, but their distinctive facial pattern and white tail spots set them apart. The Lark Sparrow is named for its song, which is reminiscent of the Old World lark’s. During 2021’s Christmas Bird Count, the largest numbers were found in Escondido, followed by Lake Henshaw. They avoid urban and coastal areas, preferring more rural, grassland habitats.

Winter is the only time of year American Pipits can be found in San Diego. They begin arriving in mid to late September and tend to prefer open country—agricultural areas, pastures, lakeshores, beaches, and even sports fields and golf courses. While they are most frequently seen on the ground foraging for insects, they may also be seen flying overhead in large flocks giving their namesake pip-pit call.

American Thrushes in the genus Catharus. Hermit Thrushes are the only ones to winter in the United States. Ariving in late September, they are commonly found in chaparral and riparian or oak woodlands foraging on the ground for insects or picking berries from shrubs. They are common winter visitors at Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary.

Wintering in Central America and the West, Ruby-crowned Kinglets are another widespread winter migrant in San Diego County. The tiny, olive-green bird, with its striking white eye ring and rarely seen ruby crown, is most common in riparian and oak woodlands but can also be found flitting amongst the branches of urban eucalyptus and pines. With their velvety plumage, distinctive black mask, crest, and splashes of bright yellow and orange, Cedar Waxwings are a wintertime star attraction. They are found in the greatest numbers between November and March and are most common in coastal lowland areas. They fly in flocks and can often be seen feasting on Toyon berries.

Four wintering ducks, the Northern Pintail, American Wigeon, and Greenwinged and Cinnamon Teals (above) cluster on a narrow spit in the San Diego River flood channel. While some duck species are resident, many are seasonal, and provide a colorful display of diversity in the colder months.

During the winter (November through March) Surf Scotters are the most common bird on San Diego Bay as well as offshore, with more than 5,000 recorded during 2021’s Christmas Bird Count. They feed largely on mussels, which they swallow whole. Their powerful bill pulverizes the shell. They also have salt glands above their eyes which grow larger in the winter.
Conservation: A Year of Big Wins

ReWild Mission Bay

We have more than 60 organizations in our ReWild Coalition and gave 19 presentations to community groups. We had more than 600 people at Love Your Wetlands Day in February 2022. Our activities in the marsh and connections to Kumeyaay tule boatbuilders brought new depth to our event and helped us make the argument for Wildest restoration of the northeast corner of Mission Bay.

In partnership with UCSD, we started Wonder the Wetlands events, and twice a month, docents help open Kendall-Frost Marsh to the public for birding and solitude. This event helps us show the beauty and value of tidal wetlands.

Staff members have been appointed to the City of San Diego Climate Action Plan Review Committee, and we are helping to craft recommendations and policies to codify wetland restoration as a climate-action goal.

California Least Terns

Through our hard work, in concert with the City of San Diego Rangers, other partners, and a lot of luck, California Least Terns had a relatively good nesting season in 2021, with more than 200 nests and 90 fledglings.

The 2021-22 restoration season in Mission Bay involved 422 volunteers and more than 18 events.

We have established restoration partnerships with the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge, Port of San Diego, and City of San Diego.

More than 2,000 pounds of invasive plants and hundreds of pounds of trash were removed and over 425 native plants installed throughout the County.

Other Conservation and Advocacy Programs

Our Native Seed Library program has grown. We now have nearly 30 libraries open for lending, including one at the Barona Cultural Center.

Building off our good name and position in Mission Bay, our staff is improving bird habitat protection by beginning vegetation monitoring and nest mapping of Black Skimmer, Caspian Tern, and Forster’s Tern nesting locations.

We continue to push for a seat at the planning table for Western and Clark’s Grebes at Lake Hodges.

Our Audubon Advocates program enrolled another 20 Advocates, who are ready to learn environmental campaign strategies and share their priority projects with us.

We expanded our campaign on Native Plant Proclamations and were successful in convincing every municipality in the Otay Valley watershed.

The City of Chula Vista, the City of Imperial Beach, and the City of San Diego all passed Native Plant proclamations.

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Our Sanctuaries: Havens for Birds and Living Labs for Nature Enthusiasts

At San Diego Audubon, we are fortunate to provide a welcoming space for our visitors to reconnect with nature, and throughout the past few years, we have come to realize that there are few things more important for our mental health than our connection to the natural world. Birds and bird lovers alike are welcome to connect in our two well-managed properties, Silverwood and Anstine-Audubon.

Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary: Recovering a Landscape as It Once Was

Silverwood hosted 1,695 visitors throughout the year.

142 students and youth group members, including students from the University of San Diego and Girl and Boy Scout Troops, participated in nature and ethnobotany programs.

125 adults from hiking, ecology, and birding groups participated in special programming.

Staff and volunteers worked to eradicate most of the germinating target species of invasive plants in hotspot zones.

Volunteers spent 375.5 hours hosting Sunday events, 78 hours removing invasive weeds and restoring native species, and 37 hours maintaining trails.

Of the 130 species of birds that have been reliably recorded at Silverwood over the last 60 years, 73 species were recorded for the past year, including three separate sightings of an American Bald Eagle.

Education: Back on the Trail

In-person field trips resumed in spring of 2022. The students and our staff were excited to get back out on the trails. We reached nearly 1,000 students and provided more than 3,500 nature lessons throughout San Diego County.

Anstine Adventures programs expanded to provide 783 nature lessons to 214 students through on-campus and field-trip programs to the Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve. We piloted a Junior Adventurers on-campus program for first- and second-grade students at Vista Unified School District to prepare them for their third-grade field trips in upcoming years.

Silverwood’s Science Discovery fourth-grade program taught 630 nature lessons to 210 fourth-grade students from the Lakeside School Districts. We provided students with in-class lessons, research projects about native species, and a field trip to the Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary.

OutdoorExplore reached 195 elementary afterschool students with 1,509 nature lessons in San Diego, Chula Vista, and Escondido school districts through virtual, on-campus, and field-trip programs.

Sharing our Shores South Bay introduced 297 students to the local and migratory birds of South San Diego Bay through virtual and field-trip programs, providing 597 nature lessons about the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

Students created conservation-themed posters to educate the public about threatened birds and shared their work through a virtual art show.

OutdoorExplore visits Golden Hill. Photo by Jude Lincer

Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve: A Pocket-Sized Nature Experience

The preserve hosted 732 visitors throughout the year, who were able to observe White-crowned Sparrows at our feeders, Cedar Waxwings darting among the trees, Western Bluebirds feeding on wild grapes, and Hooded Mergansers swimming through our pond. Events included a Hummingbird Photography workshop, native seed collection with the California Native Plant Society, work parties, and a Spring Fling community event.

Through the dedicated work of a local Eagle Scout group, an outdoor education deck was built to provide space to prepare native plants and wildflower seed bombs for planting and restoring the native habitat at the preserve.

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Our Flock Together We Defend Our Region’s Birds, Unique Biodiversity, and Threatened Habitats

Our community rallied to support San Diego Audubon in heartwarming and impactful fashion, contributing 7,049 volunteer hours given by 989 volunteers, valued at $211,118 of services.

You migrated throughout the county to join us for Birding for Beginners, Yard Sales, Bird Outings, and a fully recovered San Diego Bird Festival engaging more than 600 of our favorite people.

San Diego City College Audubon Club’s efforts represented a point of pride and importance to our collective efforts, leading for the first ever Environmental Justice Conference, launching a Native Seed Library on campus, and completing a beautiful birds mural in an otherwise drab parking garage.


Contributions & Membership $444,941 39%
Grants $834,558 73%
Program Fees $160,678 14%
Investments/Interest $(292,289) -25%

Total Revenues $1,149,426

Conservation, Education, Sanctuaries $785,150 73%
Management $148,527 14%
Fundraising $139,135 13%

Total Expenses $1,072,812

Beginning Assets $6,901,050
End of Year Assets $6,977,664
Balance $76,614

Great Egret Society Members

Active for 12/1/21 to 12/1/22

Anonymous
Theresa Acoro
Janet Anderson
Bettna Arnold
Kathy Askin
R. Lawrence Bailey
Earl W. Balch
Pam & Ken Barratt
Ewvin Bates & Christopher Croom
Janet & Alan Baumann
Susan & Richard Breisch
Susan Buckley
Fay Bullett
Kristin & Walter Burns
Mandy Butler
Lisa & Craig Chadock
Keith & Sue Colestock
Steven & Carolyn Conner
Diane Coombs
Alison Cummings
Gary & Diane Davis
William H. Disher
Jeanne Dreufuss
Joyce Edwards
Petey & Davis Engel
Madeleine English
Joan Falconer
John A. Flasnerud
Virginia D. Forrest
Pamela Fairky & Kent Foster
Pamela Fair & Glenn Sullivan
Peter Flint & Robert Padgett
Clare Friedman
Janice J. Gale
Eve & Sally Gall
Bill Goff
Ellen Gross
Matthew Gross
Marty Hall & Janes McKerrow

Marsia Hansen
Wayne & Margaret Harmon
Lisa Heira
Robert Hemphill
Edward & Connie Henry
Nigella Hilgath
Steven Hilyard
Mel Hinton
Bonnie Horstmann
Susan Hunter
Padma Jagannathan
Rustom Jamadar
Conny Jamieson
Donald & Barbara Jania-Smith
Jay Jeffcoat
Marvin Jones
Sonja J. Jones
Rita L. Kafalas May
Matt & Natalie Karstean
Carol J. Kemitt
Amy Kimball
Robert & Mary Kimball
Lynn Weih Kees
Candi Kolb
John E. Kramer
Barbara E. Kue
Karen Learner & Todd Stone
Marie Anne Bovil Lea
Vicki Lindblade
Nancy Lindborg
Steve A. Lister
Dorothy Little
Claudia Lowenstein
Michael Lubin
Joseph M. Mahaffy
Vanessa Makame & Kenneth
Kashima
Patricia Masters
Mike & Genevieve Matherly
T. D. Mathewson
George E. Mant
Jorge Sebastian Matt-Navarro
Don & Jan Metzdorf
Anne McCammon
Betty McCormick
Thane & Judy McIntosh
Christie McKown
Holly McMullan & Jim Chute
Kris & Jim McMillan
Elisabeth & Alan McQuaide
Sherry Medler
James Michael
Kathy Moser
Colin & , Molly Emsley
Eden Mush
Steve Munzinger
Peter & Sally Newton
Bonnie Nickel
Robert, Michelle & Emma Nickel
Geri Nicolson
Bryan F. O’Leary
James H. Oliver
Elizabeth Hansen Oliver
David Oselet
Deborah Pate
James Pea & Sandra Peterson
Jim & Barbara Pough
John & Nunt Pierce
Vanessa Pizato
Portia Pizato
Bruce W. Purshkus
Patricia Potter
Ruth F. Potter
Charles Chatham Purr
Melinda Pyne
Kay Quijada
Suan Randsen
Anita Reeth
Karen & Mark Rennanes
Brenda L. Richmond
Carole Reiker
Paula & Mark Robertson
Charles Herfield & Paul Rogers
DeWerna Rogers

TernWATCHer’s Program Gives Lessons in Conservation and Life

Last summer, I volunteered with San Diego Audubon for the first time. I had come across an Instagram post advertising the TernWATCHer program, which trains and enlist volunteers to monitor California Least Tern nesting sites for predators in Mission Bay. It sounded like the perfect opportunity for me to expand my skills in observation, data analysis, and timely communication, which would aid me in completing my second undergraduate degree in Wildlife Biology. As a bonus, I would be volunteering for an organization that has done so much good in San Diego.

Throughout my time with the TernWATCHer Program, I felt supported, cared for, and valued. Everyone I worked with was beyond wonderful and encouraging, and they will be a huge factor in my decision to return for a second season of volunteering. Both the previous Conservation Manager, Megan Flaherty, and the new manager, Cristina Santa Maria, helped me improve my time with TernWATCHer as an internship credit for my degree. Because of both of them, I was able to use this volunteering opportunity to gain skills, meet new people, and be one step closer to earning my degree.

During volunteer shifts, observing our Adelaide California Least Tern friends from a safe distance gave me a sense of peace. I feel incredibly lucky to have been able to witness bird parents raising their young to be fully functioning adults by the end of the breeding season. There’s something really special about watching birds, and really all life, simply exist. Every aspect of the TernWATCHer program was phenomenal, and I could not have asked for a better volunteering experience.