

Sketches

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SAN DIEGO AUDUBON

Celebrating 75 Years of Protecting Birds



BIRDS OF THE OPEN OCEANS

Flying Against the Winds of Change

ANNUAL REPORT

FYE JUNE 2022 / MAY 2023

Currents of Life

Pink-footed Shearwater by Jenna Asperslag



Magnificent Frigatebird
by Karen Straus



Nazca Booby
by Jenna Asperslag

My Epic Pelagic Adventure

by Jenna Asperslag

I spent the week nervously tracking Hurricane Kay, worried that my upcoming pelagic bird trip would be canceled by the approaching storm. Luckily, Kay veered sharply west as it reached northern Baja California, hitting San Diego waters as a post-tropical cyclone. Rather than spoiling my weekend plans, the storm produced the most eventful pelagic bird trip I've ever experienced.

The fun started early. While still fairly close to shore, with the sun just barely peeking out from behind a wall of tropical clouds, a Least Storm-Petrel fluttered around like a bat just alongside the boat, putting on an endless show. This would be the first of several appearances by this species throughout the day. We even got to see them right beside our more common Black Storm-Petrel, enabling us to appreciate the size difference. Shortly after the first Least Storm-Petrel entertained us, we saw a striking, Red-billed Tropicbird sitting on the water, and then a Nazca Booby flew by. We hadn't even hit the 9-Mile Bank!

When we did arrive at the upper 9-Mile Bank, 1,000 Black-vented Shearwaters swarmed around the boat, along with a few interspersed Pink-footed Shearwaters and Western Gulls. Everywhere I looked, dozens of shearwaters skimmed the deep blue waves, gliding along with the wind. A pod of Common Dolphins joined the feeding frenzy, and a Brown Booby circled the boat, as if curious to see what all the excitement was about.

It was still early when we crossed into the San Diego Trough, and we were delighted to see more Nazca Boobies. At about 10 a.m., a Blue-footed Booby streamed by the boat—probably the rarest of the boobies for San Diego waters—and I saw it only as a beautiful, distant silhouette against the sun. I'm told it's a pelagic rite of passage to miss an exciting bird because you were in the head.

Fortunately, I was not in the head when I noticed the signs of a particularly rare sighting: the trip leaders' radios crackling with unintelligible excitement; the boat's engine stuttering to a stop; everyone seated on the upper deck glancing around to the wheelhouse, binoculars at the ready.

The call was a Wedge-tailed Shearwater. It's rare to see the veteran trip leaders scramble for a view of the birds along with the rest of us. They've been on these trips enough times that most of our birds are routine. But for this, the third San Diego record (at that time) of a Wedge-tailed Shearwater, they were at the railings with us. "[Bleeping] epic!" one of them shouted, grinning from ear to ear.

We tracked the bird for a while to make sure everyone got the best looks. It soared alongside a Pink-footed Shearwater, providing the perfect comparison shot. The Wedge-tailed had noticeably longer wings, bent at

the wrist. Dark above, light below, but it was slimmer and had a darker bill than the Pink-footed. I was entranced watching the two birds glide together, almost dancing around each other on the water. Resting my head on the railing, I immersed myself in the view of these two birds so elegantly made for the sea. Looking back, I regret not taking more photos, given how rare the sighting was, but I will never forget that moment.



Left: Dark morph Wedge-tailed Shearwater flying in front of Pink-footed Shearwater. Right: Wedge-tailed Shearwater seen flying on its own. By Jenna Asperslag.

After we finished following the shearwaters, another rarity rushed past what felt like five feet in front of me. It was a Red-footed Booby, bringing our Booby species count to four for the trip. And shortly after, another adult Nazca Booby approached, eyeing our boat as if for fish.

It was only 10:30 a.m.

Those first three to four hours proved to be the most eventful of the day, but that's not to say the rest of the trip was boring. The day continued with heaps of storm-petrels (Black, Townsend's, Leach's, Ashy), shearwaters (of the more expected Pink-footed and Black-vented), terns, phalaropes, jaegers, and gulls. A little bit of everything. The sun came out in full, glittering against the waves. In the distance to the east, we could see large thunderhead clouds forming over land.

As we made our way back to Mission Bay, exhausted but pleased at the end of a long day, our trip leaders came over the intercom to share how delighted they were with this trip. One at a time, they expressed what a remarkable show this had been, thanking us all for sharing it with them.

The boat slowed as we crossed the threshold of the jetties, and then, a chorus of voices shouted from the bow of the boat, "Frigatebird!" An adult male Frigatebird circled lazily around the Hyatt hotel at the marina. Long, forked tail split, impressively large wings, a splash of red visible below the beak. Frigatebirds, as their name suggests, are impressive birds. Massive and almost pterodactyl-like in shape, their soaring seems effortless. It was a perfect way to finish off the day.

The Art of Photographing Pelagic Birds

by Thomas A. Blackman

Photographing birds on the ocean presents challenges you don't encounter when photographing birds on land. These challenges can make it frustrating and difficult to photograph pelagic birds. One of the biggest challenges is motion. The vessel is moving, the bird is moving, and you are moving. Lighting can also be tricky. Light and shadows change rapidly as you move to follow birds around the vessel. Advancements in digital camera technology and postprocessing software, as well as a lot of practice, can help you create great photos despite these two challenges, but technology can't address the third main obstacle—you must wait for the birds to approach the vessel. You cannot stalk or walk up to them.

Camera Selection

Most popular camera manufacturers, including Canon, Nikon, and Sony, feature advancements in digital camera technology that are critical for pelagic bird photography, such as reduced sensor noise, increased frame rates, and improved tracking capabilities. Take the time to learn your camera's features. Practice and be aware of the many settings you can use to produce the best results. Online tutorials can assist in this process.

The best lenses for pelagic bird photography have focal lengths of 500mm to 600mm. These give the photographer reach, while keeping size and weight down.

Position on the Vessel

The adage to shoot through your shadow is very important on a vessel. If you have the choice, position yourself between the sun and the bird. Move around the vessel to get into position, as needed, although that may not always be possible. Learn the flight patterns of birds circling or approaching the vessel. This will help you to learn where to position yourself to obtain an image. Steady yourself by leaning on the rail with your hips or by leaning your back against a bulkhead, as this greatly helps in keeping the camera steady. Do not rest the camera directly on the rail, as it will pick up engine vibrations and could blur the image.

Postprocessing

Software, such as Lightroom, Photoshop, Nik, and Topaz, can help you maximize the aesthetic appeal of your images. Take the time to study and perfect your processing technique, and it will dramatically improve your resulting images.

When all is said and done, the most important part of taking great images is “what's four inches behind the viewfinder,” as photographer Steve Perry likes to say.

Here are some of the pelagic trips out of San Diego in 2024.

San Diego Bird Festival Trips

Book with San Diego Bird Festival via [San Diego Audubon website](#)
Friday, February 23
Saturday, February 24
Sunday, February 25

San Diego Pelagics Trips

Book via [sandiegopelagics.com](#)
Saturday, May 18
Saturday, June 8
Sunday, July 14
Saturday, August 3
Sunday, August 4
Sunday, August 25
Saturday, September 7
Sunday, September 8
Saturday, September 28

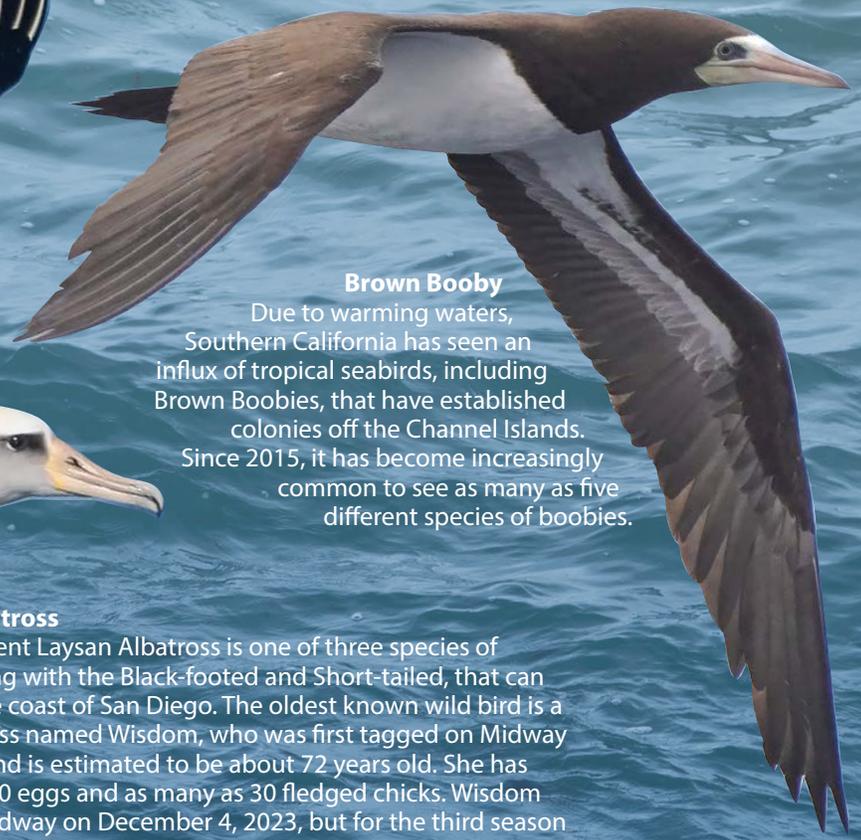
Camera Settings

- **Shooting mode:** Shooting in Servo (Canon) or Continuous (Nikon/Sony) mode will help you capture images as you and the bird move.
- **Auto Focus (AF):** This is the box within the viewfinder that you keep the bird in while shooting. A larger box, such as AF Wide, will give you multiple assist points to maintain focus during movement. Do not use single point AF unless you're shooting Alcids sitting on the water. In that case, a quick change to single point AF using a preprogrammed button is an asset. Learn to quickly move between AF settings as the situation dictates.
- **File Format:** Shoot in RAW not JPEG. RAW images can be processed easily and have 10 times the information. This additional information is invaluable to bring out detail in shadows, or conversely to tone down highlights that often occur in pelagic photography.
- **Frame rate:** Choose 20 or so frames per second. Though you may have extra postprocessing editing, it is worth it as the bird's wing position, head position, and eyes change instantly.
- **Auto-ISO:** This allows the camera to adjust the exposure using the ISO according to the scene, such as aiming at a bright sky and then following the bird down to the darker sea.
- **Shutter speed:** The shutter speed should be at 3200 or more due to the complex motions of pelagic bird photography. Do not be worried about additional noise in the image, as today's software such as Topaz Denoise will take care of that in postprocessing. Postprocessing will not fix motion blur or an out-of-focus image.

Pink-footed Shearwater
Photo by Tom Blackman



BIRDS OF THE OPEN OCEANS



Brown Booby

Due to warming waters, Southern California has seen an influx of tropical seabirds, including Brown Boobies, that have established colonies off the Channel Islands. Since 2015, it has become increasingly common to see as many as five different species of boobies.

Laysan Albatross

The magnificent Laysan Albatross is one of three species of albatross, along with the Black-footed and Short-tailed, that can be seen off the coast of San Diego. The oldest known wild bird is a Laysan Albatross named Wisdom, who was first tagged on Midway Atoll in 1956 and is estimated to be about 72 years old. She has produced 50-60 eggs and as many as 30 fledged chicks. Wisdom returned to Midway on December 4, 2023, but for the third season in a row, her mate of more than 60 years hasn't been seen.



Red-billed Tropicbird

Once rare in our waters, the elegant Red-billed Tropicbird is often seen on pelagic trips out of San Diego. It is a superb fisher, and is often parasitized by the Magnificent Frigatebird (see page 2), which is also ranging northward as the waters warm due to the growing climate crisis.

Photo credits:

*Brown Booby and
Pink-footed Shearwater
by Jenna Asperslag*

All others by Tom Blackman



Red-necked Phalarope

Members of the Sandpiper family, Red-necked Phalaropes nest in the Arctic but spend most of their lives on the open ocean, making them a true pelagic species. They normally migrate through our area from July to October. Females are larger and more colorful than males, and once their eggs are laid, they leave the males to incubate and raise the chicks.

Pomarine Jaeger

Known as the pirates of the seabirds, jaegers attack other species and steal their prey. Pomarine Jaegers are the biggest of the three jaeger species, which all have very similar plumage. Pomarines often rely on surprise and brute force to tackle shearwaters and gulls feeding on the water rather than on acrobatic flight like smaller species of jaegers, such as the Parasitic Jaeger. These birds breed in the Arctic, and are dependent on lemming numbers for successful reproduction.



Black Storm-Petrel

The Black Storm-Petrel is the largest of the storm-petrels found off our coast, and the one mostly likely to be seen from shore. They nest on Islas Coronado and other islands off of Baja California, as well as the Channel Islands. They can be found rafting off of our coast in large numbers in the fall.



Rhinoceros Auklet

A close relative of puffins, the Rhinoceros Auklet is named for the single vertical horn that sticks up from its orange bill. In 2019, research revealed that the horn, which looks grayish to us, is actually brightly colored to animals that can see ultraviolet light. This is thought to help them identify each other while foraging in the water or when they're in their breeding colonies at night.

Pink-footed Shearwater

This species is the largest of the shearwaters seen off our coast. Compared to Black-vented Shearwaters, Pink-footed Shearwaters have heavy, slow wingbeats. They are often seen mixed randomly with other seabirds rather than in pure flocks of their own species. For identification, look for a pink beak with a black tip and a slow, lumbering flight pattern.

The World's Seabirds Are in Trouble

... But We Can Help!

by LaTresa Pearson, Sketches Editor



Black-vented Shearwater by Tom Blackman

A stunning full moon sits above the ocean in a sky painted with the soft pastel pinks and purples of sunrise when I arrive at “Stan’s bench” in La Jolla Cove. Adjacent to the La Jolla Bridge Club, the bench is unofficially named for the man I’ve come to meet, Stan Walens, a retired UC San Diego anthropology professor, who has logged more than 13,000 hours watching seabirds from this spot since 1982. Walens says this is the best place to see seabirds from land in San Diego because Point La Jolla sticks out a mile from the coast, and there is also a deep underwater canyon nearby. While seabirds congregate offshore to raft and feed in the nutrient-rich waters, the right wind conditions can bring a variety of species close enough to observe from shore.

Walens has his Swarovski scope set up in front of the bench, and he’s already watching a group of Black-vented Shearwaters foraging about a mile offshore when I approach. He’s brought an extra scope for me, and after a quick lesson in using it, he points out a couple of fishing kayakers on the water to help me locate the birds, which are too far away on this light-wind day to see with the naked eye. “Do you see them?” he asks. “Flap, flap, flap, flap, very fast, and then glide,” he tells me, describing the tell-tale flight pattern of the Black-vented Shearwater. And then, I see them. Flashes of white from their bellies and underwings catch the sun as the birds maneuver low above the surface of the water. Even from this distance, it’s mesmerizing to watch. “I can still remember the first shearwater I saw,” Walens says. “I’d never seen anything fly that beautifully. It was like ballet, so in tune with the ocean.”

Unlike other shearwaters, which range over the open ocean far from land and nest in the Southern Hemisphere, Black-vented Shearwaters nest only on a few islands off of northern Baja California and stay close to the California coast. Isla Natividad, a 4-mile-long island located about 350 miles southwest of San Diego, hosts 95% of the world’s Black-vented Shearwaters, and their underground labyrinth of burrows dominates 1 square mile of the southern tip of the island. As with many seabirds that nest on islands, introduced mammals are one of the biggest threats to

Black-vented Shearwaters. To combat this threat, Isla Natividad removed goats, dogs, and cats from the island in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the results are impressive. A 2019 study reports the number of Black-vented Shearwaters nearly doubled within a decade to an estimated 115,000 breeding pairs, and residents remain vigilant about keeping unwanted intruders off the island. A 2019 rat sighting led to an all-out, months-long effort to find and dispatch the culprit and resulted in the creation of a formal biosecurity plan for the island.

Such extraordinary measures are necessary at a time when seabirds are among the most endangered birds on the planet. According to BirdLife International, one third of seabird species (coastal and pelagic) are on the International Union of Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN’s) Red List as either Critically Endangered, Endangered, or Vulnerable—that’s 110 of the 359 species included in the category. Another 40 species are Near Threatened and almost half of all species have declining population trends. The top three threats affecting seabirds globally are invasive species at nesting sites (primarily rats and cats), bycatch from commercial fishing, and the climate crisis. Together these threats affect two thirds of seabird species and hundreds of millions of individual birds.

Invasive Species

Invasive rats have made their way to 90% of the world’s islands, causing an estimated 40–60% of all bird and reptile extinctions, so it’s no wonder that the rat sighting on Isla Natividad was so alarming. Fortunately, invasive rodents have been removed from nearly 700 islands worldwide, including on California’s Anacapa Island in Channel Islands National Park. Anacapa is one of the four primary breeding islands for Scripps’s Murrelet, one of the rarest seabirds in the world, and the Channel Islands are the nesting location for one third of the world’s population of this diminutive bird. In the 1990s, there were only 1,500 breeding pairs in all of the Channel Islands, and several hundred were on Anacapa. When combing the caves and rocky crevices where the birds nest, researchers were finding nothing



Scripps's Murrelet by Tom Blackman

but broken eggshells, the remnants of rat predation. A project to eradicate the rats was completed in 2002, and within 10 years, the hatching success of Scripps’s Murrelet chicks went from 30% to 85%. As a bonus, Cassin’s Auklets have returned to nest on Anacapa, and even the populations of native Island Deer Mice and Side-blotched Lizards have increased. The island also hosts Ashy Storm-Petrels and the largest colony of Brown Pelicans in the United States.

A similar project is in the works for the South Farallon Islands. The Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge off the coast of San Francisco contains the largest seabird nesting colony south of Alaska, including the largest colony of Western Gulls in the world, as well as half the world’s population of Endangered Ashy Storm-Petrels. In this case, the invasive species is the house mouse, which doesn’t actually prey on the seabirds or their eggs. Instead, the mice attract migrating Burrowing Owls, some of

which stay through the winter feasting on Ashy Storm-Petrels and Leach's Storm-Petrels when the mice run out. To break this cycle, the plan is to air-drop rodenticide pellets to eradicate the mice. To protect Burrowing Owls and other raptors from the rodenticide, U.S. Fish & Wildlife personnel will capture and translocate them during the project. They also will haze Western Gulls away from treated areas to prevent them from eating pellets or dead mice. "There's been a lot of pushback from animal rights groups, which is really interesting because this is a proven strategy" says Lesley Handa, lead ornithologist for San Diego Audubon, and a supporter of the eradication project. "Even though it's not the best thing to have to eradicate rats and mice, it does help the seabirds, and the seabirds need a lot of help."

Commercial Fishing

Another serious threat to seabirds is commercial fishing, particularly longline fishing and set gillnet fishing. Longlines can extend up to 50 miles and have thousands of baited hooks branching off from the main line. Most birds killed during longline operations are attracted to the baited hooks when the gear is being set, so they get hooked at the surface, and are then dragged underwater. Some of the species most vulnerable to longline fishing practices are endangered albatrosses. To reduce seabird deaths, some fishing operations are employing simple techniques, such as using streamer lines, which scare birds away when they flap in the wind, and dyeing the bait blue, which reduces the contrast between the bait and the surrounding water, making it more difficult for foraging seabirds to detect it. Streamer lines have reduced seabird bycatch in Alaska fisheries by 80% or more, preventing the deaths of thousands of seabirds every year.

While California has banned both longline and set gillnet fishing in its coastal waters, set gillnet operations designed to catch California Halibut and White Seabass are still allowed in federal waters off of Southern California, including in areas off the coast of San Diego and around the Channel Islands. According to a 2023 report released by Oceana and the Turtle Island Restoration Network (TIRN), these nearly invisible nets, which are anchored to the sea floor and can be as long as the Golden Gate Bridge, indiscriminately capture 125 different species of marine animals, including marine mammals, seabirds, sharks, rays, skates, and other fish. The unwanted animals—many of which are dead, dying, or injured—get thrown overboard as bycatch. With a 64% bycatch rate, this fishery has one of the highest bycatch rates in the country. Oceana and TIRN, along with other conservation groups, including San Diego Audubon, are calling on the California Fish and Game Commission to reduce this threat to California's marine wildlife. At press time, the Commission was still receiving public comment on the issue.

The Climate Crisis

By far, the biggest threat to the world's seabirds is the climate crisis. The ocean has protected us from the worst consequences of the climate crisis by absorbing nearly a third of atmospheric carbon dioxide. It has also taken in 90% of the heat caused by global warming over the past 50 years. As a result, the ocean is changing in ways that are dramatically impacting marine ecosystems. Increased levels of carbon dioxide in the water are causing our oceans to become more acidic. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the West Coast region represents one of the most rapidly acidifying and deoxygenating areas of the ocean. The acidity of waters in the region has increased by 60% since 1895 and could rise another 40% above 1995 levels by 2050. Ocean acidification can create conditions that eat away at the minerals used by oysters, clams, lobsters, shrimp, coral reefs, and other marine life to build their shells and exoskeletons. Deoxygenation

not only reduces the quality and quantity of marine habitat, but it can also reduce growth rates, interfere with reproduction, increase disease susceptibility, and even change visual function in marine life.

In addition to ocean acidification and deoxygenation, we are also experiencing warmer ocean temperatures and increased ocean stratification. Water has different densities, depending on temperature and salinity. The coldest, saltiest water is the heaviest, so it sinks to the bottom. Warmer, less salty water floats toward the top. The cold, salty water on the bottom contains most of the nutrients that form the base of the marine food web. The incredibly rich marine biodiversity in California waters stems from offshore upwelling, which pulls those nutrients from deep cold waters and pushes them toward the surface, making them available to all of the marine life that depend on them. As surface waters get warmer, the difference in temperature between the deep cold water and the warm surface water increases, creating more and more force between the two, which makes it harder for nutrients to rise. "When there's decreased nutrients, you don't get as much phytoplankton. You don't get as much zooplankton, and then there's not enough food for fishes," explains Tammy Russell, a marine ornithologist with UCSD's Scripps Institution of Oceanography, who is completing her Ph.D. in biological oceanography and studying the impacts of the climate crisis on seabirds.

To make matters worse, warmer ocean temperatures increase the metabolism of cold-blooded animals, so they need more food to survive at a time when less food is available. The result is fewer forage fish and lower quality forage fish for all the creatures that depend on them. "Between the warming and the stratification, there are all these ripple effects that affect seabirds and their food. And it could also affect the distribution of their food, making them go maybe further offshore, exerting more energy to get the food that they need," says Russell. "That's why in 2014 to 2016, we saw massive reproduction failures from Common Murres and so many dead Murres washing up in California." Known as "the Blob," the largest marine heatwave ever recorded in the North Pacific lingered from 2014 to 2016, causing ocean temperatures to rise by nearly 7 degrees Fahrenheit. It caused mass starvation in fish, whales, sea lions, and seabirds, but Common Murres were the hardest hit. Researchers estimate 3.2 million Common Murres died—roughly half of their entire population.

In addition to marine heatwaves, El Niño events also bring warmer ocean temperatures that impact the availability of forage fish. An El Niño is forecasted for this year, and those conditions are projected to continue into May, coinciding with breeding season, which could be disastrous for seabird populations, including our local breeding colonies of Endangered California Least Terns and Elegant Terns. "It could mean scarce resources and unpredictable resources, and that's not what you want, especially after the chicks hatch," says Handa.



All of the threats that seabirds face can be daunting to think about, so for our own peace of mind and the motivation to keep going, sometimes it's important to take a step back and enjoy what we have. "La Jolla is wonderful for pelagic birding," says Russell. "A lot of shearwaters are offshore birds, truly pelagic, and we have this coastal shearwater here that is super abundant. The Black-vented Shearwater is totally overlooked. I can just be out here and see thousands of them some days. We have so many species of seabirds here in the California Current, and each one has their own drivers of how they're doing. There's tons of research to be done. We need more marine ornithologists."

(Left) The stomach of this Northern Fulmar contained 662 pieces of plastic. By Tammy Russell.

(Background) Black-footed Albatross by Karen Straus

Preserving San Diego’s “Jewels”

It Takes Vigilant Effort to Protect La Jolla’s Seabirds and Marine Mammals

by Lesley Handa, SDAS Lead Ornithologist and Board Vice President

To the world, La Jolla is a renowned vacation spot visited by thousands of people each year, where residents and tourists alike are attracted to picturesque coastal views, areas to recreate outdoors, and rare opportunities to observe wildlife up close. We can observe numerous seabirds, including large numbers of Brown Pelicans, a variety of terns, a small breeding colony of Western Gulls, and a handful of Heermann’s Gulls. Perhaps most spectacular, however, are the unfettered views overlooking the cliffs from the Coast Walk, which allow us to witness the fantastic Brandt’s Cormorant breeding displays, nest building, egg incubation, parenting, and fledging of young birds—all from just a few feet away.

This is also one of the few locations where breeding marine mammals can be observed, with Harbor Seals breeding at the Children’s Pool and California Sea Lions breeding at Point La Jolla and La Jolla Cove. The area includes three Marine Protected Areas—Scripps Coastal State Marine Conservation Area, Matlahuayl State Marine Reserve, and South La Jolla State Marine Reserve—which safeguard the extraordinary marine biodiversity that thrives in the waters here.

Though a haven for marine wildlife, La Jolla has been at the center of a human-wildlife conflict that has been playing out for at least 30 years, with wildlife frequently caught in the crossfire. Too often, human use has taken precedence over the well-being of wildlife and has dictated how the City of San Diego has managed the area. The conflict escalated dramatically in 2012 when outraged local business owners coordinated efforts to sue the City, claiming the foul smell emanating from the area detracted from local business and deterred tourists. The City responded to this lawsuit with multiple actions that have put both wildlife and habitat at risk, including creating a gate (dubbed the Brockton Gate) to allow human access to sensitive habitat in an effort to deter sea lions and cormorants from using the area, power washing the cliffs where Brandt’s Cormorants nest, and repeatedly spraying a toxic bioagent on the cliffs where seabirds congregate.

*Brandt’s Cormorant adult and two chicks nesting at La Jolla.
Photo by LaTresa Pearson.*

Concerned about the impact of these actions to marine wildlife, the San Diego Audubon Society (SDAS) and the Sierra Club’s Seal Society took several steps to advocate for wildlife and habitat in La Jolla, including submitting concerns to federal, state, and local entities regarding human-caused impacts on Brandt’s Cormorant and Western Gull colonies; supporting seasonal and year-round closures to protect breeding marine mammals from disturbance from the general public; urging the City to lock the Brockton Gate, which was a source for harassment of wildlife from the public; objecting to fireworks in La Jolla Cove due to their impacts on wildlife; and stopping the City from spraying the toxic bioagent on a designated cliff area close to Western Gull and Brandt’s Cormorant nests and loafing areas for other seabirds and sea lions above the Matlahuayl State Marine Reserve.

SDAS began tackling the ongoing issues in La Jolla in 2020 when local pelagic bird expert Stan Walens raised concerns that the City may have destroyed nests by power washing the cliffs where the Brandt’s Cormorant colony is located in La Jolla Cove. We promptly submitted a complaint to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife through CALTIP. Though we received a follow-up response, we are unaware of whether this matter was investigated further.

A few months later, at the urging of the Seal Society, we submitted another letter regarding impacts to wildlife and habitat from the toxic bioagent spraying. We addressed this issue by writing a series of letters to the City and the California Coastal Commission (CCC) regarding our concerns. This led to a September 2022 meeting with the California Water Board, initiated by Carol Archibald from the Seal Society, where we presented our concerns. Based on Walens’s weekly birding visits to La Jolla over the past 35 years, he provided important testimony that the Brandt’s Cormorants, which have had a colony in La Jolla since 1933, were not the source of the smell, noting that the odor began 20 years ago and was not observed during his first 15 years of observations. After we presented our concerns to the California Water Board, the spraying was temporarily halted for several months while the Board investigated our concerns. In June 2023, the Board revoked the City’s permit to spray, and the practice stopped.

To better advocate for this area and to obtain documentation for how birds are using the habitat, I have been surveying the La Jolla area monthly since November 2022. The permit revocation turned out to be timely. In June 2023, I observed a Western Gull chick in the same area where the City had been spraying. Had the spraying continued, the nest and the chick would have been exposed to the harmful chemicals.

The Seal Society also identified concerns regarding the Brockton Gate, which did not have a Coastal Development Permit and was not a designated public access point identified in the



(Left) California Sea Lions, including a pup, posing on the rocks of La Jolla Cove. (Right) A California Brown Pelican. Photos by LaTresa Pearson.

La Jolla Coastal Plan. This gate was problematic, as the public used it as an access point to harass marine mammals, flush seabirds using the area, trample sensitive habitat, and wander on the slippery cliffs. To the rest of the world, and embarrassingly for the City of San Diego, La Jolla is notorious for providing examples of how not to conduct oneself around wildlife. There are shocking accounts of people abusing marine mammals, getting too close in order to take selfies and videos, and even sitting on the animals. After SDAS and the Seal Society made multiple requests to the City of San Diego to lock the gate with no action from the City, we raised our concerns with the CCC through multiple letters and speeches at CCC meetings. The CCC listened and instructed the City in December 2022 to lock the gate to the general public.

We are grateful to our partners at the Seal Society, under the leadership of Chair Robyn Davidoff, who spend every weekend patiently educating the general public about wildlife in La Jolla and for staying abreast of issues that arise. We would also like to recognize the hard work of the dedicated members who have spent countless hours to secure protections for Harbor Seals at the Children's Pool and California Sea Lions at La Jolla Cove.

As is the nature of conservation advocacy, there are always ongoing issues to tackle, and we are still advocating for change. We will continue to advocate for the conservation of cormorants, which too often are scapegoated in North America for human problems and are frequently overlooked when it comes to setting conservation goals. Another current priority is locking the gate at Goldfish Point during Western Gull breeding to reduce disturbance to nesting birds. Disturbance



to this area from frequent foot traffic and individuals with dogs may have contributed to the low numbers of young observed, compared to the number of nests observed earlier in the 2023 season. As permits are distributed to displace and remove Western Gull nests elsewhere in San Diego, it is critical to protect Goldfish Point because it is one of the natural habitats the species has selected to nest.

As part of our Lights Out campaign, we are also concerned about the harsh lighting in La Jolla, which can be improved by changing outdoor lighting options to reduce impacts to wildlife. We look forward to working on this issue with the Seal Society and with DarkSky San Diego County Chapter President Cathy Handzel.



Finally, we are concerned about climate crisis impacts on the ocean and on resource availability for wildlife, which is projected to be variable in the future. The needs of wildlife must be prioritized to help populations adjust to future changes in resources. We will continue to advocate to prioritize the welfare and well-being of marine wildlife.

Above: An immature Heermann's Gull by LaTresa Pearson
Left: Western Gull chick by Lesley Handa



SAN DIEGO AUDUBON ANNUAL REPORT

FYE JUNE 2022–MAY 2023

The Currents of Life

At times, it feels as if we are being driven by an unseen force—a force built from tradition, routines, commitments, networks, societal pressures, and entrenched motivations. This force moves us through our lives in both welcome and unwelcome ways, yet we ride these currents of life in an effort to survive and thrive.

Numerous organisms rely on ocean currents for nutrients, movement, and the conditions they need to survive. These powerful forces have the ability to sustain epic migrations, culminating in massive blooms and frenzies, and ultimately fueling the great dance of life across the planet. The currents on which we travel have the power to bring about massive change and profound impact to our way of life and to our planet.

San Diego Audubon Society has been on the ride with you, experiencing tremendous growth and increased success at achieving our mission. We are generating a new and powerful current in an effort to defend the rich biodiversity of our region. We are being driven forward by the power of our community, our response to the climate crisis, and our passion for birds, other wildlife, and their habitats. The times propel us to take on increasingly challenging matters and to accomplish feats previously unimaginable. This past year's accomplishments highlight the organization we are today, and we take pride in our achievements:

- **We deepened our commitment to inclusion and to increased access for those most in need through our actions and our plan to drop the Audubon name.**
- **The force of the coalition driving our ReWild Mission Bay project grew to impressive levels, with more than 85 organizations and businesses joining the cause.**
- **The songs, stories, and needs of our indigenous partners guided our efforts and inspired 813 visitors at Love Your Wetlands Day; led to the creation of a harvesting plan for our sanctuary**

properties; initiated the documentation of lost Kumeyaay stories about climate resilience; built websites with stories to share of the Kumeyaay's connection to wildlife; and provided numerous trips for indigenous youths to nature spaces.

- **The San Diego River placed us at the river's mouth, to be its voice for the wildlife that rely on the protection and nourishment it provides. Our Speak for the River Mouth program and Bark Rangers are working hard to elevate the powerful story and needs of the San Diego River.**
- **The pandemic's power could no longer hold back our Education programs, and our number of youths served and immersed in nature rebounded, with 2,289 student visits to nature.**
- **3,500 visitors explored our sanctuaries and enjoyed the benefits they provide to their own health and well-being, as well as the wildlife that call them home. Additionally, beyond the service to the public, our sanctuary properties continue to provide a critical refuge for plants and animals, with 14 new plant species positively identified and recorded this past year alone.**

There is so much to celebrate and be thankful for. Thanks to you, our movement is strong, and its impacts are felt countywide. In the coming year, we will need you more than ever. We will need your hands as we restore critical habitat. We will need your voice as we call for bold action to ReWild Mission Bay. We will need your contributions to support our commitment to the preservation and celebration of our county's rich biodiversity and human diversity. By moving together, hard and long enough, we will generate a current so strong many will happily join the flow to transformative change. The current of life we share is beautiful and strong, and we are so grateful we are on the ride with you!

Travis Kemnitz, Executive Director

CONSERVATION

ReWild Update

The ReWild Mission Bay project is moving through a critical year—the City has released its version of a wetland restoration plan for the ReWild area. We have pushed the plan into a much better place than their first version in 2018; this plan is good but needs to be better. We have turned out volunteers for municipal meetings, created new science about sea level rise and carbon sequestration, and increased the size of our ReWild Coalition to more than 85 organizations and businesses. As the plan comes to the City Council in the coming year, our partners and Coalition members will steer the plan and get it across the finish line.

A Snowy Egret does not wish to share his fishing hole with a Little Blue Heron. By DS





Love Your Wetlands Day

In 2023, 813 visitors joined us to explore UC San Diego’s protected Kendall-Frost Marsh Reserve in Mission Bay for Love Your Wetlands Day (LYWD)! This year, LYWD was hosted by San Diego Audubon Society, UCSD Natural Reserve System, and California Volunteers in partnership with the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve, and the City of San Diego Parks and Recreation Department. The event was also supported by 32 informational booths from local environmental organizations, sharing the importance of coastal wetlands, the climate threats they face, and the ways local communities are working to restore and protect them.

The community was invited to take action directly through marsh cleanups both on land and via kayaks, where they collectively retrieved 296 pounds of trash! Other activities included native planting to provide habitat for birds and other wildlife, guided birding, fish seining, educational presentations by local scientists, speeches by elected officials, and cultural activities with Indigenous leaders. We are actively planning for next year and are looking forward to the next event on February 3, 2024.

ReWild Mission Bay Coalition:
85 Members
 Conservation Projects:
1,737 Volunteers
 Love Your Wetlands Day:
813 Visitors
 San Diego Bird Festival:
641 Attendees
 Education Programs:
2,289 Students
 Public Programming:
808 Registrants
 Silverwood and Anstine-Audubon Sanctuaries:
3,500 Visitors

Above left: Signs mark predicted sea level rise at Kendall-Frost Marsh Reserve. Below left: Miss and Little Miss Kumeyaay display oars for the reed kayaks. Photos by Sandeep Dhar

Increase in Indigenous Partnerships + Impact:

With support from the USFWS (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), we are working on deeper partnerships with Kumeyaay organizations and Native American-led student groups from local colleges. We have created a harvesting plan for culturally important natural resources in Anstine, and we have used that plan to harvest willow and cattails for Kumeyaay New Year in September. With other grant support, we are helping to record a lost Kumeyaay story about climate resilience, and we are creating a coloring book that showcases a Kumeyaay perspective on Hamo, the area around what we now call Mission Bay.

We have increased our docent programs by adding the **Speak for the River Mouth** program at the San Diego River Mouth. We have interacted with hundreds of people during the year this program has been underway, emphasizing to interested audiences how important these dune, shoreline, and wetland habitats are for birds and other wildlife, and how best to enjoy the sensitive area. We are just about to kick off our Bark Ranger program, to add a specific focus on lessening dog impacts to birds that are resting and nesting. Our Wander the Wetlands program continues at Kendall-Frost Marsh.

We continue to help the endangered **California Least Tern nest in Mission Bay**. With only a few thousand pairs left in the world, California Least Terns need Mission Bay nesting preserves, and they need all the dirty, callused hands that pull out invasive ground cover for them all winter long. Without that work, the terns’ eggs would not be camouflaged in the sand but instead would stand out among the bright green weeds. Thank you to the volunteers, Mission Bay Park Rangers, and agency staff that work with us every year.

So far this year, from January to October, Conservation events have engaged more than 1,737 volunteers.





Anstine Adventures by Nigella Hillgarth

OutdoorExplore

Four elementary schools from the Chula Vista School District participated in four weekly hikes to the **Otay River Valley Regional Park (ORVRP)** through our OutdoorExplore program. Since the pandemic, our OutdoorExplore programs had been running virtually or as on-campus lessons. This year, however, the students were able to explore the trails of the ORVRP once again. Students discovered animal tracks, learned the difference between native and nonnative species and learned about the importance of watersheds for the health of our ecosystem. A family day was hosted at the ORVRP ranger station, where students were able to introduce their families and friends to the trails at the park and to plant native milkweed for pollinators.

- **Outdoor Explore: 157 students, 536 student visits to nature**
- **Funding was provided by the Port of San Diego**

EDUCATION

Anstine Adventures

The Anstine Adventures third-grade field trip program expanded to 11 Vista Unified School District schools this year. Each class participated in three weekly field trips to the Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve to learn about coastal sage scrub and riparian habitats, identify local and migratory birds, and restore native habitat for wildlife. Students planted thousands of native wildflower seeds to provide habitat for native pollinators.

- **Anstine Adventures: 264 students, 792 student visits to nature**

New for the 2022–2023 school year was the **Anstine Adventures Junior Adventurers program**. Second-grade students from the same 11 schools were treated to three weekly on-campus programs to introduce them to the importance of native pollinators for humans and wildlife. The program included a classroom presentation, a hands-on science project, and the construction of an on-campus pollinator mini garden, all in preparation for them to visit the Anstine Preserve as third-graders next year.

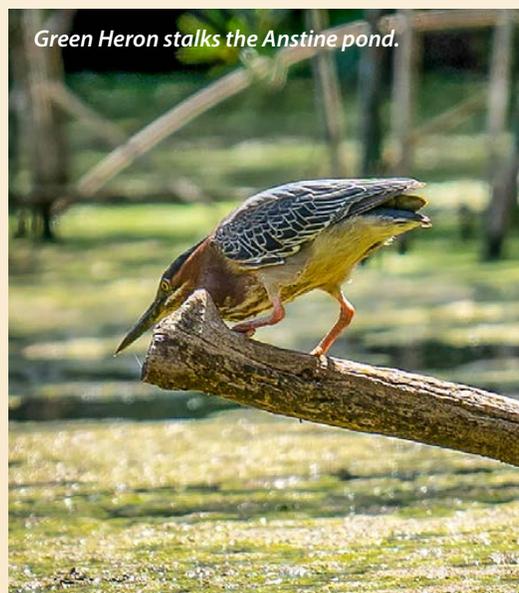
- **Anstine Adventures Junior On-Campus Program (new this year): 250 students, 750 student interactions. All programs were funded directly by the Vista Unified School District.**



Thumbs up at Silverwood Science



Anstine wildflowers by Rebekah Angona



Green Heron stalks the Anstine pond.



Anstine pond by Rebekah Angona



American Avocet by DS

Sharing Our Shores: Mission Bay

Four schools, including two Mission Bay elementary schools, the Barona Indian Charter School, and the Pala Band of Mission Indians Learning Center, participated in our **Sharing Our Shores: Mission Bay program**. Having been on hold since the pandemic, programs were finally able to resume with in-class lessons and a field trip to Mariner's Point to learn about dune habitats and the endangered California Least Tern.

- **Sharing Our Shores Mission Bay: 206 students**
- **Funding was provided by the Dorrance Family Foundation**

Sharing Our Shores: South Bay

Three elementary schools from the South Bay Union School District in Imperial Beach received Sharing Our Shores: South Bay programs. Students learned about the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge through in-class lessons and then visited the Bayside Birding and Walking Trail to observe birds, learn about threats faced by migratory birds, and plant native species to restore habitat for wildlife. Many students visit the bike path and bird trail on their commute to school, bringing together the value of wildlife habitats and human interactions.

- **Sharing Our Shores South Bay: 190 students, 380 student visits to experience nature**
- **Funding was provided by U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service**

ANSTINE-AUDUBON NATURE PRESERVE

The Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve experienced another wonder-filled year welcoming guests, students, and wildlife to our preserve. **This year we hosted 1,266 visitors through our visitor open hours, education programs, and special events.** We've recorded more than 100 bird species at the property, and the preserve boasts a plethora of beautiful wildflowers. We deeply thank our students for the role they played in planting native seeds for improved pollinator habitats.

We have also built new partnerships in the community. The California Native Plant Society routinely visits the preserve to collect native seeds to use in our Native Seed Libraries. These libraries provide guests with prepared seeds to start their own native plant gardens. Be sure to pick up your own native seeds the next time you visit the preserve.



while willows and cattails are used to build *ewaa's*, which are traditional Kumeyaay shelters.

Anstine is open to the public on Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m., October–June. We have volunteer opportunities, including Saturday hosting, trail maintenance, bird walk docents, and more. To learn more about the Anstine-Audubon Nature Preserve, please visit sandiegoaudubon.org/what-we-do/Anstine

(Above) Red-tailed Hawk by Karen Straus



Silverwood Science Discovery by Nick Thorpe

Silverwood Science Discovery

San Diego Audubon collaborated with the Barona Cultural Center and Museum to improve our curriculum by providing indigenous connections to our local habitats and wildlife. Students learned about native uses for plants and about the role that animals in our region play in Kumeyaay culture. Students then participated in a field trip to the Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary, where naturalists led them through the intertwining trails of Silverwood, stopping by three stations along the way. They observed birds through binoculars, identified animal tracks on the trail, and discovered importance and beauty of the chaparral habitat.

- **Silverwood Science Discovery: 375 students**
- **Funding was provided by SDG&E**
- **Overall, for the 2022–2023 school year, education worked with 1,442 students and provided 2,289 student visits to nature, in addition to 1,021 on-campus student interactions.**



Newly identified hornwort by Tab Tannery



Silverwood following 2003 Cedar Fire



Same view today. Photos by Phil Lambert

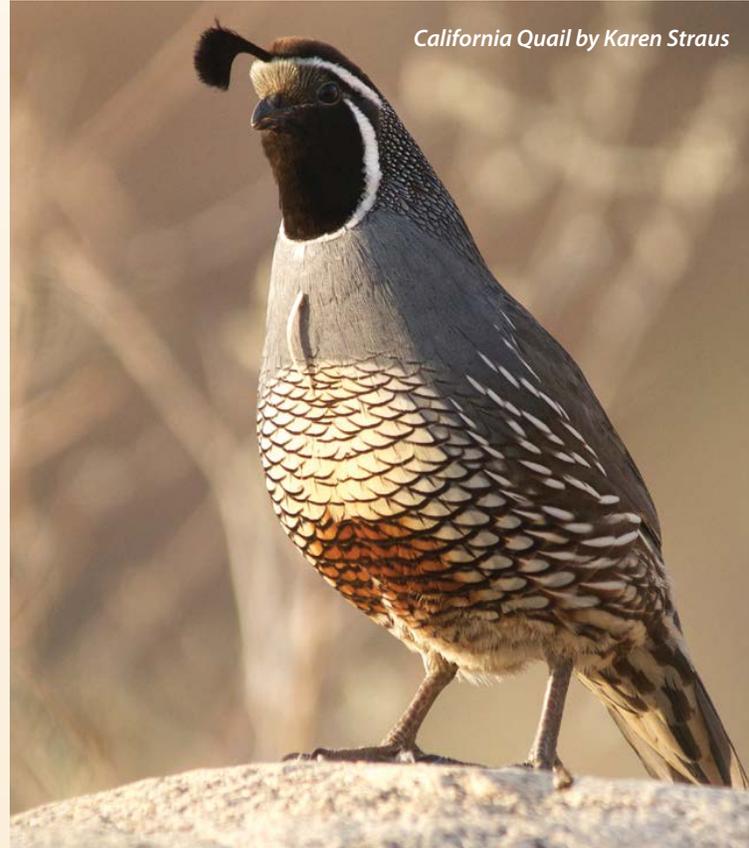
SILVERWOOD WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Silverwood is quiet most of the time, and a true sanctuary for birds and other wildlife. But on the two days per week it is open (plus special events), it is a prime destination for chapter members, the general public, and school field trips. The past year saw a total of 2,275 visitors attending 110 events. Among them:

- **10 scheduled adult group events** with 141 participants, including Nature Trek Birding, the annual Great Egret Society Luncheon, and an array of birding groups.
- **10 scheduled nature education programs** with 253 students and youths, including USD Ornithology, San Diego City College Geography, and USD Ecology students. Other student events included Christian Heritage Home School (Ethnobotany), Inspire Charter School, and the High Tech High Nature Program.

Many of Silverwood's maintenance projects heavily rely on the efforts of volunteers, who contributed a total of 933 hours this past year. A lot of sweat equity went into **fire clearance** (5 volunteers giving 112 hours over 6 events), **invasive weed pulling** (44 events supported by 17 volunteers, with 275 hours invested), and **trail maintenance** (4 volunteers making 16 trips up the trails for a total of 85 hours).

Our faithful **Sunday hosts** contribute an invaluable human touch throughout the year. Nine individual hosts logged 369.5 volunteer hours for 42 Sunday events, with each hour accented with smiles. Eight volunteer **docents** conducted nature tours and stations for 10 informative and inspiring events, totaling 44 hours.



California Quail by Karen Straus



Bobcat by Rowshan Dowlatabadi

Silverwood's 785 rugged acres of coastal sage, chaparral, and live oak habitat range in altitude from 1,500 up to 3,177 feet. Its **13 named and sponsored trails** carry you over 5 miles of unspoiled nature, where you may encounter scores of plant and animal species on any given walk. New species are added to our checklists on an ongoing basis.

This year we have reviewed our policies for both Silverwood and Anstine-Audubon, and we have consolidated them for clarity, consistency, and to create a comprehensive management perspective. As we move through this century of climate crisis, east and north county development issues, and other drivers of habitat degradation, the challenges we face are real. We are working to ensure that we're applying the smartest, strongest policies to keep our sanctuaries thriving.

Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary in Lakeside is free and open to the public on Sundays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Registration required. To sign up for a visit, RSVP at www.sandiegoaudubon.org/what-we-do/silverwood. Silverwood is also open on Wednesdays, 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. for SDAS members only. Please call a week in advance of the day of your visit at (619) 443-2998. See our web page for all updates.

Government, Foundation, & Corporate Partners FYE23

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Honda Marine Science Foundation
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 U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
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City of San Diego
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Elwyn Heller Foundation
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Great Egret Society Members

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 Bettina Arnold
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BUILDERS INITIATIVE FOUNDATION: *Standing behind those on the forefront of change*

This year, thanks to a 2-year grant from Builders Initiative Foundation, we have been able to grow our capacity, make strides towards our strategic plan, and increase community support and visibility of ReWild Mission Bay. Specifically, with Builders Initiative we were able to create key positions to meet the needs of the organization. These positions are already producing positive impacts: engagement with ReWild project communications increased by 39%, our ReWild Coalition now numbers over 75 organizations and 500 supporters, and grant funding for projects has increased over 74%. "Standing behind those on the forefront of change is our main mission" says Laura Rodriguez, Senior Program Officer of the Oceans program at the

Builders Initiative Foundation. "We are thrilled to support the growth and impact of San Diego Audubon Society and the ReWild Mission Bay coalition."

The Builders Initiative Foundation funding has helped strengthen our Advocacy Training program and provided training for our volunteer Conservation committee. The visibility and interest of our ReWild Mission Bay project increased significantly among the general public with 8 live coverages and 20 print stories published by the media, including coverage of a rally held with the ReWild Coalition to advocate for more wetlands in the De Anza Cove redevelopment plan.

FINANCIALS FYE 2023

INCOME

Contributions and Memberships	\$329,377	22%
Grants	\$976,619	66%
Program Fees	\$189,586	13%
Investments/Interest	\$(7,586)	-1%
Other	\$2,021	

Total /Revenues \$1,490,018

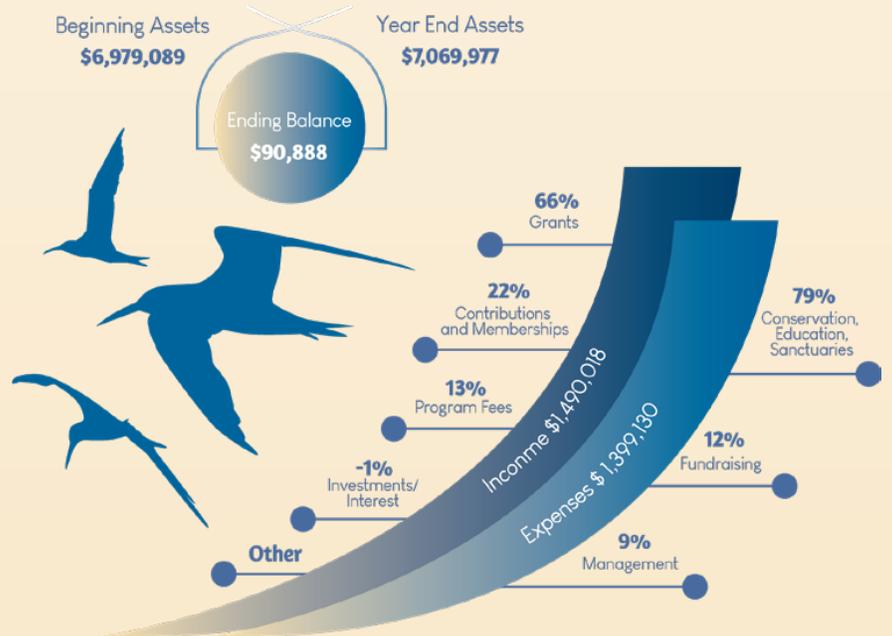
EXPENSES

Conservation, Education, Sanctuaries	\$1,111,280	79%
Management	\$124,064	9%
Fundraising	\$163,786	12%

Total Expenses \$1,399,130

Beginning Assets	\$6,979,089
Year End Assets	\$7,069,977

Ending Balance \$90,888





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Go Ahead, Brag a Little

When you become a **San Diego Audubon member** and discover all the ways to enjoy our region's hundreds of bird species, other wildlife, and their habitats, you'll be bragging about your good fortune. At any level, your membership is something to crow about.



Join or Renew as a Member. Make monthly or yearly contributions, meet other bird enthusiasts, and enjoy member benefits, too.

Make a Donation. Make a tax-deductible gift to support our initiatives, our many programs, and both of our sanctuaries.

Leave a Legacy. Make plans today for a gift tomorrow and become part of our esteemed Golden Eagle Legacy Club.

Volunteer. There are many ways to contribute of your time and talents.



DS/23

We encourage you to become a member of San Diego Audubon, especially if you are already a National Audubon member.

To become a member, visit:
sandiegoaudubon.org/joinourflock/become-a-member.html

Sketches SAN DIEGO AUDUBON

SKETCHES is published quarterly.
For details on submissions and deadlines, please contact:
LaTresa Pearson at lens.pearson@sbcglobal.net
The office is open to visitors. Please call in advance to confirm someone will be present.

4010 Morena Blvd. Ste. 100, San Diego, CA 92117

Messages can be left at any time by email:
sdaudubon@sandiegoaudubon.org
(Emails might be more effective than calling.)

San Diego Audubon Office: 858-273-7800

California Audubon Society: ca.audubon.org
National Audubon Society: www.audubon.org
National Audubon Activist Hotline: 800-659-2622
National Audubon Customer Service: 800-274-4201

San Diego Audubon Society is a chapter of the National Audubon Society



Audubon

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Log on for online resources. *Please visit our website for all calendar items and registrations.*

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Together we defend our region's birds, unique biodiversity, and threatened habitats through advocacy, education, and restoration.