

SUNDAY SAN FRANCISCO Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Maria Alicia Gaura, Chronicle Staff Writer
Sunday, August 14, 2005

Since its inception in 1990, the 260-mile-long San Francisco Bay Trail has been a gift to Bay Area birders, giving them access to some of the richest birding sites in the United States from its network of pathways.

Now, a coalition of trail advocates and environmentalists has released a guide to 16 of the best bird-watching spots along the Bay Trail, allowing anyone with binoculars and a steady hand to glimpse firsthand wildlife previously seen mainly by hard-core bird lovers.



"Before now, you would have had to be pretty tied in to the birding community to know where to go to find some of these spots," said La Honda resident and birding guide Les Chibana, who designed the Birding the Bay Trail map and guide, which was commissioned by the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory. "There was no one source for this information."



The 16 sites on the Birding the Bay Trail map range from Alviso in the South Bay to Napa and Petaluma in the north. All the sites are wheelchair accessible, and many offer amenities such as restrooms, benches and picnic tables, as noted in the guide. Thirteen of the sites charge no entrance fee.

That means that even visitors with small children and the mobility impaired can get out to see such rare creatures as endangered clapper rails and threatened burrowing owls, as well as scores of other interesting species.

Because San Francisco Bay is a major migration stopover, the shortening days of autumn bring hundreds of species -- and hundreds of thousands of birds -- to the bay, its sloughs and tidal flats. Many birders consider winter the best time of year for bird-spotting. But spring and summer bring chicks, whose fuzzy cuteness and earnest attempts to feed and fly are hard to resist.

On a path next to a freshwater marsh in Palo Alto's Baylands park, city resident Eleanor Bassler watched raptly recently as a shrieking pied-billed grebe drove a predatory black-crowned night heron away from its tiny chicks. The downy chicks dove into the water to seek cover as the mother grebe battled with the heron, which eventually threw in



the towel and flapped downstream. The mother bird clambered back onto her nest and called her chicks, who popped from the water and vanished beneath her wings.

"I came out today to see how the grebe nest is doing," Bassler said. "I've been watching it for a couple of weeks." "I used to work in Silicon Valley," Bassler said. "Now I have the time to come out here and enjoy this. It's such a grand resource, and this map is wonderful."

Many visitors to Baylands come to catch a glimpse of the clapper rails that stalk the pickleweed marsh in search of clams and worms. The birds are solitary and quick, and a sighting is never assured.

Less shy are the hundreds of brilliant white snowy and great egrets that, since 2003, have been nesting in the date palms next to the Baylands duck pond. On a recent morning, dozens of tousle-headed egret chicks could be seen perching in the palm fronds, begging meals of regurgitated fish from their harried parents and occasionally crash-landing in the dirt as they honed their flying skills.

In a nearby eucalyptus, two juvenile night herons jostled one another atop a nest of stacked twigs, gazing intently back at watching birders. Across the street from the duck pond, avocets and curlews probed the mud of the abandoned Palo Alto Yacht Club with their long beaks, while hovering Forster's terns plunged into deeper water, snatching at tiny fish.

A short drive away, near Mountain View's Shoreline Park, a crowd of passers-by gathered around Chibana's scope and tripod for extreme close-up views of a clan of yellow-eyed burrowing owls. At least nine of the pint-sized predators live condo-style in a burrow just 40 feet from a public walkway, drawing gasps from observers as they popped their heads from the dusty holes riddling the mound.

While most birds are most active early in the morning, and most owls come out only at night, burrowing owls are diurnal and quite lively in midday, when many other species have retreated from the heat.

"It's terrific to see them by the bay again!" exclaimed Cupertino resident Shirley Gordon, who was on her way to a lunch date. "The last one I saw was years ago, before all the building took place out here."

Even in midsummer, a visit to just the Baylands site rewarded Chibana and his guests with dozens of bird species, five types of herons, five species of baby birds, and one endangered species, all before lunch.

And this, according to local birders, is the off-season. "The shorebirds are just starting to arrive," Chibana said. "We are just at the beginning of the fall migration."

The Birding the Bay Trail brochure was produced as a partnership of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory, the San Francisco Bay Trail and the Coastal Conservancy.

Janet Hanson, executive director of the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory, hopes the guide will inspire more residents to consider the birds living in our midst. "Experienced birders can use the guide to target particular species, but anyone can use it to know where to look and what you might see at any time of year," Hanson said. "A lot of trail users are not aware of what they are rollerblading past, and why they should keep the dog on the leash," Hanson said. "This shows the best places for the largest variety of birds and the best habitat." And the more people know about birds, the more volunteers sign up to help with habitat restoration and annual bird counts.

"What is so wonderful about birding is that you can never know all there is to know," Bassler said. "It's something that just grows on you the more you know."

To obtain a copy of the "Birding the Bay Trail" brochure, which outlines 16 prime locations to bird watch along the San Francisco Bay Trail, e-mail outreach@sfbbo.org or call (408) 946-6548.

Page A - 19

URL: <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2005/08/14/BAG4KE7PUT1.DTL>

Many of the images used in the Bay Trail brochure were taken by Rob Pavey. The images included in this version of the article were also taken by Rob Pavey and include, in order of appearance! – Loggerhead Shrike, Northern Pintail Ducks, American Avocets, Snowy Egret in breeding plumage, Osprey, Song Sparrow and Great Blue Heron. All these birds can be found while birding the bay trail.

