



PETALUMA WETLANDS ALLIANCE NEWSLETTER

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Providing Education in and Stewardship of Petaluma's Public Wetlands.

Winter 2006

2005 Review of Docent Activities at Shollenberger Park

by Bob Dyer, Senior Docent

Overview and Summary

The Shollenberger Park docent program dates from 1999. Since its formalization in 2003, we have greatly expanded services to the public. The docent program works very closely with, and is supported by, the Petaluma Wetlands Alliance.

Docent Tours and Activities for School Children

We conducted tours for **1,059** people in 2005 compared to 750 in 2004. Our programs for school children involved **700** children in 2005 compared to 470 in 2004. With the assistance of several newer docents, we expanded services for children in class and at the park. We did not charge the schools for any of these services. Donations and a grant to the PWA paid for materials, and our docents volunteered their services.

We also conducted a number of tours for the public. Open tours were scheduled for the second Saturday of every month (except from June to September). We also had tours for groups and participated in the January San Francisco Bay Flyway Festival.

Other Services

Docents provided a number of new services in 2005, from renovating kiosks to creating a student activities and picnic area at the front of the park (with four eight-foot picnic tables). We used the \$15K Supplemental Environmental Project Grant to help pay for these efforts.

In November of 2005 we received another grant of \$2,500, which will help us with material costs in 2006 and allow us to add new artwork to another of the kiosks.

Recording Activities on Heron/Egret Colony

For the third year several docents recorded nesting activity at the heron/egret colony across the river from the park.

Bird Surveys

Every week from late September 2004 until September 2005, top birders did counts of all the birds that could be observed from the park trail. This provided a baseline study that can be used by experts. The surveys were

continued on a **monthly** basis, starting in October 2005. Park docents helped with the surveys, as well as with the logistics and data recording. This year some of our docents participated in the first annual Sonoma Valley Christmas Bird Count. See the article below by Peter Colasanti.

Docent Training

We conducted a training course for new docents at the Lucchesi Community Center in September and October, graduating seven new docents. It is important that we continue to increase the number of our docents. Our expanded school activities now require five docents for in-class activities and five for at-the-park activities. We are all unpaid volunteers, and our primary motivation is to share our love of the wetlands with others, especially youngsters. Not all of us are available on any given day because of work or other activities.

Bird List

Starting in 2005, we published a new checklist for all the birds recorded at the park and adjoining wetlands since 1999. This was available at the park and proved quite popular, with 1,500 being printed.

Bird Count

by Peter Colasanti

Friday, 30 December 2005, more than a dozen hardy souls huddled in the lee of the outhouse at Shollenberger Park before sunrise. Their mission: to identify and count all the birds occurring within about ten square miles of Petaluma Wetlands and coastal prairie, also known as Area 5, before sundown as part of the first annual Sonoma Valley Christmas Bird Count (CBC). A storm was forecast—the wettest in close to a decade—and it had already started to rain. Captain Gary Compari was preparing his launch at the marina to cover the river and its tributaries south to Lakeville with a crew of two, hoping to be at Ellis Creek for the 8.0' tide at about noon. Andy LaCasse and Gerald Moore took four others to Cardoza Ranch at Tolay Lake bed and I stayed to do Shollenberger and environs with the six remaining.

My crew birded our way hastily to Gray's Mud (aka Gray's Ranch) for the flood tide and shorebird flyover. Viewing to the south was nearly futile, with our scopes pointed into the driven rain, and Bob Dyer headed out with the bulk of the group and Don Howard's scope by the time we'd soaked our first field list. Don and I caught up at the kiosk opposite the Haystack Landing egret rookery; they'd found Common Yellowthroat, a bird that had evaded me for the better part of two weeks previewing for the count. It turned out to be Unique To the Count Circle (UTCC) in the final tally. We redivided the team and Bob's crew did the north end of Alman Marsh while my people did Adobe Creek and the rest of Shollenberger. En route to lunch, my group stopped at Wheat Creek for the Burrowing Owl we expected to find there, and Bob Benson found the first of two Snow Geese, UTCC. Everyone met at Papa's Taverna at noon for lunch. The compiler, Tom Rusert, caught up with us there.

The boat crew had jumped four Black Rails and two American Bitterns, both UTCC, as was the Tolay crew's Tricolored Blackbird, one of their total of 63 species for the morning. Lunch was delicious, though next year Andy should buy two, and we got some handle on what to look for in the afternoon when we returned to the field to complete coverage of the area. Don Howard and I found some good birds at a gull roost and the southeast corner of Shollenberger Park, but only Tundra Swan was UTCC.

Four of us made it to the tally dinner shared with eight teams of about a dozen people each. It took about three-quarters of an hour to compile our area total from nine soggy lists in four or five formats. There was a reporter and photographer from the local Sonoma city newspaper, speechifying by the compilers and the

mayor, the best pot luck dinner I've had the pleasure of gorging on, and bottles of Syrah with a Sonoma Valley CBC commemorative label passed out to leaders in attendance (sorry, Gerald). The final tally was 150 total species for the count circle, which places the count in Table 2 of the CBC edition of *American Birds: Counts with 150 or more species*. Area 5 found 101 of those species with at least 6 species UTCC and another 3 unique count week birds. All in all, a fine inaugural.

Tree Swallow Houses Ready for New Tenants

by Bob Dyer

Several years ago docent Andy LaCasse built birdhouses for tree swallows and he and Tommy Smith erected them along Adobe Creek, all visible from the Shollenberger trail. Andy added more in 2005 near the park entrance on the peninsula behind the picnic tables, and students from McDowell Elementary School helped erect them. Tree Swallows nested in all the boxes, and numerous young swallows successfully fledged.

In January Andy and Len Nelson cleaned out the houses along Adobe Creek to prepare them for the nesting season, which could start as early as February. School children in the Land Paths program had previously cleaned out the peninsula houses.

Len reported that yellow jackets were residing in a number of the houses, but they were not active and could barely move. Apparently, they were hibernating, so it was a good time to visit the houses and clean them. In the twelve nests that were cleaned out, Andy and Len found nine unhatched eggs and a few dead chicks. In the area they also found owl scat that appeared to be recent. Andy felt that a visit at night with a good flashlight might catch an owl on one of the houses.

Recent and Upcoming PWA Activities

by Gerald Moore

Education Funding

In November 2005 Gerald Moore and Bob Dyer met with the officers of RNM Properties and presented our educational program and its budget. This resulted in a \$2,500 grant from the corporation to fund our educational needs during 2006.

Weed Management Activities

Gerald Moore and John Shribbs spent two weeks in November writing a grant proposal for \$10,000 to help fund our plant restoration program. We will know at the end of February 2006 if we will be funded. If this proposal is not funded, we will seek funds from other sources. Moore and Shribbs spent much of December writing a weed management plan for the Petaluma Wetlands. The entire document is about 2.5 inches thick and will be presented to the City of Petaluma in late January. We hope to start attacking the most invasive weeds at Shollenberger this spring. We are counting on your help—see below.

Two New Docent Programs

Several of our docents have started monthly family walks on the third Saturday of each month, targeted at children and their parents. These walks, scheduled to start at 9 a.m., are designed to further reach out to children and increase their interaction with nature. The importance of facilitating the interaction of today's children with nature is discussed in the well-researched book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* by Richard Louv. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in nature, the environment, children, and the future.

PWA is also starting family walks in **Spanish** for our Hispanic community. Connie Peabody, a PWA docent and Spanish teacher at Petaluma Junior High, will lead these walks. Connie is committed to the science and natural history education of our Latino children. Anyone in the community with bilingual skills who would like to help with this program should contact us at 763-3577. Check our Web site for program details.

Docent Education

On 30 November 2005 most of the PWA docents went to the Richardson Bay Audubon Center and Wildlife Sanctuary for an overview of their school docent program. We enjoyed tide pooling and interactions with their staff, including Center Director Brooke Langston, who is very supportive of our program. On 3 December Mary Edith and Gerald Moore attended an open house at the Audubon Center where we discussed our program with Audubon California director Glenn Olsen and other Audubon California staffers who were very encouraging. One area of great excitement was our plan to start a Spanish-language tour program for families.

Bay Area Flyway Festival 27 to 29 January 2006

For the third year PWA is participating in the Flyway Festival by leading daily tours at Shollenberger Park and staffing an information booth at the Mare Island Exhibit Center, Bldg. 897. Exhibit days are 28 January, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., and 29 January 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Upcoming Items to Watch For

(Further details on these activities will appear on our Web site, be posted at the park in kiosk #2, and appear in future e-mailings.)

1. PWA and Madrone Audubon will cosponsor a Migratory Bird Days celebration at Shollenberger Park on Saturday, 20 May 2006.
2. The docents will organize a spring cleanup at the wetlands.
3. We plan to start the weed cutting and pulling projects this spring and invite all schools, community groups, and interested individuals to join us in this effort to restore the Petaluma Wetlands to a natural, more native, condition that will attract even more wildlife to the area for our enjoyment.
4. In the fall of 2006 we will conduct another docent training course. We plan to make this one even bigger and better than the last.