PETALUMA WETLANDS ALLIANCE NEWSLETTER
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Providing Education in and Stewardship of Petaluma's Public Wetlands.

Summer 2007

Enrich Your Life—Become a Petaluma Wetlands Docent by Gerald Moore

The Petaluma Wetlands Alliance Committee has a very active wetlands docent program, which not only serves the community but also offers its docents many rewarding experiences. The program is so popular with grade school teachers that we are booked up for the year within thirty days of opening our schedule in the fall. Our major focus is a third grade hands-on program with both classroom and wetlands visit components. We also do nature discovery walks for second grades and bird/nature walks for higher grades and adults. This year we interacted with nearly 700 grade school kids. In addition, our docents have the opportunity to participate in educational workshops, field trips, and stewardship activities at the wetlands. Meet and work with some great, enthusiastic, amateur naturalists in our community. Our annual new-docent training will start on 14 September 2007, from 8:30 a.m. to noon, and run for six consecutive Fridays. Please join us in this rewarding, fun, educational adventure. We ask docents to make a minimum two-year, twenty-hours-per-year commitment spread out in any way among the many activities we support. There is a $40 charge for course materials. For more details contact Bob at 763-2934, Gerald at 763-3577, or see our great website: www.petalumawetlands.org.

Educational Program for First Half of 2007 by Bob Dyer

Since the beginning of 2003, Shollenberger docents have provided educational services to 3,000 local school children, including almost **700 children this year**. We offered varied activities inside local classrooms and at the park, at no expense to our schools or taxpayers.

In 2005, Sharon Mansfield, a retired teacher, fashioned a program that went beyond presenting slide shows in class and bird walks at the park. We now have a broader range of interactive activities to offer, directed primarily to second, third, and fourth graders. Students in groups of five or six rotate through the activities with one docent leading each activity.

In-Class Educational Activities:

1. Slide Presentation. This was offered to second, third, and fourth graders.

   The next three activities were for third and fourth graders.

2. Wetlands Model.
3. What Makes a Bird a Bird—Feathers and Bills.
4. Who Am I—A Guessing Game about the Wetland Animals.

At-The-Park Activities:

1. Nature Walk for second graders.

The next activities were directed to third and fourth graders.

2. Mud and Water.
3. Habitat Walk.
4. Bird Walks.

Update on Weed Removal and Habitat Restoration by Gerald Moore

Between February and July of 2007 we removed tens of thousands of Italian thistle plants, both by spraying and pulling. We have also removed all of the star thistle and cardoon that we could locate. The hardinggrass has been reduced in quantity by at least fifty percent. In between all of this weed removal work we planted about 1,800 native plants including creeping wild rye, meadow barley, coyote bush, wild rose, buckeye trees, and monkeyflower. In May we constructed a new information kiosk to explain the weed removal/habitat management program to the public. A new, highly invasive weed was identified in Shollenberger on 10 July. This plant, named *Dittrichius graveolens*, was removed by pulling on 11 July. Removal was done under the concept of "Early Detection—Rapid Response," which is the highly promoted weed management approach by the California Department of Agriculture. On 15 July we had a booth at the Art and Garden Faire to tell people about our project.

Perennial pepperweed is a major challenge at our site and will be a focus next year. This year we established some test plots in the uplands to evaluate four different spray techniques for this plant. The results will be apparent next spring. The only effective way to deal with this species is spraying since it puts out underground runners that clone the mother plant, and any of these rhizomes left in the soil will restart the plants.

Fifth Year of Shollenberger Heron/Egret Colony Ends by Bob Dyer

Len Nelson and I have completed our 2007 observations of heron/egret colony #121 (as designated by Cypress Grove Research Center to which we submit reports of our observations).

This was the fifth year for this colony. During its history, Len and I have counted 250 mature chicks. Seventy-five percent of these have been great egret chicks. This year we found no great blue heron or snowy egret chicks.

There were twenty-five great egret chicks, only half of our 2006 total. We observed no obvious predation or human interference. Some other factor was at work—the dry winter or a shift of breeding birds to other colonies.

Watching the parents feeding and socializing with their young can be wonderful. We watched one parent playing keep-away with a stick from a large chick. Every so often the chick would grab the end of the stick

and there would be a brief tug-of-war. We also watched another large chick checking its flying abilities—circling the colony, swooping, and then banking sharply.

Dutra Products still wants an asphalt factory adjacent to this colony. The initial EIR is long overdue, but we are monitoring the situation. It is against federal law to disturb the colony during the breeding season.

Renewal of Sections of the Federal Farm Bill Are Important by Gerald Moore

We need help in writing members of Congress about getting the 2007 Farm Bill passed with retention of a strong Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and inclusion of the Sodsaver Program. Since 1985, CRP has maintained eight million acres of farmland as wildlife habitat (including wetlands) and is critical for wildlife. The Sodsaver Program removes incentives for conversion of native prairie to cropland. Please write or e-mail your congressional representatives and urge support for inclusion of strong versions of these programs in the 2007 Farm Bill. Both National Audubon and Ducks Unlimited support this effort.

Tree Swallows and the Mystery of Alman Marsh by Len Nelson

It began as a simple question: what happens in the twenty tree swallow nests at Shollenberger Park over the course of a nesting season? For the last two years, Andy Lacasse and I had been cleaning the nest boxes that he constructed. This year I took notes as to what we found in each box to learn how many eggs did not hatch and how many nestings there were. But the old nests could not even suggest how many chicks had lived to fledge. So I made up my mind that I would answer that question in the course of the 2007 mating season.

Naively, I thought I was doing something quite original, but I discovered that a project of this nature that stretched from Alaska to Argentina had been in existence for some time. It is called the Golondrinas de las Americas. (*Golondrinas* is Spanish for swallow.) Refer to http://golondrinas.cornell.edu/ for details.

Tree swallows lend themselves well to a broad study since they are quite tolerant of intrusions into their private nesting lives. Cornell has a protocol for this study that calls for the collection of details such as number of eggs, number of chicks, number that die, number that fledge, yellow jackets and other predators that intrude, shape of nest (from a selection of four types), height of nest in centimeters, and number of feathers that might be proximal to a chick and the number that are on the outside of the nest as you see it when the door is open. At first, the details together appear so overwhelming and superfluous that my reaction was to simply exclaim, “Oh, just forget it!” But, upon further reflection, it became obvious that most of the details on a nest needed to be captured only once (like nest height, nest shape, number of feathers in and out), so it really came down to my ascertaining the information that I wanted to collect originally—number of eggs, number of chicks, number that die, and number that fledge.

The study’s averages indicate that the incubation period for eggs is from thirteen to sixteen days. During the first nesting season at Shollenberger, though, the average was nineteen days, well above the high range of the study. The average fledging time is sixteen to twenty-four days, and at Shollenberger tree swallows fall in the middle of the range at 20.4 days.

From the twenty nests at Shollenberger, fourteen (70%) were productive, that is, fledged tree swallow chicks. An interesting question is who did not produce fledglings and why.

Eleven of the twenty tree swallow nests are in a line on either side of Adobe Creek. Six are outside of Shollenberger proper on the west side of Adobe Creek in Alman Marsh, and five are inside Shollenberger on the east side of the creek. All of those on the east side fledged chicks and none on the west side were productive. Not only did the six nests on the west side not produce fledglings, but five of the six did not even produce chicks. Of the twenty-seven eggs laid in these six nests, only four chicks in one nest (#6) hatched. Thirteen days after these chicks hatched, I discovered many feathers on the ground around the box and, more ominously, one chick's wing too. No other remains were found. One person reported seeing a feral cat in the area earlier that day. So that explains, at least to me, what happened here.

But, we still have the mystery of Alman Marsh: how about nests #1 to 5? You see, all of these produced eggs—twenty-three in total or 4.6 per nest on average. But none of these eggs hatched, and it appears that none of the parents were too interested in incubating the eggs in these nests. Why? No one has a good answer yet. None of these nests ever appeared to be raided by anything. If you have any good ideas on this issue, please send them my way.

One of the nests on the other side of Adobe Creek, nest #12, on the right side of the right channel as you enter the park at the main entrance, produced chicks that reached the age of six days before they died. Of the six chicks in this nest, two were found dead in the nest, covered with ants. A third was dead on the ground with a few ants on it, and the remaining three were not found. What happened here is a matter of speculation.

The story is quite different for those nests clearly in Shollenberger Park on the east side of Adobe Creek, though. All thirteen produced chicks that fledged. Out of sixty-six eggs, sixty-three (95.5%) hatched, three (4.5%) did not hatch, fourteen (21.2%) died, and forty-nine (74.2%) fledged. I do not know how these numbers measure up to the study's averages at this time.

The first nesting period at Shollenberger is now over. The second nesting is well under way, and some chicks have already fledged. The figures for the second nesting will follow at a later date. However, one thing is already clear: the nests in the Alman Marsh area are not successful. Stay tuned for details at a later date.