

PETALUMA WETLANDS ALLIANCE

(A COMMITTEE OF MADRONE AUDUBON)

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Providing Education in and Stewardship of Petaluma's Public Wetlands

Spring/Summer 2008

PWA Works on a Strategic Plan by Gerald Moore

In order to help map out our future, we started work on a five-year strategic plan last January. With luck we will finish the plan by December. Then we will start on a brief business plan. Most serious organizations go through such planning, but our long-range desire is to build an interpretive center for Petaluma's public wetlands at the Ellis Creek Water Recycling Facility and Wildlife Sanctuary. Such plans are critical to help obtain the grant funds for a project like this. California Audubon has expressed interest in running such a center, which would quickly become a major focal point for both education and tourism in our community. Local architect **Mary Dooly** has donated a 4,200-square-foot floor plan as a prototype concept for the center. Unfortunately, this project will have to wait for the economy to improve.

Shollenberger's Heron/Egret Colony by Bob Dyer

Since 2003 there has been an active colony of nesting herons and egrets across the Petaluma River from Shollenberger. It is on the property now owned by the Dutra

company, which is seeking permission to build an asphalt factory there.

Colony health signifies a healthy environment (wish I could say the same about an asphalt factory!). **Len Nelson** and I record activity at the colony for Cypress Grove Research Center (a part of Audubon Canyon), which maintains an atlas of Bay Area colonies. Last year, production at colony “123” fell off, with only 25 chicks reaching “stage 4.” At that stage, the chicks are standing on the nest platform and the parents are mostly away from the nest searching for food. This is the most significant stage statistically as it shows the birds are active, and they are easier to count. This year things have been looking up.

Len and I have reviewed activity at the colony eight times since early March. There are currently 30 active nests seen from Shollenberger and another 18 to 20 that can only be seen 180 degrees away from Petaluma Blvd. South. So far this year, the colony has produced 55 stage 4 chicks, and at least 10 of them have already fledged. Although the great majority of the chicks are great egrets, we have also seen six great blue heron chicks (the most ever at this location). Only the smaller snowy egrets have not shown much success. There will be one more site visit in early July to wrap up the season. Park-goers can expect activity through July as the larger chicks continue to get fed and practice flying. For a good view, bring binoculars and walk counterclockwise from the entrance of the park about .8 miles to an area on the trail opposite the houseboat. Because of traffic conditions, we do not recommend attempting to view the colony from Petaluma Blvd. South.

Thank You Docents
Sharon Mansfield

by

Our generous and informative PWA docents completed another successful year of classroom and field visits with Petaluma area school children. Since October, we completed 30 visits with appreciative teachers who tell us that our educational program has become their favorite visit activity of the year. It has also become a favorite activity for our docents. We get to see the enthusiasm and excitement on the faces of students as they experience the wonders of natural science with a docent by their side. Each and every docent has special gifts to offer to our programs, and we thank each one.

Our docent schedule for the 2008-09 school year will begin the first week of October. We expect teachers to select dates for their visits in August and September. We plan to see about the same number of classes again with a few possible additions in April. We are reaching out to schools and third grade teachers that we have not visited in our three-year program.

We will begin the new year with all “seasoned docents,” so we can get a quick start in the fall. There will be opportunities for “brush-up” training in September. New docent training

will take place in January and February 200 (see below). As more teachers request our program, we need to sustain and grow our docent population. Encourage friends and neighbors to look at our web site, www.petalumawetlands.org, for information on becoming a wetlands docent. Everyone have a lovely summer. No doubt many will be strolling Shollenberger Park.

Jepson Prairie Preserve Enrichment Field Trip Edith Moore

by Mary

In the spring, 10 PWA docents carpoled to the Jepson Prairie Preserve, a native grassland containing the best vernal pools in the area, where they met preserve docents Jim and Kate for a three-hour tour. Although it was a cold, breezy morning, the PWA docents followed Jim and Kate over prairie mounds, through winding swales, and around flower-fringed vernal pools. As the docents walked along, botanist Kate indicated the abundant bunch grasses and wildflowers by both their scientific and common names. At the largest vernal pool, Jim gathered water samples that were teeming with life, including the rare fairy shrimps and tiger salamanders. The PWA docents experienced hands-on encounters with these ancient invertebrate ancestors. Later, many of the docents met for lunch at Baker's Square in Vacaville.

Next PWA Docent Training Course Gerald Moore

by

Our next training course for new docents will start on **9 January 2009** and run for eight consecutive Friday mornings. If you are interested or know someone who might be interested in becoming a wetlands docent, please contact us at **763-2934** or **778-6558** for more details. Join the fun by becoming part of this great group of people.

Western Pond Turtles at Shollenberger by Bob Dyer

The Western Pond Turtle (*Emys marmorata*) is the only native turtle in the western part of the United States. They can live up to 40 years in the proper environment, have a carapace (shell) 8 inches long and weigh as much as 2 pounds. Their diet consists mainly of insects, worms, small aquatic animals, and plants. The pond turtles are strictly freshwater creatures and you can find them basking at Shollenberger in the two narrow channels that you see as you enter the park. I believe we have a population of 15 to 20 at the park. We estimate the number by counting them when they are out of the water and basking in the sun. They do

this to raise their body temperature since they are cold-blooded reptiles. Studies have shown that basking is as important as feeding to the growth of younger turtles. Pond turtles nest away from the water—from 5 feet to more than 1,000 feet. They need well-drained clay/silt soils with a slope of less than 15 degrees. Nests must be protected from dogs, raccoons, and skunks. Even hatched baby turtles are not safe, as they can be consumed by river otters and bullfrogs (both of which we have at Shollenberger).

This species is in danger in Sonoma County and we see few baby pond turtles at the park. Additionally, the natives must compete with the introduced red-eared sliders for basking space. Recently, park docents placed three logs in the right channel and two in the left channel, anchoring them to the shore, to provide necessary basking room. As many as seven pond turtles have been seen on one of the logs at one time!

Providing the appropriate nesting habitat is another goal, and we are studying this with help from experts at Sonoma State University. These actions are required or there will be no pond turtles for the public (especially the school children) to enjoy watching.

Weed Removal Parties at Shollenberger Park **by** **Gerald Moore**

Between now and October we need to pull out several species of nonnative thistles and other invasives to prevent them from spreading in our wetlands. If you would like to help with this effort, we will be working on the **first and third Saturdays** and the **second and fourth Wednesdays** of each month through October. We will start at 7:00 AM June through August and at 8:00 AM during September and October. Please join us for one to four hours of light pulling and fellowship on those mornings. Gloves, tools, and bags will be provided. Please call **763-3577** so we know you are coming and can bring the necessary equipment. This is light work and tends to be a nice social experience. You can start later in the morning if that better fits your lifestyle.

For those of you who like to pot plants we have a work opportunity at the Casa Grande Native Plant Nursery, which supplies us with all our restoration plants. **John Shribbs**, who runs the nursery, is having work parties on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9 to 11 AM, during July and August and on Thursday afternoons and Saturday mornings during the school year. John really needs help to augment the work of the high school students (particularly during the summer) so he can continue to supply plants for our restoration work. We plant in the wetlands between December and March. Please call John at **769-8961** if you can help.

Madrone Audubon Awards for Three **by** **PWA Members for Outstanding Contributions**

Mary Edith Moore

Bewick's Wren Award—Len Nelson

The Bewick's wren is Madrone Audubon's logo and the name of the oldest of the four Madrone awards, which recognizes a member for a long-term, exceptional contribution. This year's recipient is Len Nelson. Len is a member of Madrone and has been a PWA docent since 2003 and a PWA Board member since 2004. He took on the job of data manager in 2004 when PWA started the Shollenberger bird surveys and continues the surveys management. When PWA started the Tolay surveys in 2006, Len stepped forward and accepted that data management and has recently agreed to manage the Madrone Christmas Bird Count data. Len has taken over the tree swallow box management and activity surveys at Shollenberger/Alman Marsh for *Golondrinas de las Americas* (and PWA and PRBO Conservation Science), a monitoring project that stretches from Alaska to Argentina. Also, Len helps with PWA habitat restoration at Shollenberger/Alman Marsh and the in-class, in-field educational activities. Undoubtedly, Len is a treasure, and we are most appreciative of his work.

Bentley Smith Award—Gerald and Mary Edith Moore

Given in honor of Martha Bentley and Ernestine Smith, this award was established in 2002 to recognize contributions to environmental education and conservation activity in the community. Both Martha and Ernestine are charter members of Madrone and continue to be environmental advocates and inspirations to us all. (Note: Martha died on 26 May 2008 at the age of 89 years—a tremendous loss to Madrone Audubon and the community.) This year's recipients are a husband and wife team, Gerald and Mary Edith Moore, who have put their energies, since 2001, into being instrumental in establishing the Petaluma Wetlands Alliance and setting up an excellent Petaluma Wetlands docent training for leaders of school and youth programs as well as nature walks for the public. Their efforts raise the awareness in the Sonoma County community to this environmentally important area that is one of the most natural and prolific estuary river systems that still exists in California.

PWA Annual Meeting Gerald Moore

by

The PWA Annual Meeting will be held on Saturday, **1 November**, 9:45 AM to noon at Lucchesi Community Center. The featured speaker will be **Patricia Winters** who will present a program on Bay Area bats. We will also recognize people who have contributed to our education and restoration programs and field questions and comments about our work in the wetlands. Please come to this free meeting and learn more about bats and the Petaluma Wetlands Alliance.

