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PETALUMA WETLANDS ALLIANCE

**(A COMMITTEE OF MADRONE AUDUBON)
P.O. Box 973, Petaluma CA 94953-0973**

Spring-Summer 2012

PWA Education Program for Third Graders

by Helen Heal

From mid-March to mid-May, docents for PWA's third grade education program were busy working with 384 children in 15 third grade classrooms in the Petaluma River watershed. For the full 2011-2012 academic year, 702 children in 28 classrooms were served in this program. This included two mornings with each class. The first morning is in the classroom focusing on a slide show and activities to introduce concepts and processes relating to the habitats in Shollenberger Park. The second morning is spent at the park, using the park as an outdoor laboratory to explore how these concepts and processes play out in the natural world. All of this is aligned with California's science learning standards for third graders.

We also partnered with Valley Vista School to produce a mural for the front of the school. This involved a short presentation for the school and support for the students as they painted a variety of wooden cutouts of animals found in Shollenberger and nearby locations. We then participated in their Garden Party event on May 5 and in the unveiling of the mural. Many public officials were present, and it was a nice boost for the park. Drive by the school and enjoy this spectacular sight!

In addition, we helped John Shribbs organize and deliver a week of classes about Shollenberger for his Advanced Placement students at Casa Grande High School.

There are many ways in which docents serve children and families in the park, and it all adds up to generous contributions of time, commitment, knowledge, and care for our next generations. We will be taking a bit of a breather over the summer, although there is always work to do, and starting up again in early September.

Awards

by Mary Edith Moore

Bowen Award

Madrone Audubon presented **Susan Kirks** with their oldest award, the **Bowen**, which acknowledges outstanding contributions to the chapter. Susan has an impressive record in several ongoing conservation projects. She is cofounder of the Paula Lane Action Network (PLAN), which preserved 11 acres in Petaluma as habitat for wildlife, including badgers and birds. Susan is actively involved in wind energy awareness, encouraging the county to draft better regulations to protect wildlife. Since 2006, Susan has been a Petaluma Wetlands Alliance (PWA) docent and is active, when time allows, in habitat restoration at Shollenberger Park/Alman Marsh.

Special Recognition Award

Madrone Audubon gave **Special Recognition** to **Andy LaCasse** for his ongoing contribution to cavity-nesting species and their habitats. Andy has built and erected nest boxes for Tree Swallows, Barn Owls, Wood Ducks, and bats on public and private lands.

During the school year, PWA docent Andy can be found at Shollenberger Park, showing and telling third graders how to identify birds and their habitats. He easily changes from birds to reptiles, amphibians, or invertebrates if the students encounter one of these animals on the trail and indicate interest. His Tree Swallow, Barn Owl, and bat houses are easily seen at Shollenberger Park, Alman Marsh, and the Ellis Creek Water Recycling Facility areas.

Need help on a bird survey? Just call Andy who counts in or leads surveys at Shollenberger, Ellis Creek, Tolay Regional Park, Christmas Bird Counts, and Bird-A-Thons. Whenever Madrone needs help with bird counts, bird walks, and building bird nest boxes or bat houses, Andy is their man.

Badger Spirit Award

In May 2012 a **Certificate of Recognition** from the California State Assembly, signed by Jared Huffman and accepted by Gerald Moore, was presented to the **Petaluma Wetlands Alliance** (PWA) at the Paula Lane Action Network Ribbon Cutting Ceremony. The award recognized PWA as the cornerstone of conservation and education at Shollenberger Park, Alman Marsh, and Ellis Creek in Petaluma and cited the hundreds of hours dedicated to preserving the conservation values of the Petaluma wetlands, while improving habitats for wildlife.

Shollenberger Park Concerns

by Gerald Moore

Vandalism

I encourage docents and park regulars to be on the lookout for vandalism in Shollenberger Park. We have had a wave of minor events in the last three to four months. These include:

1. Someone threw bags of dog poop in the dredge spoils pond.
2. City park signs were taken down and thrown in the garbage or the weeds.
3. The brochure box attached to the new entrance kiosk was torn down and partially destroyed.
4. We have received reports that a couple of snakes have been run over and killed by bicyclists.

Please help us by reporting such activities if you see them happening. Do not confront the vandal directly, but use your cell phone to call Parks & Recreation at 778-4380 or the Petaluma Police at 762-2727 (the switchboard) and report the incident. If your cell phone takes photos, you might also take a shot or two of the problem if it is safe to do so.

Dog Controls

On July 3 I was going to check for mail at the main Petaluma Post Office. As I walked toward the entrance I saw a homeless man and his Chihuahua dog walking toward me. The dog was on a zoom leash and we were on opposite sides of the sidewalk, which is 12 feet wide in front of the post office. One step after we had passed each other the dog darted across 8 feet of sidewalk and bit me on the leg. It instantly returned to its owner, all in the time interval of three or four seconds. I shouted to the owner that his dog had just bitten me, he disagreed, and they both quickly disappeared up the street. I sought advice from Kaiser, which told me I had several days to find the dog or take the shots. My wife and I looked in vain for the man and dog. Animal Control officers also looked with no results. On July 10 I began the series of rabies shots.

The point of this story is that it could easily happen at Shollenberger or Alman Marsh where the trails are less wide and lots of people walk dogs there on zoom leashes, which greatly reduce owner control unless the owner plans ahead and reins in the dog before nearing other people or dogs on the trail. I have witnessed several dog versus dog fights that resulted from failure to quickly control dogs on long leashes. This is one of the reasons these long leashes are not considered legal leashes in the state of California. California law recognizes the six-foot leash as the legal leash. Also remember that the little dogs are frequently more aggressive than the larger dogs. The high density of both people and dogs on our wetlands trails requires that we all stay on guard for unexpected dog behavior. We encourage the use of six-foot leashes. We also discourage bringing mean, aggressive dogs to the park.

Local Heron and Egret Colonies

by Bob Dyer

This year, 2012, was a successful year for birds at the three heron and egret colonies in the upper Petaluma Marsh. One hundred and twelve young birds became old enough to fledge. This is the highest number since PWA docents started tracking local activity in 2003.

Dennis Buss, Len Nelson, and I were involved this year. We accomplished a total of 39 observations of the three colonies in the area of the wetlands. We sent observation results to Cypress Grove Research Center (CGRC), Audubon Canyon Ranch. The three active colonies this year were:

- Shollenberger (Colony #121) across from the park
- Petaluma Holding Ponds/Ellis Creek (#40)
- McNear (#139), next to the Petaluma River's eastern side, across from Warren Drive

This is the first year the Shollenberger colony has been active since 2009. Eight Great Egret pairs produced 19 healthy chicks.

The Petaluma Holding Ponds colony produced 31 Great Egret chicks and 10 Great Blue Heron chicks. There were also Double-crested Cormorant chicks, but CGRC tracks only the total number of cormorant nests (of which there were 10) and not resulting young.

McNear was a favorite of the smaller Snowy Egrets with 40 chicks. Great Blue Herons also like the McNear colony and 12 chicks became old enough to fledge. Late in the season, a mature Red-tailed Hawk harassed the Snowy Egrets in this colony and predated several young, according to observers. We did note a late reduction in Snowy Egret chicks, but the 40 figure above includes only the likely successful young. I contacted Dr. John Kelly of CGRC about the Red-tailed Hawk disturbance as this is the first time we have seen such an occurrence in the 10 years we have been observing the local colonies. He said "Harassment and predation by Red-tailed Hawks is likely a natural, although only occasional, influence on the nesting activities of heron and egrets."

CalTrans plans to break ground for the funded South Petaluma Boulevard freeway exchange later this year. It is likely they will remove the eucalyptus trees of the Shollenberger colony that the birds use for nesting after all this year's young have left, as the frontage road will come within 50 feet of the base of several of the trees. If some hardy birds should choose to return next March or April, the Department of Fish and Game would bar construction activity within 300 feet or so of the trees, thus halting CalTrans in its tracks and potentially costing millions of dollars in delays (claims CalTrans). There is nothing legally stopping the agency from removing the trees, however, after the nests are deserted this summer. Several of us will meet with the agency later in July to look at possible mitigation for this loss of nesting availability.

The Shollenberger colony produced 425 chicks from 2003 to 2009 and in 2012. We all will miss watching the birds from the park trail near the river.