



PETALUMA WETLANDS ALLIANCE

P.O. Box 2182, Petaluma CA 94953-2182

www.petalumawetlands.org

PWA NEWSLETTER

FALL 2016

The School Program

Helen Heal



Since its beginning as an organization, PWA has introduced thousands of children to the Petaluma wetlands. The work with children has developed over the years to become a program that is valued by docents and teachers alike. A dedicated corps of 25 to 30 trained and supervised docents provides hands-on experiences during a morning in the classroom. The

following morning, children arrive at Shollenberger where they continue their learning in the park.

This program is available to all third-grade classes in the Petaluma River watershed, and approximately 30 third-grade teachers sign up each year. Children learn about the value of wetlands in watershed systems, adaptations of various plants and animals in the park, and the differences between a variety of habitats. The focus and content of the program are closely aligned with California's Next Generation Science standards. The enthusiasm of the docents encourages the children to fall in love with the wetlands and the wonders of the park. Every year, we receive many letters of thanks from children. Here is a sample of what they tell us:

"I loved seeing that Great Egret through the binoculars and it was very exciting to take apart the owl pellets. I am amazed at how much you taught me."

"I liked to see the jack rabbits play with each other. The killdeer was my favorite bird. I will never forget this trip."

"On the habitat walk I liked the lizards that liked the fence posts. Something that impressed me is that the bat house could fit 40 bats. I love it at Shollenberger."

Teachers also have let us know how much the program means to them:

"My students valued the entire experience beginning with the classroom visit and then going to Shollenberger Park. They wanted to do it all again when you returned in the spring for another class. Thanks for all you do in offering this incredible experience to our students."

"The content is consistent with our curriculum and helps tie together our science units."

"Love, love, love everything about the content and the people who share their time with us. My students look forward to understanding and exploring their "backyard." It flows nicely with many things that we talk about throughout the year."

"The content was perfect for third graders. All knowledge was at the appropriate level and understood by all students. This is usually the favorite science topic and field trip during the school year."

Aug. 24, 2016—It was a beautiful morning at Shollenberger, clear overhead with traces of coastal fog keeping things cool. Our group of 8 was led by Peter Colasanti. The early morning flyout included 800 Red-winged Blackbirds and 400 gulls. We watched the SMART train cross the green bridge over the river, and after it passed Haystack Landing a big flock of White Pelicans lifted off near the tracks, immediately followed by more than 20 egrets, both Great and Snowy. They appeared to be roused by the train. (Tried to find a name for a flock of egrets and found a website that called it a "skewer of egrets," but this same website also mentioned a "gallon of petrel," which I'm pretty sure is not widely accepted!).



Only 2 species of ducks were seen. In the whole park, only a few mallards and one lone Green-Winged Teal. But there were a lot of peeps: more than 2,000 Western Sandpipers, 300 Least Sandpipers, and 2 Baird's Sandpipers (left) up close for good viewing and comparison. Killdeer were very scarce today—only 2—while Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plovers were more numerous. A Belted Kingfisher is not a rare sight but always fun to see. This male was on the river side of the park. The only raptors up and about were a male Northern Harrier and a White-tailed Kite. Forty-seven species total.

Save the Date

2017 Docent Training will begin January 12, 2017.
Check our website for more information as the date gets closer.
www.petalumawetlands.org

Whenever I see a snake ahead on one of the wetland trails, I become worried—not because I am afraid of being bitten, but I’m afraid for the *snake*! It is a valuable creature for our wetlands and absolutely harmless to humans. My concern is that some fast-riding cyclist will not see it in time, run over the snake, and kill it. There are three snakes you might see on the trails: the Gopher Snake, the California Kingsnake, and the Coast Garter Snake, and one you **won’t** see—the Northern Pacific Rattlesnake.



Gopher Snakes (left) average about four feet long and have brown and reddish blotches on a background of yellow. They eat a variety of small mammals, frogs, even birds. Along with other species, they help suppress the rodent population. A gopher snake is often misidentified by casual visitors to the wetlands as a rattlesnake because of its color. It can even mimic a rattlesnake by hissing and shaking its tail. The snake is reflecting its fear, but it cannot hurt you. Just walk away.

California Kingsnakes (below) average 2.5 to 3.5 feet in length and are unmistakable, with their handsome black and white stripes. When disturbed they will coil their body and also mimic a rattlesnake (the word gets around!). *Any* of these snakes can bite if you *handle* them, and they might excrete musk and fecal matter. So, in keeping with our wetland rules, do not touch snakes or any animals or birds.





Coast Garter Snakes (left) are smaller than Gopher Snakes or Kingsnakes, 1.5 to 3 feet long. They are beautifully patterned—brown with white stripes. They eat small rodents, frogs, and lizards, and are more reclusive than the other snakes.

Feel honored if you see any of these creatures. They are valuable and an essential part of the wetlands ecosystem.

White-tailed Kite Nest in Petaluma

PowerPoint presentation
FREE
by Bob Dyer
of the Petaluma Wetlands Alliance



Wednesday, October 12
7:00 to 8:00 p.m.
Petaluma Library Forum Room
For more information call 763-2934

2016 Tree Swallow Nesting Results

Len Nelson

Twenty-eight bird houses perch on poles at Shollenberger and Ellis Creek. In the spring and early summer you may have seen swallows flying around and into them. These are the migratory Tree Swallows that accept these houses as nesting sites since most of their natural habitat (cavities in decaying trees) has been removed from the environment. I have been monitoring the bird houses at Shollenberger and Ellis Creek for 10 years not only to take note of how many eggs are laid and chicks hatched and fledged, but also to provide assistance if possible to assure their success. Tree Swallows generally have two nestings each year with details collected on each, so by the end of each season there is copious information to work with. If you wish to see the 10-year details, they will be posted on the PWA website. Here are basic details for the 2016 Tree Swallow nesting cycle.

In their first nesting, from late April to the end of May, 145 eggs were laid, 132 of them hatched and, from those, 82 chicks survived to fledge. This indicates a mortality rate of 38 percent against a 10-year average mortality rate of 24 percent. These results were, unfortunately, the third worst in that period. In early May we discovered many dead chicks that we had expected would survive. It had been unusually cold and windy and insects are not too inclined to go airborne under such conditions. So, perhaps the chicks starved since their parents could not find enough flying insects to feed them.

In their second nesting, from early June to the first week of August, 103 eggs were laid and 89 chicks hatched. Sixty-three fledged, a mortality rate of 29 percent. This is quite good for a second nesting when the temperature can become hot and the insect population plummets. The 10-year average mortality rate is 42 percent. This year was the second best year in 10 for the second nestings at Shollenberger/Ellis Creek.





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Join Petaluma Wetlands Alliance – “Education and Stewardship”

Please support our free 3rd grade education program for all schools in Petaluma, free public walks and presentations, monthly bird counts, bird research, and the preservation of Shollenberger Park and Allman Marsh.

I would like to join PWA:

____\$25 Individual ____\$40 Family Donation: \$_____

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