

Creekside Park Walk

2001

Clad in jeans and sweatshirts, some of us with binoculars around our necks, we huddled expectantly at Kentfield's Creekside Park on a spring day, waiting for our guide. We had no idea we were about to find such an assortment of treasures in this urban wetland-park. Group member Joyce excitedly, yet reluctantly, passed her only pair of binoculars to Penelope who had spotted an osprey overhead. Many osprey fish in the shallow San Francisco Bay waters and commute home with their meals every day to Kent Lake, 8 miles away. There may be as many as 40 nests there, making up one of the largest populations on the west coast.

Joyce's friend Sue, an experienced birder, nearly shared a meal with one of the Kent Lake residents. Living high atop a hill on Crest Road in Ross, Sue said that she and her family were taken aback during dinner one night when a commuting osprey flew by at eye level, just 25 feet from their window. "For several weeks," she said, "our boys watched faithfully at half past six, hoping for another glimpse, noses pressed against the glass." As their interest waned, it seemed that an osprey magically appeared. Cheers erupted! Clutching its prey beneath it, with every beat of the osprey's wings the fish appeared to be swimming in the same direction as its captor.

Jules Evens, wildlife biologist and leader of this *Friends* walk, arrived laden with binoculars, books, and spotting scope. He took the already enthusiastic walkers to a small, protected inlet where there was a group of coal-black coots. As the birds swam, their white beaks jutted out ahead of them and their greenish yellow feet paddled behind. Coots are the common relative of Creekside Park's most endangered bird species-the California clapper rail.

Jules pointed to tall stalks of native cordgrass between the levee path and Bacich School as he pulled a small tape recorder from his satchel, and instructed everyone to listen. He played a recording of a male rail and instantaneously there was a reply. "Kek brr, kek brr," called the unmated female. The clapper rail usually nest in areas of full tidal influence, but they are also found in the muted tidal flow of Creekside Park. You may be lucky enough to see them feeding on shorecrabs, mussels and amphipods (tiny crustaceans). Rails are slowly diminishing in numbers in the Bay Area. They are often preyed upon by feral cats and red fox when high tides force rails into upland areas. Loss of gently sloping habitat between marsh and upland has meant loss of hiding places, leaving them more susceptible to predators. Rails are generally sedentary, but if a population is too large and overcrowded, they will disperse to other parts of the bay to nest. With few wetlands left, it is important to protect Creekside Park and other wetland areas for this population and others that remain.

Near one of the large outfalls that bring tidewaters into the marsh the group spotted a green heron watching for a meal. Only about 14" long from its bill to its tail, this bird is much smaller than the other herons. It was stirring up the sediment with its legs, seeking small invertebrates, probably worms. Herons also fish in some locations where there are dense willow thickets by dropping a willow leaf or flower into the water. As small fish swim towards the lure, the heron watches until finally it snatches one up with a quick stab of its stiletto-like beak.

An Anna's hummingbird caught everyone's attention as from a great height it swooped earthward in a J-shaped trajectory, and then shot straight up again to show off his prowess in a nuptial flight. Hummingbirds can fly to the right, left, up, down, backward, upside down and also turn in mid-air. They get their power from the down stroke of their wings like other birds, but in addition they get power from the upstroke for extra maneuverability. Although not typically a marsh resident this bird came to visit late blooming sage plants in a garden nearby.

Jules said that you can get a good idea of what birds live in the marsh by listening to the myriad calls of the non-native mockingbird. Just then a visiting mockingbird previously heard only in the distance, landed on a plum tree in an adjacent garden flashing its gray and white

plumage as it balanced. Although the mockingbird is not a marsh resident the walkers were grateful for his repertoire of calls.

As jubilant creek-watchers pleased with their finds headed back on the levee path along the Larkspur side of the creek, a red-shouldered hawk flapped and glided away from the group as he displayed windows of white in his wings and landed in an acacia tree. Jules lamented that tidal wetlands will never be as they were two hundred years ago, but they still support a great many plants and animals and continue to be the most productive ecosystem in the world.

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