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The Egrets Are Back

Lisa Heschong

In California, we don't have much to remind us of time's long stretch. There are no ruins of an ancient civilization, no medieval town gates that we must build around. Buildings that are all of seventy or eighty years old are set off with floodlights and special status to mark their rarity. There isn't much constructed evidence that has the power to pull our minds back in time and help us sense the roots of this place.

Animals, though, do have that power. Driving into San Francisco along the bay, keep your eyes open for a bright white egret posing in the mudflats next to the freeway. Walk down to the waterfront to have a lunchtime conversation with a harbor seal playing among the piers. Go for a walk in the East Bay hills at dawn or sunset to greet the deer who casually stroll the streets looking for tender greens. In Marin County, beware of marauding wild boar.

The presence of these animals in the midst of a dense urban area is rather extraordinary. Most cities must be content with flocks of pigeons and bands of squirrels (or worse) to add a natural dimension to their resolutely built environments. Here, when the pelicans cruise by in their careful lines, when the whales breach as they migrate down the coast, they make a link with a history far grander than our few

hundred years of effort. We see only the faintest remnant of the wildlife that was here two centuries ago. The well-traveled Spanish explorers found the Bay area to be the most wildly abundant place they had ever encountered. The great estuary served as a crossroad for both migratory birds traveling the length of the Pacific coast from tropical winters to arctic summers and migratory fish funneling in from the Pacific Ocean up to all the streams of the Sierra Nevada. These vast populations would blacken the skies and boil the waters, providing a bonanza for all the animals, and the Indians, that preyed on them. Now the grizzly bear and the antelope are gone, but the tracks of coyote and mountain lion are still occasionally spotted in the East Bay hills. How extraordinary it is that in 1985, amidst housing developments and office parks, a mountain lion can still travel and find its prey.

The San Francisco Bay area does have an unusual physical setting, where the waters of the bay and the ridges of hills have set limits for urban expansion and allowed wild lands and waters to interlock with cities and freeways. Geographic and historic conditions encouraged large tracts of land to be set aside for military installations, watersheds, salt ponds, and agriculture. These tracts remained undeveloped islands, preserving wildlife

habitats within the urban expansion. Yet, although the Bay area may have been fortunate with its physical endowments, the continued presence of wildlife can be attributed to a long-standing public resolve to preserve, and more recently, to restore their habitats.

Twenty-five years ago things looked very grim for the survival of almost any kind of wildlife in the Bay area. The urban areas of California were growing at the fastest rate in the nation, and the pressure to develop new land was mounting. The San Francisco Bay was being filled in at an alarming rate. In 1960, only one-quarter of the original marshland remained. It was estimated that, at the then current filling rate of 3.6 square miles per year, the bay would be reduced to a river by the year 2020.¹ The city of Berkeley had made a grandiose master plan to fill 2,000 acres of its tidelands, essentially creating a second city for industrial expansion. There was the infamous Reber Plan, approved in concept by the voters of California, to dam the entire South Bay, solving problems of sewage disposal, flood control, smelly mudflats, etc., all through the creation of one vast, freshwater lake. The great estuary was well on its way to becoming a completely man-made environment of deepwater ports, flood control gates, industrial land reclamation, concrete bulwarks, and

highway embankments. If the mudflats and marshlands were destroyed, it was estimated that 70 percent of the migratory shorebirds of the entire Pacific coast flyway would disappear also.²

Pollution was also becoming more noticeable and noxious. It was considered unsafe to swim in the bay. Sewage dumping was essentially unregulated. DDT was threatening the reproduction of most of the large birds. There appeared to be plenty of pelicans around, but someone finally noticed that there were no juveniles. In 1965, there were no nesting pairs of pelicans left in the state.

Since those dismal days in the early sixties, the trends have at least been stalled and in some cases even reversed. The filling of the bay was essentially halted with the creation of the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, empowered to control all development within 100 feet of the high tide shoreline. Some marshlands and other natural habitats have been restored by the newly created wildlife refuges. Perhaps most dramatic is the return of the egrets, pelicans, and other large birds affected by DDT. There are now over 75,000 nesting pairs of brown pelicans in the state. Although similar figures are not available for egrets, it is clear that they too are back in increasing numbers—a

striking, yet poignant presence.³

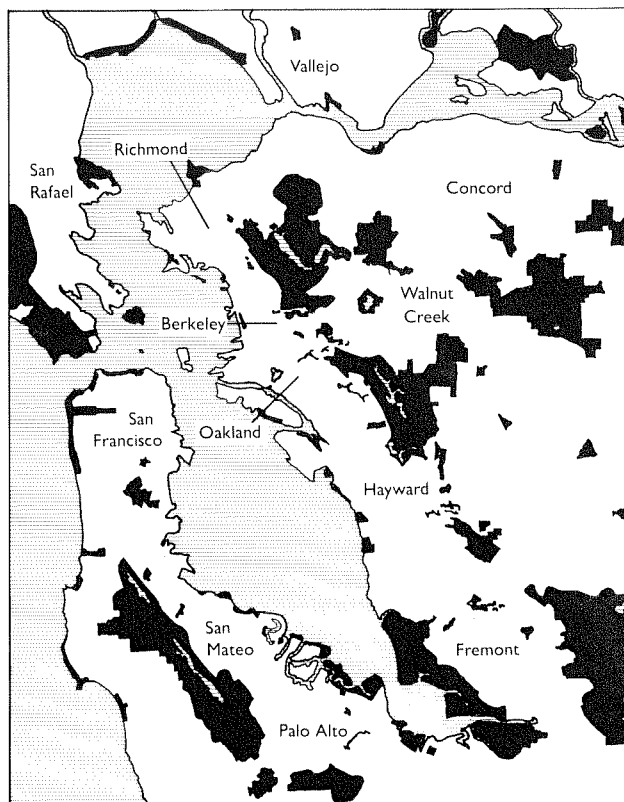
Saving the bay, and saving wildlife habitats, has become institutionalized through the creation of new government agencies. The official statistics are dazzling, such as the great acquisition of parkland by regional, state, and federal governments during the 1970s. The East Bay Regional Parks more than doubled in size during the 1970s, from 22,000 acres in 1968 to 57,000 acres in 1984. Golden Gate National Recreation Area was authorized by Congress in 1972 to manage 73,000 acres in San Francisco and Marin counties. Also in 1972, Congress approved the acquisition of 23,000 acres of marsh and salt ponds from the Leslie Salt Company to create the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. But the initial turnaround, and the creation and direction of these institutions, was brought about by a simply monumental outpouring of citizen effort.

There is a long tradition of citizen action in the Bay area. The East Bay Regional Park system was first conceived by Robert Sibley in 1928, when he read that the local utility district planned to sell unneeded watershed lands in the hills behind Oakland and Berkeley. He formed a coalition of local groups that canvassed house to house and lobbied the state

legislature to create the first regional park district in the country. The park system is now a key player in trying to preserve the natural corridors that allow wildlife to maintain a sufficient range.⁴

In 1961, the Save the San Francisco Bay Association was started by three women in a Berkeley Hills living room. Catherine Kerr, wife of the president of the University of California, had read an article about the filling of the bay in the *Oakland Tribune*. She shared her concern with Ester Gulick and Sylvia McLaughlin, also university wives. "We sent out about 700 letters, and got 600 replies." Within four years, the group that they had formed had successfully lobbied for the creation of the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC). Ester Gulick, now in her seventies and still an active leader of the 20,000-member organization, says "I think we succeed because we do our homework. I think I have read every Environmental Impact Report that was submitted to the BCDC, and, unless I was on vacation, attended every meeting of the Commission."⁵

By the middle of the 1970s, the pieces of the mosaic were beginning to make a coherent picture. Regional planning was having an impact, if only to motivate local groups to crystallize their own goals. Howard



Publicly Open Space in the San Francisco Bay Area as of 1984. (Includes city, county, state and federal parklands, wildlife preserves, and watersheds.) (map by author)

Cogswell, professor emeritus of ornithology at Hayward State University, says he helped form the citizens' group that proposed the Hayward Shoreline Plan only when he realized that Hayward was left as a blank hole in BCDC's 1969 master plan. He had first started counting egrets in the Leslie Salt ponds in 1949. After 35 years of effort to protect various rookeries and food supplies, he says with reserve, "At least we still have something left to fight for."⁶

The *Harbinger File* for 1985 is a guide to some 900 organizations in northern California that are concerned with the natural environment. It lists 99 such government agencies and 192 local citizen action groups. It lists 82 separate groups concerned specifically with bay habitats. There are still more groups than those listed.

One of the many not included in that list is the Urban Creeks Council. It is a small group with a narrow focus: the restoration of natural stream habitats. They estimate that 90 percent of the riparian habitat of the

San Francisco Bay area is gone, and they are fighting for that last 10 percent.⁷ They have organized weekend work parties to slog down the streams to clean out accumulated rubbish. They prepared a citizens' alternative to the flood control plan proposed by the Army Corps of Engineers for Wildcat Creek in Richmond, hoping to keep culverts away from one of the few remaining wild creeks, so that the endangered Salt Water Harvest Mouse might have a little more room and so might urban children growing up in Richmond. Their efforts bespeak the hundreds of thousands of other volunteer hours that have been invested in order to translate a perhaps romantic sense of a natural heritage into legal protection of this heron rookery of that seal pupping ground.

My young daughter and I often take walks in the nearby hills. Sometimes, we pretend that there are gnomes or fairies hiding in the tangled undergrowth, but we do not have to pretend about the animals. She is very good at spotting the

deer who graze quietly and stare back at us. She takes them for granted, as an expected part of her urbanized world, without the slightest inkling of how many people have worked since her grandparents were children just so that she could.

NOTES

- 1 *The San Francisco Bay Plan* (San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, 1969).
- 2 Robert Odell, *The Saving of San Francisco Bay* (Washington, D.C.: Conservation Foundation, 1972).
- 3 Phone conversation with Roy Low, biologist, San Francisco National Wildlife Refuge.
- 4 Mimi Stein, *A Vision Achieved, Fifty Years of the East Bay Regional Park District* (East Bay Regional Parks, 1984).
- 5 Phone conversation with Ester Gulick, founder of Save the San Francisco Bay Association.
- 6 Phone conversation with Howard Cogswell, professor emeritus of ornithology, Hayward State University.
- 7 Written communication from A. L. Riley, member, Urban Creeks Council.