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Golden Gate Audubon Society celebrates 100th anniversary near Orinda

By Sophie Braccini



Golden Gate Audubon Society members discover the McCosker Loop Trail. Photo Sophie Braccini

Going on a hike in the East Bay hills with the Audubon Society is a treat on multiple levels: enjoying the sheer beauty of the trails traveled; observing surrounding birds and nature at a mindful pace; and learning from experts about the remarkable richness of the local avifauna. This year is also extra-special as the Golden Gate chapter of the Audubon Society, one of the West's most respected and impactful nonprofits that embraces large parts of the East Bay including Orinda and Moraga, celebrates 100 years of study and preservation.

One of the important events that ran during this commemorative year in the East Bay was the hike of the new two-mile McCosker Loop Trail located in the East Bay Regional Park District's Sibley Volcanic Regional Preserve near Canyon. The trail is located in the 1,300 preserved acres of the Gateway - now Wilder - property. This trail has a very long and significant history behind it, for the Society and for local nature lovers.

The access point of the trail is the Wilcox Staging Area located on Pinehurst Road. The relatively short loop, with some somewhat steep climbs, takes walkers to beautiful viewpoints of this side of the East Bay. The Oct. 29 walk led by the Audubon Society was of specific significance. The trail is part of strategically-located acres that were added to East Bay protected wildlands through negotiation with a succession of Wilder developers over a 20-year period, with Golden Gate Audubon playing a large part in the successful outcome. At the beginning of the October walk several Audubon members recalled how things happened. William Hudson, Orinda resident and very active birder, recalled that the extensive grading and drainage that were needed to support roads and construction of the first proposed project in the '80s would have destroyed existing creeks, wetlands and seeps, and numerous old growth trees, a variety of habitats home to species including endangered California red-legged frogs and Alameda whip snakes, as well as majestic golden eagles.

The opposition to the development of the Gateway project was led by a well-organized and persistent group of Orinda residents called Save Open Space - Gateway Valley, several of them also members of GGAS. In 2002, Farallon Capital Management acquired the development rights to the Gateway area. Farallon approached GGAS's executive director, Arthur Feinstein, and asked him to bring SOS into discussions toward a compromise. The efforts were successful and the responsibility for the 1,300 protected acres was subsequently assumed by the East Bay Municipal Utility District, the East Bay Regional Park District, and a small Geologic Hazard Abatement District funded by Wilder homeowners.

During the GGAS walk in October the participants realized the extent of the land that was saved and the richness of its habitat. Each equipped with binoculars the birders observed finches, robins, phoebes, bluebirds and chickadees, and some red-tailed hawks. The acres that are now protected complete a vast north-south wildlife corridor that goes from Wildcat Canyon to Lake Chabot. The trail takes walkers from charming woody areas to hillcrests with views of vast wild territories.

The Golden Gate Audubon Society has over 7,000 members and is the ninth biggest Audubon chapter in the U.S. It covers San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, Alameda, Albany, El Cerrito, Richmond, Orinda, Moraga, Piedmont, San Pablo, El Sobrante, Kensington and Treasure Island.

The Chapter offers a multitude of classes, trips and restoration activities to its members, including being part of the worldwide Christmas bird count. A traveling exhibit celebrating its 100th anniversary and its achievements is now on display at Lindsay Wildlife Experience in Walnut Creek, through Jan. 2. More information about the club can be found online at goldengateaudubon.org.

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