

# Birds of the Tenderloin

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ings and shore structures, practically spoon-feeding birds.

With gloved hands, Harris marks 50 gulls and eight pigeons on her 3-by-5 cards, then walks west. Her workday started at 8:30 a.m. when she left her Turk Street apartment, spotting eight sparrows on the way to U.N. Plaza. Over her 15 years in the Tenderloin, the count has been aided by birds she sees in the sky and perched outside her windows. She knows what to look for, but sometimes is surprised. Two years ago, she saw a black-crowned night heron in a tree that caught her breath. It was so far from the water.

"This is like a meditation for me," she says, glancing up at building ledges as she walks, bent slightly to counter the backpack, a breeze jostling her shoulder-length gray hair. "And I think it's good for older people."

She tries not to count the same bird twice. But the birds move around. Already she has scores of western gulls and rock pigeons and the one yellow-rumped warbler she saw on her walk from Jones Street.

## RAVENS, CROWS GAINING

Gulls have moved into the inner city because of our changing habits. Open city dumps used to attract huge flocks, count-compiler Murphy says. But the dumps got covered and fast food exploded. Urbanized birds now follow the people, swooping in where crumbs, buns and fries hit the pavement.

"Ravens and crows are growing by the greatest percentages," says Murphy, a retired special education history teacher at Alameda County juvenile hall who once taught field ornithology at the California Academy of Sciences. Maybe 700 of each nest in the city now, he says, but he doesn't know why, though they're smart enough to follow any food source, and are adept nest raiders.

"But birds have really taken a hit in

San Francisco," Murphy says, "They're on the skids." As buildings supplanted open spaces, dove and blackbird populations plummeted about 50% from the 1980s, and quail almost went extinct. Removing underbrush in city parks and fallen limbs — prized bird hangouts — takes a toll along with feral and domestic cats. Poisons outdoors, for rats in particular, also kill lots of birds. The survivors are "building-adapted birds" such as peregrine falcons, pigeons and cliff swallows, birds that treat skyscrapers like hills.

"We've taken more and more of the birds' habitat as we build in the inner city," says Mike Lynes, executive director of Golden Gate Audubon Society. "We're faced with how we manage what's left." Data from the counts help determine the direction of the association's advocacy.

## RED-WINGED BLACKBIRDS NEW

Harris nears the northern edge of the plaza, opening to Leavenworth, and reminisces about being 9 years old and listening to birds outside her window in Chicago and singing back to them. More memorable, while getting her master's in biology from the University of Illinois, was an ornithology class in 1954 when the professor took the students to a graveyard where birds were attracted to the vegetation. She's been in solid with birds ever since.

"I'm a person of prayer," Harris says, squinting as the glasses come up, "and to me this is like entering into their world. I'm moving between people, yes, but I'm shutting that out and being in their world."

What's new in the Tenderloin is red-winged blackbirds, Harris says. The first showed up in June.

"We used to only see them in Yerba Buena Gardens and Justin Herman Plaza," she says. "They like water and reeds. But they can't nest here. I don't know what they eat."

She stops at Hyde and Fulton and looks at the trees next to the Main Library as the sun is fully on nearby City Hall. There's movement in the trees.

At the end of the plaza, in a forlorn tree, she spies her first bunch of red-winged blackbirds of the day. They're singing. She brings the glasses down and starts counting them out loud, pointing her pen at each.

"I love those birds," a vendor at his stall a few feet away says with a big smile. "Their song, well, it makes you laugh. I told them, 'You're a little loud for winter!'"

"I love hearing their song, too," Harris says, jotting down a number. She turns to cross Larkin, but at the curb is startled by frantic chirping that fills the air.

Red-winged blackbirds in the barren trees at the library are spooked. Some flutter off, flashing their colorful wings in flight, thrilling her.

"They're scared," Harris says, marking 12 on the card. "When they get excited, a hawk is around. I don't see it. But they're afraid they'll be eaten."

"I love it when they're active."

Among the red-wings, Harris counts three Brewer's blackbirds, which thrive in the Tenderloin. "See?" Harris says, "This can be exciting. I think blackbirds are increasing."

She counts 25 western gulls in the street, then looks north into the trees with the binoculars.

"See those eyes?" she says to no one in particular. "They're white, and, oh, there's a starling — two starlings in that group, male and female. Oh, I love that sound." Starlings can imitate other bird songs and also whistle and warble. "That makes nine species."

She sees crows in front of the Main Library and at Civic Center Park playground, more that are on dirt ground. She admires their shiny blackness. Her cold hands, arthritis and backpack laden with three days of food in it (the Marines survival package she always carries "in case of an earthquake") are forgotten burdens as she circles the



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Mary Liz Harris sees movement in the trees by the Asian Art Museum and trains her binoculars on the spot—red-winged blackbirds, neobies in the neighborhood.

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Mary Liz Harris

block, making more counts of red-winged blackbirds, rock pigeons, western gulls and Brewer's blackbirds after threading through a homeless encampment on the sidewalk.

"Pigeons are decreasing at City Hall," she notes. "Of course, it's against the law to feed them."

With the binoculars she scans a second-story fire escape for house finches that a woman was feeding there last year. "She must have moved," Harris says, seeing none, and meanders over to the Community Garden at McAllister and Larkin. This year she missed seeing any white-crowned sparrows at City Hall, too.

Harris says birding is a great activity "when you get old." She sometimes spends an hour just watching a flock of birds. But with teaching Sunday school and singing in her church choir, lectures she attends, memberships in all the city museum associations, plus volunteering at St. Anthony's and doing occasional tai chi, she hardly lacks for action. She believes that learning is something you do every day.

## RAPTORS IN THE HOOD

She has seen a lot of hawks in her 15 years in "the extremely interesting" Tenderloin. The first peregrine falcon she saw was sitting on top of the cross at St. Boniface.

"I was eating breakfast, looking out my kitchen window," she recalled. "They were nesting at PG&E South of Market and people were taking work breaks — bird breaks — to watch them."

Hawks, for all their predatory aggression, would likely stay away from the abundant gulls, repelled by their intimidating size. A peregrine falcon, though, is more likely to tear into one. But their speed can be literally breakneck. Six peregrines have died from collisions in seven years in the downtown area, according to the society. The last one was Dec. 7 near Market and Van Ness, very likely after colliding with a building.

Diving at 200 mph, these raptors — the fastest member of the animal kingdom — are doomed when hitting clear glass they can't see. City legislation in October 2011 required new buildings and renovated ones within 100 yards of the Bay or ocean to install all windows from ground level up to 60 feet high with "fritted" ceramic and silica specks that birds see and humans don't.

## SPECIAL SIGHTINGS

She has seen a Cooper's hawk, too. "It's funny," she says, "all these special sightings have come from my apartment. Some years ago I saw a red-shouldered hawk, unusual for the Tenderloin. They're looking for rodents, and they're here for food."

Red-tailed hawks are pretty common. She often sees a pair on the St. Boniface cross, "like their activities are being blessed." And at various blessed times she has seen a great egret and double-crested cormorant when she was close to the Bay, and "more food for hawks" — barn swallows, red-masked parakeets ("they're tourists down from the hill") and the stunning black and white phoebe that "wears a tuxedo."

"Oh, there are so many ways to amuse yourself in the Tenderloin," Harris sighs. "You don't have to shoot drugs and drink. There are simple gifts."

Harris' trek leaves out a lot of territory. It's an established route and takes in the most likely places to see birds. Ignored is the small garden adjacent to the temporary YMCA on Golden Gate Avenue. In October, The Extra ran a picture of a garden resident, Maxine the hummingbird, but Harris won't see her on this round, though eager to add species.

Harris won't be using any tricks to lure birds, either, as Dr. Harry Parker did in the Presidio during her second year counting. He played a recording of the winter wren's song and some came flying. "I was assigned to him. It was wonderful."

At the corner of Larkin and McAllister — "now, I'm really enjoying the sunshine" — she counts the "clacking" Brewer's blackbirds on the opera blue railing near the garage and more of them strolling on the pavement, plus a dozen brown-headed cowbirds. "I'm very happy I walked to this gate," she says.

At the Community Garden she picks up litter off the sidewalk and disposes of it in a nearby trash can. She points to a fuchsia plant that could attract hummingbirds and a purple bougainvillea, admires the verdant garden, counts two Brewer's blackbirds, a pi-

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CENTRAL CITY EXTRA is published monthly by San Francisco Study Center Inc., a private nonprofit serving the community since 1972. The Extra was initiated through grants from the S.F. Hotel Tax Fund and the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund. The contents are copyrighted by the San Francisco Study Center, 944 Market Street, Suite 701, San Francisco, CA 94102.

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