SAN DIEGO BIRD ALLIANCE

Sketches

Celebrating More than 75 Years of Protecting Birds

Winged Icons

Exploring California's Namesake Birds

Plus

Bird Festival Keynote Speaker Q&A

Love Your Wetlands Day Preview

WINTER 2026
VOLUME 77 • NUMBER 1

Q&A WITH SDBA'S 2026 BIRD FESTIVAL KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Growing Our Birding Community Benefits All of Us—Especially the Birds

by LaTresa Pearson, Sketches Editor

The 2026 Bird Festival features a dynamic lineup of keynote speakers who share not only a passion for birds, but also a passion for making birding and nature more welcoming to everyone. We contacted each to discover more about their love for birding, why they are committed to creating a birding community as diverse as the birds we all enjoy, and how groups such as SDBA can help. We've edited their comments for space, but you can find their full answers on the 2026 Bird Festival website https://www.sandiegobirdfestival.org/media. Without further ado, here's a brief introduction to each of our participants:

Makeda "Dread" Cheatom

• **Makeda "Dread" Cheatom**, founder and Executive Director of the WorldBeat Cultural Center in Balboa Park, collaborates with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Celebrate Urban Birds initiative and with the National Science Foundation's NOISE Project. Her passion: reviving forgotten foods, forgotten plants, and forgotten relationships with the earth.

• **Jason Hall** founded the In Color Birding Club, a nonprofit that strives to create safe, joyful, and welcoming birding experiences for historically marginalized communities. In 2024, he teamed up with fellow keynote speaker Dexter Patterson to launch the *Bird Joy Podcast*. His passion: sharing the joy of birding as a powerful connector among people of all backgrounds and experience levels.

Jason Hall

• **Kenn Kaufman**, legendary birder and tour leader, primarily focuses on his book projects as a writer, editor, and illustrator. His latest book is *The Birds That Audubon Missed*, published in May 2024. His passion: working with his wife Kimberly to encourage more people, especially young people, to become interested in nature and conservation.

• **Marilú López-Fretts** leads Celebrate Urban Birds, a participatory science initiative from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which connects communities with birds, nature, and science. Her passion: making birding and environmental education welcoming to all.

• **Dexter Patterson** co-founded the BIPOC Birding Club of Wisconsin, co-hosts the *Bird Joy Podcast*, and authored *Birds of the Great Lakes*. As the "Wisco Birder," his "You Ready? Let's Go!" videos have garnered millions of views online. His passion: making birding inclusive for everyone.

Kenn Kaufman

Sketches: In keeping with the theme of this year's San Diego Bird Festival, can you talk about how your passion for birding took flight?

Cheatom: Birds have been part of my life for as long as I can remember. As a small child, I used to rescue birds from traveling fairs, taking home the weakest ones and nursing them back to health. I became a vegetarian at a young age because I couldn't imagine eating birds—or any animals. Growing up in Southern California, I spent countless hours walking through San Diego's canyons, always noticing the incredible diversity of birdlife around me. Those moments shaped my connection to the outdoors and to the natural world.

Hall: My passion for birding took flight in the forests of Naylors Run Park outside of West Philadelphia my senior year of high school. I had an environmental science teacher who introduced me to birding. After the first unit and a number of quiet mornings sketching birds, I had a love for birding and had solidified my spark bird as a Tufted Titmouse.

Kaufman: I was inspired by the most common, everyday birds at first. At the age of six, living in suburban Indiana, there were no big animals around, so I would creep across the lawn for closer looks at things like sparrows and starlings. Even a little House Sparrow, poised for flight, looking back at me with those bright, alert eyes, seemed so vibrant that I was captivated. Birds came to represent what it meant to be intensely alive, and I've been fascinated ever since.

Lopez-Fretts: Growing up in Puerto Rico, birds were part of my world. I loved hearing them, watching them fly. But the moment when my passion truly took flight came much later in life. I was volunteering with a Spanish-speaking youth theater group in Syracuse, New York, and we got a mini-grant from Celebrate Urban Birds at the Cornell Lab. The kids performed *The Two Mockingbirds*, adapted by José Martí, and we used mockingbird recordings from the Lab's Macaulay Library. It felt like this beautiful coming together of community, culture, art, and nature. A few years later, a job opened up at the Cornell Lab's Celebrate Urban Birds, and I got hired. That experience opened the door for me to learn deeply about birds—not just as beautiful creatures, but as indicators of environmental health and as ways to connect people and communities.

Patterson: My passion for birding really took flight when I finally slowed down enough to pay attention. I have always liked birds, but I never gave them the attention they deserved until I actually started looking and listening. That mindset came from my grandpa, who used to take his kids into nature and say, "Pay attention, and the birds will reveal themselves." Once I started doing that in my own life, everything changed. Birds gave me a sense of peace, joy, and curiosity that I didn't even know I was missing. That simple invitation to pay attention opened the door to a completely new chapter of my life.

Marilú López-Frett

Sketches: How would you describe your birding style?

Cheatom: I enjoy using the Merlin app—it's an easy, intuitive teaching tool that I love sharing with others. I also practice mindful birding and *Shinrin-yoku*, the Japanese tradition of "forest bathing." It's all about slowing down and fully engaging your senses in nature. Unlike hiking, the focus isn't on physical activity but on a gentle, immersive experience that can ease stress, support healthy blood pressure, and strengthen overall well-being.

Hall: My birding style is relaxed and more community oriented. I like to ensure everyone from the beginner to the experienced birder feels welcome. It's important to me that everyone leaves with a sense of joy.

Dexter Patterson

Kaufman: It varies! Sometimes I like to run around and see how many different species I can find. Sometimes I'm checking out spots where vagrant birds are likely to show up. More often, I spend time with individual birds. The latter is especially true when I'm sketching birds in the field, which involves a lot of intense looking, punctuated by brief moments of drawing.

Lopez-Fretts: I'd describe my birding style as a mix of mindful wandering and curious observation. I like to give myself space to be surprised—I love watching behavior. I like slow birding: taking my time, listening, taking it all in, and letting the environment reveal its magic.

Patterson: I keep my birding style rooted in joy. I prefer a casual and relaxed approach because birding should feel fun. I love the moments that make you smile, laugh, breathe, and just enjoy the experience. I am not out there to chase numbers. I am out there to connect with nature and the people around me. When birding starts with joy, it becomes something you want to share with the world.

Sketches: What does birding and spending time in nature do for you personally?

Cheatom: I love walking in nature and watching birds in their natural habitat. I also practice physical grounding—direct skin contact with the earth through walking on grass, sand, or soil—which helps with overall well-being. Spending time outside at least once a day has become essential; it's part of my lifestyle now.

Hall: For me, birding helps reduce my anxiety. Once I grew past the phase of heavy listing (which only caused anxiety), I found my pace with energetic but low-pressure birding. If I don't see my target bird, that's fine. It just means I have another adventure awaiting when I do eventually see that species.

Kaufman: I don't think I could live without it.

Lopez-Fretts: Birding and spending time in nature is how I recharge. It makes me happy, calms me down, and grounds me. Just watching a bird or hearing bird songs or calls—it grounds me in a way not many things do. And it keeps my curiosity alive—there is always something new to learn. I love connecting with nature and the birds in it. When I'm out there, I feel present. It inspires me.

Patterson: Birding boosts my mental health in a powerful way. It keeps me grounded and connected to the world around me. Nature gives me space to breathe and reset. Birding also connects me to a global community of people who care about the natural world. There is something special about finding your people through shared curiosity. Birding gives me purpose, community, and a deeper appreciation for life.

Sketches: Why is it important for everyone to have safe and equitable access to nature?

Cheatom: Many BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) people experience fear or discomfort outdoors because they're often treated as if they don't belong or are trespassing. It's not uncommon for someone birding in a hoodie to be mistaken for a houseless person or viewed with suspicion. Too often, BIPOC individuals in natural spaces are unfairly assumed to be doing something wrong, which adds an extra layer of vigilance to what should be a peaceful experience.

Hall: It's really important for all peoples to have safe, joyful, equitable, and meaningful access to nature. We sometimes forget that we are also part of nature. We are descendants of apes that walked off of the plains of Africa. Since then, we've been evolving through our connection with nature. We've since lost that connection in many ways, but we can always get it back, as our bodies are still tuned in, if we let them be.

Kaufman: That should be a basic human right. Clean air, clean water, equal opportunities, equal treatment under the law, access to education, and yes, absolutely, access to nature.

Lopez-Fretts: The reality is not everyone has felt welcome in outdoor spaces, and some communities are far more likely to live in areas with little to no access to green spaces. That matters. There is evidence

that spending time in nature improves our health and well-being. Community parks and natural areas help people feel more connected to where they live and to each other. I'm inspired by indigenous teachings, voiced by Robin Wall Kimmerer, about reciprocity—that nature isn't just a resource we take from, but a relationship where we give back. For that reciprocal relationship to exist, everyone needs to be able to access and to connect with nature.

Patterson: Everyone deserves to feel safe and welcome outside. Representation matters. I love the idea that if you can see it, you can be it. I take it one step further: If you can see it, you can do it. We need more people out in nature because the future of conservation depends on it. If we want to protect birds and their habitats, we need a new generation of birders who feel a sense of belonging in outdoor spaces. That starts with access, visibility, and genuine inclusion.

***Sketches:* What does it mean to have a diverse birding community and why is it important?**

Cheatom: Many people of color haven't had the opportunity to spend much time birding or simply being outdoors, which is why reconnecting marginalized communities with nature feels so important to me. I grew up surrounded by nature, and that connection stayed with me all the way to creating a Cultural Center in Balboa Park. Having this space helps the BIPOC community remember what has been forgotten: that nature has always been part of our lives and our culture.

Hall: First, the more diversity the better. You get more ideas, more perspectives, more connection, more learning, and a more robust understanding of your environment. Second, the world (and the USA) is becoming more and more diverse. There is ZERO chance we can conserve the birds if we only cater to the legacy communities (white, cis-gendered, heteronormative, and retired).

Kaufman: As a birder, I've always recognized that diversity is a good thing. Going out in the field, I like to see and hear many different kinds of birds, not just one kind. Hanging out with other birders, I like to see people from many different backgrounds, I like to hear many different voices and perspectives. The whole experience is better when we can share it with a wider and more diverse circle of friends.

Lopez-Fretts: A diverse birding community is one where people of all backgrounds—cultural, racial, gender, age, ability, experience level—feel represented and valued. Birds connect with everyone, but not everyone has felt connected to the birding community. Diversity brings in new perspectives, different traditions, and new ways of engaging with birds. It makes our community richer, more creative, more resilient. And honestly, it reflects the reality of the natural world—vibrant ecosystems thrive on diversity.

Patterson: A diverse birding community reflects the real world. Birds belong to all of us, and the spaces we explore should feel that way, too. When people from different backgrounds come together to enjoy nature, it strengthens the community and expands what birding looks like. Diversity brings new stories, new perspectives, and new ideas. It creates a more vibrant and welcoming future for birding and conservation.

***Sketches:* How can birding groups such as San Diego Bird Alliance create safe spaces for diverse groups of birders?**

Cheatom: Having BIPOC guides makes people feel seen and helps break down barriers that often discourage people of color from birding. I've noticed that when many are first introduced to birding, they assume it's an activity reserved for white people. But when they see instructors from the BIPOC community leading, it changes the dynamic—suddenly birding feels more accessible, relatable, and comfortable. To truly reach diverse communities, it's essential that guides not only come from BIPOC backgrounds but also bring expertise in ornithology, alongside a strong presence of BIPOC participants at outings. This combination fosters belonging and helps birding become part of our shared cultural experience.

Hall: The SDBA can really step into this space by creating consistent and simple ways to engage with inner-city communities, in particular Latino and Black communities. This means not only spending time and effort but also investing in the gear, transportation, and joy of students. Allow them to be themselves in nature rather than trying to force them into the way it "has been done." This advice works for adults from the same communities, as well.

Kaufman: I don't know all the answers, but I'm glad you're thinking about the question. The birding community at large needs to make much more progress in that direction, and I applaud any organization that is making a conscious effort.

Lopez-Fretts: Birding groups can create safe spaces by recognizing that birders come from all different experiences and backgrounds. That awareness opens up opportunities: offering programs led by and co-designed with diverse community members, creating mentorship opportunities, and making sure trips are physically and socially accessible. It also means bringing birding to communities—meeting people where they are, in their neighborhoods, schools, public libraries—and fostering participatory science and activities right in the community, with community leadership. When people participate in helping birds, they see how it helps other biodiversity, their communities, and themselves. That positive impact translates into holistic conservation action that helps preserve birds, biodiversity, and the well-being of us all.

Patterson: Collaboration is key. The best way to create safe and welcoming spaces is to involve people who look like the communities you hope to engage, not just as participants, but in planning and leadership roles. When you see someone who looks like you leading a bird walk, it sends an immediate message that you are welcome and valued. It makes you feel seen. Birding groups can also build trust by listening, partnering with local organizations, and creating programs that reflect the needs and voices of the communities they want to reach. Real inclusion happens when people are part of the process from the beginning.

The Bird That Stopped Bulldozers

The entire life cycle of the California Gnatcatcher is tied to its coastal sage scrub habitat. Dominated by plants such as California Sagebrush, California Buckwheat, and Black Sage, this biologically rich habitat once stretched unbroken from Ventura County to northern Baja California. During the 20th century, however, urban development wiped out 60–90% of Southern California's coastal sage scrub environment. By 1991, San Diego County had lost 229,000–246,000 acres of coastal sage scrub habitat—an area as large as the City of San Diego!

With their remaining habitat degraded and fragmented by urban development, the number of breeding pairs of California Gnatcatchers began to drop. By the mid-1990s, only about 2,500 pairs of California Gnatcatchers remained in the United States, about 1,500 of them in San Diego County.

In 1993, the California Gnatcatcher was listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA), prompting a firestorm. The ESA listing threatened development in Southern California's prized real estate market. To avoid "an economic trainwreck," Bruce Babbitt, the Interior Secretary at the time, pushed for a system to balance real-estate development with wildlife needs. The State of California responded with Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP), which emphasizes an ecosystem approach that protects multiple species and their habitats, rather than focusing on individual species.

Using NCCP as a model, San Diego developed the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP), enacted in 1997. While the MSCP has streamlined permitting for land development, it has also facilitated the conservation of more than 100,000 acres of land in the region. According to the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), western San Diego County now has a regional preserve system of 670,189 acres, including 88,172 acres of the California Gnatcatcher's coastal sage scrub habitat.

The California Gnatcatcher population has stabilized, and as a hopeful sign, a wildlife biologist found an active California Gnatcatcher nest at Cabrillo National Monument in 2015. The last time gnatcatchers were recorded nesting at the monument was in 1915!

Wildfire is an emerging threat, however. Studies of burned gnatcatcher habitat indicate that it can take decades to recover to levels suitable for sustaining gnatcatcher populations. We must double-down on fighting the climate crisis, a major cause of increased wildfire activity, as well as on restoring coastal sage scrub habitat.

California Gnatcatcher: Tim Pagaard

THREATENED

CALIFORNIA GNATCATCHER

Polioptila californica

IDENTIFICATION: Small, dark gray, long-tailed songbird. Breeding male has black cap; female has thin white eyering and brown tones in plumage. Look at underside of tail to differentiate it from Black-tailed and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. The California Gnatcatcher's is entirely black with narrow white edges (much less white than both Black-tailed and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers).

WHEN TO SEE THEM: Year-round, very restricted range

WHERE TO SEE THEM: Look for them in gently sloping areas of coastal sage scrub with good cover of California Sagebrush; usually in pairs. Listen for harsh scolding calls and then look for movement in shrubs.

FUN FACTS: California Gnatcatchers haven't been observed bathing in standing water; instead, they clean their feathers with water collected on leaves from rain or fog. These tiny birds will mob potential nest predators more than quadruple their size, including California Scrub-Jays, Cactus Wrens, and Greater Roadrunners.

Local Emissaries

CALIFORNIA SCRUB-JAY
Aphelocoma californica

IDENTIFICATION: Large songbird with a long tail and stout bill. Azure blue and gray on upperparts; pale underside that is broken up by a partial blue collar. Dark cheek patch and thin white line above eye. No crest. Its flight style is often distinctive, with a series of quick wingbeats followed by a stiff glide.
WHEN TO SEE THEM: Year-round, abundant
WHERE TO SEE THEM: Look for them in oak woodlands, dry scrublands, mixed pine-oak, suburbs, parks, and along roadsides at lower elevations. Listen for their raspy *weep* calls. Visits feeders.
FUN FACTS: Like many members of the crow and jay family, California Scrub-Jays are intelligent and have a mischievous streak. They steal acorns from Acorn Woodpecker caches and sometimes even steal acorns they've watched other jays hide. When Scrub-Jays hide their own acorns, they check to make sure no other jays are watching.

CALIFORNIA GULL *Larus californicus*

IDENTIFICATION: Medium-sized gull with a white head and medium-gray lower parts, yellow legs, dark eyes, and a yellow bill with distinctive red and black markings on the tip. Immature birds have mottled plumage and often have pink or gray-green legs and a pink bill with a black tip.
WHEN TO SEE THEM: Much more abundant in winter than in summer, but eBirders report seeing them year-round.
WHERE TO SEE THEM: Look for them at parking lots, beaches, or lakes, often in flocks with Herring and Ring-billed Gulls.
FUN FACTS: California Gulls spend most of the year *outside of California*; they're the state bird of Utah, *not* of California. (Their voracious appetites saved Mormon farmers by devouring a plague of katydids.) They prefer eating live prey but will eat almost anything they can scavenge or steal — picnickers beware! Though they can leap directly into flight, they prefer having a runway. Reported to live up to 27–30 years.

California Quail: Alana Asmussen

CALIFORNIA QUAIL *Callipepla californica*

IDENTIFICATION: A small rotund bird with a teardrop-shaped plume protruding from its forehead. Males have a black face and a longer more forward-drooping head plume. The bellies of males and females are adorned with white feathers in an intricate scale-like pattern.
WHEN TO SEE THEM: Year-round, but especially in spring
WHERE TO SEE THEM: Inland, open scrub with low ground-cover vegetation. Listen for their "Chi-ca-go" call and look for them scratching at the ground in large groups. Will flush if startled, so approach cautiously.
FUN FACTS: California's state bird. The California Quail needs intestinal protozoans to digest food, so chicks eat their parents' poop to get their own symbiotic intestinal fauna. YUM! Though quails readily fly short distances to safety, they prefer to run. Many parents collaboratively rear their hatchlings and usually live longer than parents raising 11 or so youngsters alone. After breeding season, quails join coveys (25–75 quails) for mutual protection.

CALIFORNIA THRASHER *Toxostoma redivivum*

IDENTIFICATION: Largest of the thrashers. Drab grayish-brown bird with a long tail and long, downcurved slender bill. Often found singing stunningly complex songs from a prominent perch. Forages primarily on the ground by sweeping its bill through leaf litter to uncover insects and other prey.
WHEN TO SEE THEM: Year-round; singing peaks November–July
WHERE TO SEE THEM: Mostly dense chaparral. Does not adapt well to urban environments. Look for them in the early morning. Listen for a long song of mostly double phrases and then scan the tops of shrubs.
FUN FACTS: Considered one of the loveliest songsters, both male and female California Thrashers sing, sometimes duetting. Like their mockingbird relatives, thrashers incorporate mimicry into their intricate songs, often including species such as California Quail, Wrentit, California Scrub-Jay, Bewick's Wren, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Spotted Towhee, and Lesser Goldfinch. Mated pairs seem to enjoy each other's company, foraging together and even singing together, as well as rearing offspring together over multiple breeding seasons.

CALIFORNIA TOWHEE *Melozone crissalis*

IDENTIFICATION: Large, stocky, long-tailed sparrow. Matte brown with rusty undertail and facial feathers around the bill. Males and females look alike. Weighs twice as much as a Song Sparrow. Forages for seeds and some invertebrates by hopping and running on the ground.
WHEN TO SEE THEM: Year-round, abundant
WHERE TO SEE THEM: Widely distributed; urban or rural; dry chaparral or underbrush. Listen for a loud, sharp metallic chip call and then look at nearby shrubs, the ground below them, or an exposed perch. Visits feeders.
FUN FACTS: California Towhees form socially monogamous, lifelong pair bonds. They stay together year-round, foraging and defending territory together. To reinforce the pair bond, they make a unique squealing duet call whenever they reunite, even after brief separations. While the California Towhee's chip call is frequently heard, it is rare to hear it sing because the male only sings when he is trying to win a mate. They often build their nests in poison oak and feast on the plant's berries.

Soaring Against the Odds

CRITICALLY ENDANGERED

CALIFORNIA CONDOR

Gymnogyps californianus

IDENTIFICATION: Largest bird in North America, with a 109" (>9') wingspan, 46" from bill to tail.

WHEN TO SEE THEM: Only two eBirders have reported seeing a California Condor in San Diego County, but they're year-round in their range.

WHERE TO SEE THEM: Nest in caves high on cliff faces in remote locations, including Big Sur, Pinnacles National Park, and the Sespe Wilderness in Southern California's Los Padres National Forest. Look for large, dark soaring birds that don't teeter like other vultures. (The San Diego Zoo's Elephant Odyssey exhibit and Safari Park's Condor Ridge exhibit have California Condors on Display.)

FUN FACTS: Listeners can hear the sound of California Condor wings either taking flight or diving steeply from nearly a mile away. California Condors can live 50 or more years, but they don't reproduce rapidly. Female condors only lay one egg per nest attempt, and they may not attempt to nest every year. Young rely on their parents for more than a year and don't reach maturity for 6–8 years. Condors can store up to 3 pounds of meat in their crop, allowing them to survive 1–2 weeks without eating.

Historically, California Condors lived from California to Florida, and from western Canada to northern Mexico, but by the 1950s, the species was nearly wiped out—victims of habitat destruction, poaching, and lead poisoning. In 1967, the federal government listed them as endangered.

With numbers dwindling, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) established the California Condor Recovery Program, in 1979, to save the species from extinction. By 1982, only 22 wild condors remained, so USFWS, with several partners, captured them and began a captive breeding program.

One of those partners, the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance (SDZWA), was the first organization given permission to start a zoological condor breeding program. Scientists and wildlife care specialists developed techniques for incubating condor eggs, hand-raising chicks with adult-condor puppets, and using other captive condors as mentors to teach the offspring natural social skills.

In the early 1990s, USFWS and its partners began reintroducing captive-bred condors into California. There are now four California reintroduction sites—Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge north of Los Angeles, Ventana Wilderness in Big Sur, Pinnacles National Park, and Yurok Nation in northern California. They are also reintroducing them in Vermilion Cliffs near Grand Canyon National Park in northern Arizona, and the Sierra San Pedro Mártir of northern Baja California, Mexico.

According to SDZWA, 40–50 California Condors join the population every year, with 12–15 chicks hatching in their native habitat annually. More than 560 California Condors are thriving today, including nearly 400 in the wild.

While that's good news, California Condors continue to face threats. According to pathologists from SDZWA, lead poisoning is still the biggest cause of condor deaths. When condors eat wildlife shot with lead ammunition, they can accidentally ingest and digest the lethal lead, absorbing it into their bloodstream. Although California banned lead ammunition in 2019, some hunters continue to use it, poisoning condors and their offspring. Hunters can protect the growing population of wild California Condors by switching to non-lead ammunition.

California Condor: Courtesy of SDZWA

Love Your Wetlands Days

Learn, Explore, Act

by Andrew Meyer, Director of Conservation, and Cristina Santa Maria, Conservation Manager

Several staff members and a couple of long-time volunteers were already at the gate to Kendall–Frost Marsh Reserve when we arrived with a truck full of tents, chairs, posters, scopes, flyers, brochures, and a couple of boxes of donuts—the fuel that really gets the annual Love Your Wetlands Day celebration up and running.

Dawn was just breaking over the marsh, the cordgrass lit up, and the wigeons started their nasal fluting. The condensation dripped off the ReWild canopy as the sun warmed up the rows of booths that began to take shape. Soon, more than a thousand visitors would arrive—eager to learn about, explore, and act for these remnant wetlands.

This dewy morning was months in the making; it started with swapping spreadsheets, fielding emails, mapping booth layouts, and stitching together a schedule designed to encourage San Diegans to fall in love with this special place.

The Kendall–Frost Marsh Reserve and the City of San Diego's adjacent Northern Wildlife Preserve are the last 1% of marsh remaining in the 4,000-acre Mission Bay Regional Park. These wetlands support migratory birds such as Brants and American Pipits, as well as year-round residents such as the state-listed endangered Belding's Savannah Sparrow and the federally listed endangered Light-footed Ridgway's Rail. Love Your Wetlands Day opens these hidden habitats to the public, providing a unique way to meet birds that are normally cryptic and distant. It shows off research and connects people to actions to protect and restore the area.

A COLLABORATIVE LABOR OF LOVE

Like water carving a channel through the marsh, many hands have shaped the annual Love Your Wetlands Day event. Beginning 21 years ago, the Mission Bay Park Rangers and the UC San Diego Natural Reserve System decided to promote the health and value of Kendall–Frost Marsh by creating an event tied to Valentine's Day. The San Diego Bird Alliance became involved a few years later, and

now it is an equal partnership between the Natural Reserve System (NRS) and the Bird Alliance, with critical involvement by the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve and the City of San Diego.

In the early years of the event, the Bird Alliance provided scopes and outreach materials that celebrated and shared the bird species living in the marsh, which was closed to the public the other 364 days of the year. Once our ReWild Mission Bay Feasibility Study was underway, and we saw the potential for newly restored wetlands, we realized that Love Your Wetlands Day could be a powerful way to increase public support for the ReWild Mission Bay campaign.

Attendees learn how to build a ha kwaiyo, or Kumeyaay tule boat.

A group of attendees explores Kendall–Frost Marsh from the water on kayaks donated by Aqua Adventures.

We began adding dynamic speakers, including local researchers sharing the work they're doing at this living laboratory; music, dance, and other art forms; fun and informative activities such as kayaking excursions, which add another avenue for visitors to explore and learn about the marsh; and ways for people to take action, such as building nesting platforms for Ridgway's Rails and talking with City Councilmembers. Now, it's something we can really sink our boots into!

Then, six years ago, we met someone who led us to add a whole new dimension to Love Your Wetlands Day. As we looked out from Crown Point toward downtown, Brandon Linton, the founder and director of the Renascence Project—a community-based, Indigenous-managed nonprofit organization that aims to reconnect people with land and to provide healing—described the Kumeyaay perspective of this land. He painted a portrait of Mission Bay the way his ancestors had viewed it, removing the rooftops, spreading out Fiesta Island, flattening the skyscrapers and the University of San Diego, plucking out the palm trees, and adding back not only thousands of shorebirds and dabbling ducks, but also the Indigenous peoples who used this land. Once again, we expanded our vision. In addition to restored wetlands, we now wanted to see a people restored and reconnected to this place.

Through discussions, plans, speakers, and booths, Kumeyaay partners are showing the needed changes to the land and to the planning process. As we plan for habitat restoration, we must account for human reconnection, too. The tule boat–building activities that Stan Rodriguez has led for the previous four years at Love Your Wetlands Day are a gift to all of us. We all learn boat building, and we all work toward putting Kumeyaay activities back in the Bay. There's still a lot of work to do, but we're on the move. (See "Harvesting Tule at Anstine Provides Cultural Connection" on page 12.)

WHAT'S NEW FOR 2026?

This year, we're excited to add more new components to the day. We hope to improve the human connections we make to our shared shoreline through a new native plant nursery and an oral-history booth. At the on-site native plant nursery, we will welcome visitors to get their hands dirty, learn the Kumeyaay names for species with long human histories, and plant a seed in a pot that they can take home with them. We're happy to have some space to show off the evolutionary marvels that survive in the tidal marsh and to give folks a free plant to take back to their communities for improving habitats for birds and humans alike.

We are also working with Condor Visual Media, a digital photo and video production company dedicated to serving the 18 sovereign Tribal Nations in the San Diego area. The company will have an oral-history booth set up where visitors can record their memories and hopes for the northeast corner of Mission Bay. Participants will be able to have an audio clip of their story emailed to them.

I (Andrew) plan to share my memory of seeing a herd of 20 Long-billed Curlews slowly stepping through the cordgrass, grazing on invertebrates like a herd of bison grazing on the grasslands of the Great Plains. It took two looks to distinguish their beige bodies from the green-beige pickleweed background. I want to ReWild Mission Bay to provide more habitat for curlew herds.

I (Cristina) plan to record my memory of being present for a release of Ridgway's Rails that were raised by the Living Coast Discovery Center and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). It was such an inspiring moment, watching these young birds take their first full flight into the wild at Kendall–Frost Marsh. In that quiet, fleeting instant, so many people, organizations, and partners were united in care for this species. Hope for the marsh felt almost tangible, and it really drove home why protecting and expanding this precious habitat matters so much.

We hope that collectively sharing our memories and dreams will elicit a deeper, culturally informed Love Your Wetlands Day for all. And we hope it will get us to ReWild even faster!

We would like to thank the many people and organizations that have helped build Love Your Wetlands Day into the awesome event it is today, including UC San Diego and the Natural Reserve System staff, who originated the event and who continue to work hand-in-hand with us to make it a success; the USFWS and the Coastal Conservancy, which were the founding funders of the ReWild Mission Bay Feasibility Study, and whose staff have long donated their time to share their expertise through this annual event; Karin Zirk and the Friends of Rose Creek; the late Roy Little and the Friends of Mission Bay Marshes; Megan Flaherty, our former SDBA Conservation Manager; our 101 ReWild Mission Bay Coalition partners; Aqua Adventures, which donates all of the kayaks for the event; our amazing and tireless staff, including Kelcy Coleman, Coral Weaver, Karina Ornelas, Savannah Stallings, and Allison Linton; and, of course, our indispensable volunteers.

As if planted by San Diego Bird Alliance, several Long-billed Curlews wowed Love Your Wetlands Day 2025 attendees as they hunted in the shallows of Kendall–Frost Marsh Reserve.

Photos: Victor Santos

Scan this QR code to register for Love Your Wetlands Day

We're Not Done Yet!

What we're working on in Mission Bay:

- Support for sequestration research that will illuminate how valuable the marsh is for locking away carbon each year and lowering our city's carbon emissions
- Hiring an engineering firm to create a Roadmap to ReWild to help the City of San Diego take the next steps
- Connecting Rose Creek and Kumeyaay communities to the last tidal marsh in Mission Bay
- Fighting for better everyday protection for nesting and resting birds by advocating for an end to fireworks and rescheduling San Diego Bayfair outside of the nesting season

Find out how you can get involved by attending Love Your Wetlands Day or by visiting our website, rewildmissionbay.org.

SANCTUARTIES: ANSTINE

Harvesting Tule Provides Cultural Connection

by Hannah St. John, Anstine Coordinator

One of the key features of Anstine Nature Preserve is the pond located in the heart of the preserve's 11.6 acres. Fed by streams from the east, the pond's appearance often fluctuates throughout the year, based on both rainfall and algal blooms. Year-round, however, cattails and bulrushes populate much of the pond. These water-dwelling plants provide shelter for the Common Yellowthroat, depicted on the Anstine Nature Preserve logo, as well as Hooded Mergansers visiting in winter, and various other birds, fish, reptiles, and amphibians throughout the year.

At first glance, the cattail and bulrush don't appear to differ much, but the Southern Cattail (*Typha domingensis*) has the characteristic sausage-like flower head with flat leaves, and bulrushes in the *Schoenoplectus* genus have firm rod-shaped stems. In San Diego County, there are several species of bulrushes, though many of them are called by their other common name, *tule*.

Tule has been an important crafting tool for Indigenous peoples across the West Coast and beyond. The long stems can be used to craft a variety of clothing items, housing materials, tools, and more. Local Kumeyaay people discovered that tule's waterproof exterior combined with its air-trapping spongy interior made it ideal for fashioning boats. Historically, they used the boats, or *ha kwaiyo*, to hunt whales, catch fish, and gather seafood.

At the annual Love Your Wetlands Day (LYWD) celebrated at Kendall–Frost Marsh, visitors are encouraged to contribute to crafting *ha kwaiyo*, which are then launched from the shore of Crown Point Park. Stan Rodriguez, a Kumeyaay cultural educator and advocate, leads the boat-crafting activity.

The tule used for LYWD is harvested from Anstine Nature Preserve with help from volunteers, SDBA's Conservation team, and Ali Linton, SDBA's Community Connections Coordinator and cultural monitor. At harvesting events, participants trim and bundle the tule stalks for transport. The bundles are laid flat to dry, and then either the bundles can be twisted into a flexible weaving material, or the entire length can be used in bundles or mats.

The harvesting, building, and launching of *ha kwaiyo* is a community effort designed to strengthen bonds both among humans and with nature. Harvesting is done with intention; nature is to be respected and not taken for granted. Participating in the tule harvesting, boat building, and boat launching is an incredible opportunity for all ages, and San Diego Bird Alliance encourages you to join us for future events or to explore opportunities to listen and learn from Kumeyaay people, especially at our upcoming Love Your Wetlands Day.

You can watch Stan Rodriguez, Priscilla Ortiz Sawa, and Andrew James Pittman discuss how they are rebuilding traditional ha kwaiyo *(tule boats), harvesting* ha shupill *(grunion), and teaching* ha silowik *(language about the ocean) in the lecture series* Indigenous Ocean Culture: A Renaissance*, available online through Scripps Institution of Oceanography and UCSD.*

Stan Rodriguez and SDBA Conservation Outreach Coordinator Karina Ornelas gather tule at the Anstine Nature Preserve in Vista.

Photo: Hannah St. John

SANCTUARTIES: SILVERWOOD

Striving to Keep Silverwood Safe from Wildfires

by Dylan Lau, Silverwood Coordinator

San Diego Bird Alliance's Silverwood Wildlife Sanctuary is a 785-acre nature preserve in Lakeside, which includes about 5 miles of chaparral and oak woodlands trails. Keeping those 5 miles of trails clear from overgrowth is a big job, and we are so grateful to our volunteers, who dedicate hours of their time keeping our trails trimmed back and safe for our students and guests.

It takes more than a team of dedicated volunteers, however, to maintain the necessary trail clearance and defensible space at the property. We have been fortunate to receive funding from the San Diego River Conservancy not only to support our volunteer fire clearance work, but also to hire work crews from Urban Corps of San Diego to tackle the large-scale efforts to keep our guests and property safe from the threats of wildfire.

As a nature reserve, our goal is to preserve as many native plants as possible. To maintain them in our defensible space, we prune many of our native shrubs to look like lollipops. By removing the lower branches and any root shoots, we greatly reduce the chance that ladder fuels might spread fire into the canopies. We encourage the natural growth of evergreen native plants, including Coast Live Oaks, Sugar Bush, and Laurel Sumac, all of which have fire-resistant properties, such as thick bark or succulent leaves. Maintaining fire-resistant native plants instead of clearing them can slow down embers in wind-driven wildfires and can help protect structures from igniting.

If you're looking into rewilding your own garden, we have recently partnered with SDBA's Native Seed Library and created a kiosk of native seed packets at Silverwood. Guests can take home a packet or two of native plant seeds, some of which have even been sustainably harvested right here at Silverwood.

Additionally, we have started to host wildfire walks and talks. Guests can join a free guided hike through Silverwood, which explores the fire adaptations of this unique plant community and how it has recovered from the 2003 Cedar fire. You can find upcoming dates for all our Silverwood events on the Events Calendar on SDBA's website, or join us for our open public hours every Wednesday from 8 A.M. to 12 P.M. and Saturday from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M.

Photos: Darren Whittaker

(Top) Pruning shrubs in the shape of a "lollipop" by removing lower branches reduces the risk of ladder fuels spreading fire into the canopies.

(Bottom) Work crews from Urban Corps of San Diego provide fire clearance services at Silverwood with funding from the San Diego River Conservancy.

LCW25 Highlighted Conservation, Restoration, and Inspiration

by Karina Ornelas

Latino Conservation Week (LCW), hosted by the San Diego Bird Alliance in collaboration with the Hispanic Access Foundation and several local partners, is a week dedicated to conservation-focused events that encourage the Latinx community to connect with nature and to feel inspired to protect our natural resources.

We went big for our sixth annual celebration with six events throughout the week of September 13–21. All activities were fully bilingual. We kicked off LCW25 not only with activities, but also by highlighting individual members of our local Latino conservation community. We invited people to share their photos and personal journeys in conservation. It was rewarding to see the diverse backgrounds, the inspiring stories, and the many local role models working in this field.

Our first event was Wander the Wetlands at UC San Diego's Kendall–Frost Marsh, in partnership with the UC Natural Reserve System, Center for Scientific Research and Higher Education of Ensenada (CICESE), Autonomous University of Baja California (UABC), San Diego Coastkeeper, ReWild, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS). Participants met wetland scientists, learned about the importance of the marsh, and enjoyed birdwatching, fish seining, searching for invertebrates, plant tours, science talks, and a bioblitz. It was an exciting start, with more than 25 attendees.

The week continued with an after-sunset visit to Silverwood to look for moths, owls, and other wildlife. The Nat and San Diego Coastkeeper joined us for a vegetation monitoring and restoration activity at the California Least Tern nesting sites. Next was a Burrowing Owl Restoration Party, where we were lucky to see many owls in this sensitive habitat.

We were also invited by San Diego Coastkeeper and Surfrider San Diego to help host a film screening of *El Canto del Mar*, a powerful film that uplifts Latino and Indigenous voices, celebrates cultural pride, and inspires environmental action through storytelling.

To close out the week, we hosted Journey Through the Wetlands 2.0 at the Tijuana Slough. The event wrapped up LCW and kicked off Tijuana River Action Month. Partners from both sides of the border joined us to share their conservation work. We hope to bring this event back again for LCW26!

Photos: (Bottom) C. Munoz; (Top): Karina Ornelas

Photos: (Bottom) Willow Eichler; (Middle) Roslyn Rivas

Come Fly with Us!

Sign up for an SDBA Event now!

by Willow Eichler, AmeriCorps VISTA Member/Education Assistant

At San Diego Bird Alliance, inclusivity is an essential part of our mission. Birds need help from everyone, and we welcome all bird lovers. In 2026, we are committed to offering monthly Queer Hikes, BIPOC birding outings, and mobility-friendly Bird Sits as part of our "Come Fly with Us!" initiative, aimed at dismantling common barriers to outdoor recreation and nature learning.

Our Queer Hikes create a safe space for LGBTQ+ folks and allies. These programs vary between challenging hikes and more relaxed birding outings. They foster friendly conversations and allow everyone to be their true self while enjoying the beauty of nature. We appreciate new leaders Danette Perez and Maggie Enloe, who both bring their warmth and birdy enthusiasm to our hikes.

The BIPOC outings invite Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to participate in birding outings specifically for people of these communities. Leaders a re often bilingual, making these programs great for Spanish speakers, too! We are proud of Roslyn Rivas for coordinating, promoting, and leading Bilingual BIPOC birding outings, bringing her bird expertise and translation skills along with a Black Puerto-Rican heritage to welcome a diverse community to the world of birding.

Finally, we offer Bird Sits! We understand that most birding outings are difficult for those with mobility issues. These relaxed outings are seated or include light and easy walking, rolling, and strolling, for access no matter your mobility situation. We wouldn't be able to do it without Joanne Sherif. Joanne welcomes everyone with her peaceful and gentle demeanor and brings immense value to all SDBA programs as a fluent ASL speaker.

Look out for events at the 2026 San Diego Bird Festival, too! We will have programs led in Spanish and in ASL, and we have plenty of easy walking programs, too! Use the Day Planner on Bobolink, where all these programs are tagged as "Spanish," "ASL," or "easy walking" and can be easily found using the tabs at the left-hand side of the Overview page. Feel free to reach out to info@sandiegobirdalliance.org with any questions about the festival or about any upcoming events. We are here to support everybody who wants to Come Fly with Us!

(Top) San Diego Bird Festival attendees participate in a "Big Sit."

(Middle) A BIPOC birding outing at Balboa Park.

(Bottom) Queer Hike at the Bayside Birding and Walking Trail in Imperial Beach.

San Diego Bird Alliance
4010 Morena Blvd. Ste. 100
San Diego, CA 92117

Nonprofit Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
SAN DIEGO, CA
Permit #37

SAN DIEGO PRESS CLUB 2023 WINNER EXCELLENCE IN Journalism AWARDS
SAN DIEGO PRESS CLUB 2022 WINNER EXCELLENCE IN Journalism AWARDS
SAN DIEGO PRESS CLUB 2020 WINNER EXCELLENCE IN Journalism AWARDS
SAN DIEGO PRESS CLUB 2019 WINNER EXCELLENCE IN Journalism AWARDS

A Life List Is More Than a Number—It's a Journey

It's a life full of stories, of moments of wonder, and mind-enriching experiences. Come join us on the trail—there's so much to see!

When you become a **San Diego Bird Alliance member** and discover all the ways to enjoy our region's more than 400 bird species, other wildlife, and their habitats, you'll find yourself caught up on a journey that can last a lifetime!

By joining at any level, you help us achieve our mission — and help protect our natural heritage.

Join or Renew as a Member. Make monthly or yearly contributions, meet other bird enthusiasts, and enjoy member benefits.

Volunteer. There are many ways to contribute your time

Make a Donation. Make a tax-deductible gift to support our initiatives, our many programs, and both of our sanctuaries.

Leave a Legacy. Make plans today for a gift tomorrow and become part of our esteemed Golden Eagle Legacy Club.

We encourage you to become a member of San Diego Bird Alliance, especially if you are already a National Audubon member.

To become a member, visit:
sandiegobirdalliance.org/joinourflock/become-a-member.html

SAN DIEGO BIRD ALLIANCE

Sketches

SKETCHES is published quarterly.
For details on submissions and deadlines, please contact LaTresa Pearson at tresepearson@gmail.com

Editor-in-chief: **LaTresa Pearson**
Art Director: **Tim Downs**
Associate Editor: **Shari Dorantes Hatch**

The office is open to visitors. Please call in advance to confirm someone will be present.

4010 Morena Blvd. Ste. 100, San Diego, CA 92117

Messages can be left at any time by email:
info@sandiegobirdalliance.org.
(Emails might be more effective than calling.)

San Diego Bird Alliance Office: 858-273-7800

California Audubon Society: ca.audubon.org
National Audubon Society: www.audubon.org
National Audubon Activist Hotline: 800-659-2622
National Audubon Customer Service: 800-274-4201

San Diego Bird Alliance is a chapter of the National Audubon Society

Audubon

Visit our website at www.sandiegobirdalliance.org

Log on for online resources. ***Please visit our website for all calendar items and registrations.***

Like us on Facebook:
facebook.com/sandiegobirdalliance

Follow us on Instagram:
instagram.com/sandiegobirdalliance

Together we defend our region's birds, unique biodiversity, and threatened habitats through advocacy, education, and restoration.

Cover photo: Tim Downs