

Recreational Boating on the San Lorenzo River

2014 Pilot Project Observations

April to August 2014

April 12, 2014 Paddle Event

Report #1 by Jane Mio

I came to the river at 9:15 am, to observe bird life prior to the paddle event. On the trestle bridge I watched 25 CORMORANTS in feeding frenzy mode, herding fish towards the bank, creating a "boiling" water surface. Two female COMMON MERGANSER were having a head-in-the-water torpedo exercise, while a male MERGANSER meandered on the sideline. There was another MERGANSER by the Crescent bridge. I also observed six male and four female Mallards, four SNOWY EGRETS (standing along the bank), two SPOTTED SANDPIPERS (feeding amongst the rocks), a BUFFLEHEAD pair, diving near the Riverside bridge and three more BUFFLEHEADS further upstream. A KILLDEER was walking on the shore behind the Skateboard Park. Approximately fifteen AMERICA COOTS were spread out along the trestle and Laurel Bridge. Over 30 GULLS were present, as well as one CASPIAN TERN (fishing) and nine CLIFF SWALLOWS at the Riverside bridge. A PHOEBE was surveying from the wire. An AMERICAN GOLDFINCH pair dashed through the bush.

At Laurel bridge there were two male and three female GOLDENEYE engaged in quick escape diving, which is different from feed dive.

I walked further upstream and saw a yellow kayak in the water at the Soquel bridge. The AMERICAN COOTS and MALLARDS were swimming in circles (apparently agitated) between Laurel & Soquel bridge. By the time I reached the paddler launching spot, the paddlers were heading toward the Water St. bridge, where it's really shallow. There were no river birds visible in that stretch. Curious how the land bird population was reacting, I noticed that I did not see or hear any bird activity on the banks, which is usually very busy. The paddlers turned around and I headed back toward the river mouth.

The paddlers were really stretched out all along on the river, widthwise and lengthwise. Some of them were really close by the reeds, where birds were nesting. From the Water St. bridge to Riverside bridge I saw no river birds in the water, because they were all in the air. I could tell where the paddlers were down stream since first the GOLDENEYE flew upstream, then the AMERICAN COOTS, then the BUFFLEHEAD, then MALLARDS, then the MERGANSER, then a few CORMORANTS. The birds kept circling and couldn't land due to the river being covered with paddlers. The KILLDEER was sounding a high alarm and displayed "wounded wing" behavior. When I arrived at the Riverside bridge I saw a paddler head straight for the BUFFLEHEAD pair, who did escape diving to no avail because the paddler didn't change course, instead getting closer to the birds. The BUFFLEHEAD pair finally flew off. No CLIFF SWALLOW activity. The GULLS tried to hold their position, but too much was enough. They flew off.

By the trestle were three SNOWY EGRETS and three SPOTTED SANDPIPERS, about 22 GULLS out by the river mouth. Some of the paddlers had pulled their gear ashore and rested. The behavior of the river birds before and during paddler event was notably different. Before the event the birds were at ease, doing bird life in their habitat. During the event they were agitated and fleeing.

I returned to the river two days later to inventory birds. I counted five AMERICAN COOTS (lowest number in months), 18 CORMORANTS (not fishing), 42 GULLS, 3 MALLARD pairs, one COMMON MERGANSER pair, the BUFFLEHEAD pair by the Riverside bridge, one PIED-BILLED GREBE, 2 male and one female GOLDENEYE by Laurel bridge, one GREEN HERON flew in upstream from Riverside bridge, one CASPIAN TERN. Missing from the scene: SNOWY EGRETS (they have been present in big numbers for 2 weeks), the KILLDEER, SPOTTED SANDPIPERS and CLIFF SWALLOWS, the three BUFFLEHEAD and two GOLDENEYE. Over the years I have observed that some of the river bird

population have certain spots or areas, which they claim to which they return after short flights. Some of the river birds are shyer than others and escape potential danger early. It will be interesting to see when they all settle down again.

Report #2 by Jane Mio

I started farther north along the San Lorenzo trail heading south toward the Soquel bridge. The water level I noticed was extremely low, less than two feet at most and some sections possibly only three feet wide. Looking down I could see a few **Mallards** and two pair of **American Coots**. The setting was beautiful though with extremely high green grasses, various shrubs and wildflowers filling the interior of the water banks. Several mallards flew into the river area. I searched specifically for any water fowl.

As I approached the Soquel bridge I noticed three more **Mallards** and another pair of **Coots** leisurely sitting in a small pool just beyond the bridge. As I stood watching, a maintenance worker for the city asked me what birds I was looking at and which were my favorite. He said he really enjoyed the **Blue Heron** that he sometimes sees there.

Just as we were looking down three **Black-Crowned Night Herons** (one adult and two juveniles) erupted below us flying from south of Soquel bridge up into some trees on the east bank. I looked up river to see that they had likely been flushed by the parade of watercraft coming down the river. The **Herons** rested in the trees for a few minutes but then took off circling back up the river and several other times came back down trying to find a spot to land. They were unable to do so during the presence of the watercraft.

The boaters got to the Soquel bridge and found that was as far as they could go. The water was clearly too shallow to continue. The few ducks and coot were now replaced with a dozen people and their craft all crowded in together. The paddlers turned back after ten minutes and headed toward the ocean along the very narrow stream channel. Many were passing within a few feet of the banks. During this time I observed six different duck groups flying away from the river.

May 31, 2014 Paddle Event

Report #1 by Jane Mio

The Coastal Watershed Council/San Lorenzo River Alliance held a paddle event on the river on Saturday, May 31 from 1 to 4 PM. About 15 paddlers took part, in kayaks, stand-up paddle boards and one rowing scull. The participants paddled down river to the trestle and back over 3 hours. FoSLRW members watched and photographed the event from bridges and the west levee trail.

At 1:30pm there were 5 CORMORANTS fishing upstream from Trestle bridge and approx. 30 in the trees. Some were diving in the river. There were about 20 gulls at the river mouth and 50 were circling in the air. One SURF SCOTER floated between the trestle and the Crescent bridge. A RED-THROATED LOON was floating close to approximately 25 gulls. One female MERGANSER was sleeping on a rock across from the Crescent bridge. About five teenage MERGANSERS were foraging through the shoreline rocks under Mama's watch. One SURF SCOTER was swimming back and forth by the Riverside bridge. When the first paddlers arrived, the SURF SCOTER picked up its back and forth swimming pace, then took to the air. It flew upstream, circled over the Riverside bridge and flew downstream. The RED-THROATED LOON responded to the paddlers arrival with repetitive diving and then disappeared altogether. A MALLARD couple landed, stayed for a moment, then took off with the male voicing alarm.

A long, sleek rowboat at a quick clip headed straight into the gulls, who vacated the water. The rower then headed toward the MERGANSER family, who clung to the shoreline, because the rest of the paddlers prevented their escape. The rower was unaware of the consequences of his rowing due to his back to the birds. Two kayakers halted and stayed by the Riverside bridge, headed downstream and passing very close to shoreline by the MERGANSER family, which caused back and forth evasive movement of the birds. When the rest of paddlers headed back, I saw the BUFFLEHEAD downstream from the Riverside bridge. He was swimming fast, trying to raise out off the water for take off, which he is unable to do. I turned back to the paddlers, asking them to stay clear of the BUFFLEHEAD and witnessed the big, sleek rowboat heading right into the MERGANSER family, which was trying to cross the river. The CWC leader finally took the rower under his escorting wing. There were about 12

CORMORANTS left in the trees. The BUFFLEHEAD reappeared and was leaning sideways. After the paddler event, the too-young-to-fly MERGANSER family was feeding, which they did not do during paddler event.

The morning after the event (7:20 am) the two SURF SCOTERS were not present and the BUFFLEHEAD was swimming normally on the street side of the **Crescent** bridge. The RED-THROATED LOON was preening askew wing feathers by the Riverside bridge. River birds seemed to be showing escape response to any Levee movement. See ebird for report.

June 21, 2014 Paddle Event

Report #1 by Jane Mio

At 4:30 pm on the levee from the river mouth to Soquel bridge, these birds were present:

Approximately **80 gulls** by river mouth

1 **Snowy Egret** on cliff side rock by river mouth

1 **Pelican** resting on cliff side rock by river mouth

1 **Red-Tailed Hawk** in tree by Trestle bridge

1 **Kingfisher** diving for fish by Trestle street side

1 **Cormorant** in tree by Trestle

1 female **Merganser** w/4 juvenile foraging by Trestle bridge

1 **Green Heron** standing on Boardwalk side rocks

2 **Pied-billed Grebes** foraging by Crescent bridge

13 **gulls** in water behind Boardwalk maintenance yard

1 **Cormorant** fishing in water

Large amount of **Cliff Swallows** flying low over Levee banks & water

1 female **Merganser** w/5 little ones foraging by Riverside St bridge

1 **Black Phoebe** flitting on shore line, catching insects

1 **Pied-billed Grebe** foraging by Laurel bridge

Cliff Swallows flying low over water, touching water by Laurel bridge

1 **Mallard** couple between Laurel & Soquel bridge

1 male **Bufflehead** diving by Laurel bridge

1 female **Mallard** w/4 ducklings foraging between Laurel & Soquel bridge

5 **gulls** on water by Soquel bridge

Paddlers launched approximately at 5:30 pm and spread out downstream right away. Some separated from the group, heading toward river mouth.

One paddler commented to other paddlers on birders worrying about birds getting scared by paddlers, as he pointed to 2 remaining gulls. This paddler group was getting close to **Bufflehead**, who was diving repeatedly. I alerted them to his presence and 1 paddler moved to indicated spot and remained there for some time. No **Bufflehead** resurfacing in vicinity. Man in green kayak proceeded to paddle right into reeds (in area where female **Mallard** w/ 4 ducklings had been foraging) where he remained for short time.

At Riverside Street bridge 2 kayakers were taking perfect pictures of each other, missing the female **Merganser** with her 5 offspring, who was swimming back and forth with brood trying for safe spot.

--Some paddlers repeatedly got very close to sides of the river.

--**Green Heron** flushed out by paddler's close proximity to Boardwalk bank

--2 kayakers were cleaning a stretch in the reeds and rocks by Crescent bridge.

--3 Kayakers paddled close to rocks on cliff side by river mouth.

--A few paddlers were still coming down river while others headed up river.

--Walking back to Soquel bridge these birds were present:

--**Red-tailed Hawk** in tree by Trestle bridge--2 gulls on water between Laurel and Soquel bridge

Report #2 by Jane Mio

A woman in a kayak and a man on a paddle board were both going to the reeds along the river and gathering trash. The man found a plastic soda type bottle which was a half-full with some kind of dark

liquid. He passed it to the woman who opened it and dumped the contents into the river then tossed the empty bottle to the back of her kayak where she was gathering the trash. Is it wise to dump contents of any bottle found into the river?

Report # 3 by Jane Mio Two days before June 21 Paddle Event I saw a man park his car behind the restaurant (Soquel Ave/Dakota), take his kayak down from his car at 1:00 pm and go down to the SLR and paddle, solo, down the river. I went to the Parks and Recreation Dept. office to report the incident and was given the phone number for a person in the City Manager office. I called two times and never received a reply.

July 12, 2014 Paddle Event

Report #1 by Jane Mio

An informal count before the start of the Paddle Event:
Coming from Trestle bridge toward the Soquel bridge

- 7 **Snowy Egret**
- 2 **Caspian Tern**
- 22 **Merganser**
- 2 Canada Geese
- 2 **Kingfisher**
- 2 **Green Heron**
- 1 **Great Blue Heron**
- 9 **Mallard** (8 or 9 babies)
- 1 **Pintail?**
- 1 **Lesser Scaup?**
- 1 **Killdeer**

About an hour after the event, there were only 8 or so mergansers on the river. That was it

Report #2 by Lisa Sheridan

This event was similar to my two other observations of previous paddle events. Water levels were extremely low and sand banks were larger than at previous events. Most Water fowl became air-born as kayaks and paddlers came down the river from Laurel St toward river mouth. Green Herons, Blue Heron, Snowy Egrets, Adult Mergansers, Malards and Kingfishers all took to the air and Merganser families with babies swam the channels to avoid watercraft. The paddle group started in an extremely polite and calm manner staying to one side of the river, in what seemed like an effort to not flush water fowl. Something they had not done on previous paddles. The first test of this effort was an attempt to pass the three preening Snowy Egrets, on the snag near the Laurel St. Bridge. The leaders of the group hugged the West shore line and quietly passed. By the time the fourth passed all the nervous Egrets took to the air. Once the Paddlers came out of the more narrow vegetated channel the paddlers used the entire channel with no attempt to avoid water fowl. By the time I walked back toward Laurel St. Bridge the only water fowl I could see were the three Merganser families with babies who could not fly, trying to stay far away from the paddlers and a Snowy Egret making several passes along the river looking for a clear landing spot before flying off again.

Sunday morning I was down along the river cleaning and did not see one Egret, but I was happy to see a Green Heron, a Kingfisher and a Blue Heron.

Here is my eBird observation from Saturday's Paddle event on the San Lorenzo River. <http://foslrw.weebly.com/paddle-event-bird-observations.html> (Observed from Soquel Avenue Bridge to Trestle at Board WalkClick [HERE](#) for report on eBird.

Prior to Boat Launch:

10:14 **Female Kingfisher** hunting, perching, diving near and around and over Soquel Ave Bridge.

10:15 Three **Snowy Egrets**, two female **Mallards**, Two **Canadian Geese**, resting, preening on island and snag near Soquel Ave. bridge.

10:36 Boat launch begins under Soquel Ave Bridge.

10:39 **Egrets, Mallards, Kingfisher**, Flush to air, **Geese** swim south.

10:45 **Blue Heron** Flushed to sky heading north.

10:47 **Green Heron** Flushes up from River across from Stadium.

10:47 **Mallard** Flushes from same bank as **Green Heron**.

10:53 (6) **Mergansers** Flush- mom and juveniles stop preening on sand bank and head to water as Flotilla of boats comes. Later seen going back and forth across channel.

10:53 second **Green Heron** or another flight pass by first Heron.

10:59 **second Merganser** Family flushed (four juveniles) heads off sand bank away from paddlers.

11:02 Single **Snowy Egret** Flushed from center Snag.

11:04 Two Adult **Mergansers** flushed and in air coming from South side of Riverside bridge.

11:05 Single **Egret** from earlier does fly by's looking for safe landing spot.

11:06 Prior or newly Flushed Female **Kingfisher** making passes and circling between Riverside Bridge and Trestle bridge.

11:07 **Third Merganser Family**(12) Almost full grown and adults. high alert swimming away from paddlers along south shore line bend.

11:21 **Third Merganser Family** attempts to cross river as more Paddlers come. Confused goes back and forth finally crossing all the way.

11:27 **Third Merganser Family** flushed and all 12 take to the air seen flying north.

11:50 **Green Heron** still flying back and forth in air way above river.

11:56 **Single Snowy Egret** flying up and down river looking for landing spot near Soquel Ave., boats keep coming so does not land.

12 Noon **No visible birds on water near Soquel Ave Bridge.**

Pictures below are **Mergansers** as they take to the air and **Snowy Egrets** flushed to air as Paddler in lower frame attempts to not scare them. **July 12 Report #2**
Observed from Soquel Avenue Bridge to Trestle at Board Walk

Times of observation coincide with photo documents available of all birds noted.
Click [HERE](#) for report on eBird.

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Pictures below are **Mergansers** as they take to the air and **Snowy Egrets** flushed to air as Paddler in lower frame attempts to not scare them.

Report #3 by Dan Frisch

Here's my informal count from 7/12/14, pre-event CWC Paddle Event:
coming from Trestle bridge towards Soquel bridge

7 Snowy Egret

2 Caspian Tern

22 Merganser

2 Canada Geese

2 Kingfisher
2 Green Heron
1 Great Blue Heron
9 Mallard (8 or 9 babies)
Pretty sure:
1 Pintail?
1 Lesser Scaup?
1 Killdeer

About an hour after the event, I think I saw 8 or so mergansers. That was it. As an avid paddler and curious bird observer, I went down to check out the event with an open mind and no pre-conceived notions. I watched as the first craft hit the river and was amazed by the ensuing exodus of birds from the banks, the water and their shoreline perches. After that experience, I cannot see the benefit of having any watercraft on the river.

Dan Frisch Santa Cruz, Ca.

Report #4 by Madeleine

I wanted to “report” something I saw while walking back to my car yesterday. A woman in a kayak and a man on a paddle board who seemed to be “together” were both going to the reeds along the river and gathering trash. So at one point, the man found a plastic soda type bottle which was a half full or so with some kind of dark liquid. He passed it to the woman who opened it and dumped the contents into the river then tossed the empty bottle to the back of her kayak where she was gathering the trash!!

I thought it was quite odd and disturbing that she dumped that whatever into the river.....And I noticed a City truck at the Soquel bridge.....did they have a staff person helping out with this?

Madeleine

Report #5 Barbara Riverwoman

I decided to focus on the **Common Merganser** family of one female and three juveniles near the launch point just below the Soquel Bridge. It was remarkable to observe how the birds had to keep avoiding the stream of paddlers (about 26). They spent the whole time doing nothing else. Observations:

- 1) The **mergansers** would stop moving downstream each time a paddler would catch up with them, turn around, regroup and paddle upstream until they were well behind the paddlers, then continue downstream. They must have done this at least 8 times while I was watching. They had to zigzag back and forth across the water, also, depending on which side the paddlers were using. Once a paddler tried to paddle towards the group of **mergansers**, splashing and talking to her friend. When there was a lapse, I saw the **mergansers** climb once on a log and preen furiously (was this due to stress?). They did that again on the shore later.
- 2) After all the paddlers had passed, I saw two more **mergansers** crossing the river to the shore to join the main group. Were they hiding the whole hour or more that I stood there? Were they juveniles?
- 3) Out of the 26 paddlers I counted, only 4 looked at the **mergansers**, even though they all passed very close by.
- 4) At the very tail end of the paddlers, quite a way behind the others, there was one very large olive and yellow pontoon boat with two passengers, one of whom was smoking a cigarette. Where did he plan to throw it?
- 5) As I walked home past the Water St. Bridge I didn't see the usual birds: **Snowy egrets, mallards** or any other river birds.

August 9 Paddle Event

At the Saturday, August 9 CWC Paddle Event, a juvenile Green Heron was repeatedly flushed from protective cover by paddlers on the lower San Lorenzo River. ***At its last attempt to flee, the heron was taken by a Peregrine Falcon that regularly roosts in the eucalyptus trees near the river trestle. Herons are not normally on this stretch of the river during this time of day.***

Report #1 by Jane Mio

5:30 to 6:30 pm

Between Soquel Bridge and Laurel St. Bridge I arrived at Soquel Bridge just as some of the last paddlers were entering the water. Paddlers were hugging right bank due to large areas of algae in middle and on east side. I moved ahead of paddlers, reached Laurel St Bridge, where I sat down to watch.

Green Heron At 5:45 I spotted a **Green Heron** sitting motionless on east side of river, away from paddlers. As the group of paddlers approached on west side, the **Heron** flushed and flew upriver about 100 ft. I went back upriver and found the bird with binoculars, again sitting motionless on east side. Another group of late paddlers came along the middle of the river. The **Heron** flushed again, this time flying to the west side of the river, again away from paddlers. I followed the **Heron** and watched general area where I thought it had flown. I saw the bird again when it flew up as a late paddler passed by alone, and this time the bird went south again, as if possibly returning to its regular fishing area. But about five minutes later the **Heron** was flying back again, probably finding paddlers still in the area. This time it settled on the east side where it remained frozen until the last paddler came by, then began to move a little, craning its neck and seeming to look around. Finally the **Green Heron** flew north past Soquel Bridge at which point I lost view of it.

Kingfisher While I was sitting near Laurel St. Bridge, a **Kingfisher** flew north, possibly flushed by paddlers. A little later I saw it fly south again, and then it flew north again, this time diving near the last two paddlers! When it reached the point closest to the paddlers, not more than 15 feet away from them, it uttered a really loud and penetrating rattle.

Report #2 by Jane Mio

For the last few months two **Green Herons** had been present along the San Lorenzo River (SLR). Eventually the pair showed up with two offspring, who were so well camouflaged, hidden in the bushes/reeds, that only by the **parents behavior** could the offspring location be spotted.

The first attempt of the juvenile birds to copy the thin-wire landing of their parents was a total failure: the juvenile heron approached the wire, feet first, missed the wire completely, tumbled head first toward the water, pulled back up, made another attempt, landed and was swaying wildly back and forth, trying to figure out how to get feet and wings under control. The parent was watching the effort calmly and after the juvenile was finally balanced, the parent turned its head and looked down river. At the end of following week, I observed the parent and juvenile execute a perfect wire landing simultaneously. Learning to balance on a branch while fishing caused the juvenile herons to tip off the branches and their wings would get tangled up in the bushes. They kept practicing their task over and over. The parents could be spotted near by. The birds were learning their survival skills.

Saturday (August 9th) the **Green Heron Family** got flushed out by a Coastal Watershed Council Paddle Event, in which paddlers and kayakers continually occupied the lower river. The **Green Herons** flew back and forth over the river, circling above, landing, being flushed out by the approaching paddlers, flying up stream, encountering more paddlers, flying downstream, trying to land, getting flushed, consequently steadily being flushed downstream.

Merganser mothers were clinging to the reeds with their juvenile broods, who can't fly yet. Short escape attempts in the river were the norm.

Footnote: *I now know what ensued, although I did not directly observe the incident. Never having observed, nor read reports of, any **Green Heron** at this time of day in that location prior to the yesterday's incident, it seems that there was a reason for the **Green Herons** to avoid that location.*

The father of the juvenile Green Heron that was flushed from safety by the paddlers, as seen along the stabilized bank of the San Lorenzo River.

Report #3 by Jane Mio

Walking from the Trestle towards the Soquel bridge, I observed the following birds:

- 14 **Mallards** in the stretch between Crescent & Laurel bridge (1 f. w/3 juvs, 1f. w/1 juv, 1 f. w/2 juvs, 1 f. w/2 imm.)
- 23 **Common Merganser** (1f w/1 juv, 1 f. w/6 juvs, 1 f. w/5 juvs)
- 11 **Pied-Billed Grebes** @ Crescent, Riverside St & Laurel bridge
- X **Cormorants** in Trestle tree bridge
- 1 **Great Blue Heron**
- 17 **Great Egrets** feeding in lagoon
- 17 **Snowy Egrets** feeding in the lagoon
- 2 **Green Heron** sitting in the reeds by 3rd St (1 juv, 1 adult)
- 1 **Common Gallinule**
- X **Gulls** in lagoon, 17 in the water @ Boardwalk maintenance yard
- 2 **Caspian Terns** flying between Trestle & Riverside bridge
- X **Elegant Terns** on island in lagoon
- 2 **Black Phoebes**
- 5 **Cliff Swallows**

Bird count total: 95 plus

When the paddlers headed downstream the female **Mallards** tried to hide their brood in the reeds, then came out to try cross the river, returned back into the reeds due to new paddler arrival. Bird movements were quick and agitated.

A **Merganser** female got caught with her brood in the stretch where the river bank jets out and the paddlers passed close to her hiding place, which caused agitated back and forth motions in all of them. There would a lull in between the paddlers, they would dash out to cross the river, to be forced back by the arrival of next paddler. None of the birds observed were feeding during that time.

The adult and juvenile **Green Heron** had been sitting across the river from each other, hiding in the reeds. The herons flew back and forth over the river, circling above, landing, being flushed out by the approaching paddlers, flying up stream, encountering more paddlers, flying downstream, trying to land, getting flushed, consequently steadily being flushed downstream. The **Pied-Billed Grebes** began quick diving sequences when the paddlers were still a ways off and then those grebes disappeared.

When I walked back from Soquel bridge to the Trestle I observed the following birds present:

- 7 **Common Merganser** 1 f. w/6 juvs by the Boardwalk maintenance yard
- 1 **Pied-Billed Grebe** by Laurel bridg
- X **Cormorants** in Trestle bridge
- 2 **Great Egrets** standing by lagoon
- 6 **Snowy Egrets** perched along the Trestle rocks
- X **Gulls** by lagoon

Bird count total: 15 plus