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To inspire research, education & conservation of the wetlands & watersheds of the Pajaro Valley

## BIRD-WATCHING STATION

### GOALS:

- To learn why birds are important to our environment
- To learn why our sloughs are important to birds
- To learn to use binoculars
- To identify some of the Watsonville Wetlands birds and learn interesting facts about their behavior

### MATERIALS:

Binoculars for each student

Spotting Scope

Tripod for Spotting Scope

“Local Birds of the Monterey Bay Area” Bird guides for every student

Optional supplement: “Birds of the Wetlands of Watsonville” guides

### INSTRUCTION:

1) Begin by giving a brief introduction to students (5 minutes). You may use the following as a guide:

#### What are sloughs?

- A kind of wetland that may be seasonal.

#### Is the Watsonville slough water fresh or salt?

- This water is fresh; Elkhorn Slough near Moss Landing has salt water.

#### Why are the Watsonville Wetlands important for birds?

- Many birds in the Watsonville Wetlands live here year-around. Other birds travel thousands of miles – from Mexico to Alaska and back. Birds, such as the American White Pelican, flying from Mexico to Alaska need fresh water might not be able to fly all the way to the next sloughs. They need the Watsonville sloughs to rest, feed, and have their young.

#### Where might we look for birds?

- In the air, in bushes and trees, on or near the water. We might also see cliff swallows nesting under the eaves of Pajaro Valley H.S.

#### Some of the most commonly seen birds:

- In or near the water: a Snowy or Great Egret, a Great Blue Heron, Mallard Ducks, American White Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, Cinnamon Teal, or American Coots.
- In or above the fields: Song Sparrow, Red-Winged Blackbird, Red-tailed Hawk, White-Tailed Kite, Cliff Swallow, or Turkey Vulture.

2) Demonstrate to the students how to use binoculars. Note: show them how to use them yourself BEFORE handing them out to the students. (4 minutes)

- The students hang the binoculars around their necks with the focus knob on top.
- Docent demonstrates how to adjust the lenses and focus.
- Docents demonstrate how to look at a bird.
  - First locate the bird without the binoculars.

- Bring the binoculars up to your face and position them just below your eyes like “binocular fangs”.
- While still looking at the bird, slowly flip the binoculars up so that you are looking through them.
- Never look directly into the sun and never walk or run while using your binoculars.
- The plasticized Birds of the Monterey Bay guides are used for reference. (Note that water birds are on one side of the folder; field birds are on the other side. The birds are arranged from smallest in the upper left-hand corner, to largest in the lower right-hand corner.)
- The students also can consult the binders with sheets showing birds of the Watsonville Wetlands.

3) Allow students to move freely about the station area to look for birds using their binoculars and the spotting scope. Encourage students to make observations by asking them questions about what they see, such as “What color is it?” “What are the shapes?” “Is it making a noise?” Etc. Help students use the bird guide to identify birds. After a few minutes, guide your students along the water towards the road. Look for nests in the cattails. The secret is to keep your students moving and engaged by asking them questions and being enthusiastic.

Here are some conversation starters you may refer to:

What is the difference between a snowy egret and a great white egret?

A snowy egret is smaller and has a black bill; a great white egret is bigger and has a yellow bill.

How wide are the wings of a great blue heron?

6 feet. Its wings are only 4-6” when the heron comes out of the egg; in just 60 days, the wingspread of a great blue heron grows from 6 inches to 6 feet!

Brown pelicans live by the ocean; white pelicans live in the sloughs. How do they catch fish differently?

Brown pelicans dive at the fish from the air; white pelicans catch them while swimming on the top of the water.

What do ducks eat?

Tiny duckweed floating on top of the water; invertebrates from the muddy bottom.

Why do cormorants hold their wings out to dry?

Their outer feathers aren’t waterproof and need drying out so that they can dive deeper underwater for food.

Why are coots also called “mud hens”?

Coots don’t have webbed feet like a duck, but three toes like a chicken, so they are sometimes called “mud hens.” When they fight, they lean back in the water and kick at each other with their feet!

4) 2 minutes before the time is up for the station, gather the students around you, thank them for coming to the wetlands, and have them put away the binoculars in the cases.

**TIPS FOR KEEPING THE BIRD STATION FUN:**

- Scope out your site first and find any signs of birds like nests in the cat tails and shrubs. Look for feathers or tracks in the mud.
- Keep moving. This station stays exciting if you only spend a few minutes in one spot. Feel free to walk your group along the water a little ways and even into the uplands to look for little brown birds.
- Use inquiry. Instead of telling students what they are looking at. Ask them questions: “What is it doing? Who is it with? What does it look like? Observe beak, feet, size, color, etc.