

# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

May 2023

Steve Johnson, Editor

*Inside this issue: Birds on Alcatraz*

### Numbers of Visitors Continue to Grow

We continue to see more visitors coming to Alcatraz, especially from outside the U.S. Boats are often sold out on the weekends, and even during the week the numbers are high. This has put more pressure on the staff to provide programs and services for our visitors, and fortunately more rangers will be coming on board this month; some of them are permanent rangers. We will continue to support them by giving programs, answering questions from the public, monitoring the birds, picking up trash, and roving the island.

### Dates to Remember

**Monday, May 29, 2023**  
**Memorial Day at the**  
**San Francisco Presidio**

### Memorial Day at the Presidio

Members of FOCWA will be joining the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War in welcoming families who are visiting the national cemetery on Memorial Day, which will be on Monday, May 29th. We typically stand at the entrance to give out small flags to children, salute veterans, and listen to anyone who wants to tell their personal stories or of their loved ones. We also do a cemetery tour around noon at different gravesites to talk about the Civil War notables buried there. Afterward we have a picnic at 2 pm on the grounds of the Presidio. Anyone wishing to join us at 10 a.m., or take the tour at noon and stay for the picnic, are most welcome.

### The Birds on Alcatraz

The island was named “Isla de Alcatrazes” - or “Island of the Seabirds”<sup>1</sup> - by the Spanish, who saw the island covered by seabirds of all kinds. During the prison years, the birds were mostly kept away, but returned to use the island for nesting, mating, and resting once the island became a wildlife refuge under the Park Service. Their numbers have gradually increased, though the numbers do fluctuate from year to year, mainly due to the availability of food. Here are four of the most common birds seen on the island:

**Western Gull** These are the most common birds seen on the island. They inhabit the beaches of the Pacific coast, from the United States to Mexico. Its large size and dark back set it apart from other gulls. They feed on marine invertebrates, fish, and carrion. They are scavengers and predators of young birds. They make their nests all around the island, using seaweed, leaves, and twigs. The males and females take turns incubating the 1 - 3 eggs for about a month, and within 6 - 7 weeks the young birds begin to fly.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Though Alcatrazes is often translated as “pelicans”, it also translates as “gannets”

<sup>2</sup> [http://naturemappingfoundation.org/natmap/facts/western\\_gull\\_712.html](http://naturemappingfoundation.org/natmap/facts/western_gull_712.html)

**Brandts Cormorants** Beginning in the summer the Brandt's Cormorants begin to make their nests mostly on the western side of the island. Alcatraz has the only breeding colony for this species in the Bay. They are easily identified by the colorful blue throat skin, long necks, and black body feathers. They can dive up to 150 feet for their prey, which is herring, sardines, shrimp, and juvenile rockfish. Both parents feed their young by regurgitation. You can watch them build their nests out of seaweed and eel grass, and see some birds steal grass from other birds' nests. Some years there have been over 1,200 nesting pairs of these birds<sup>3</sup>, a reflection of the abundance of food in the waters of the Bay at the time.



**Snowy Egrets** These elegant birds, once nearly made extinct because their feathers were highly prized<sup>4</sup> can be seen in the bushes on the western side of the island. They are mostly wading shorebirds, eating small fish, crabs, frogs in marshes, and sometimes found in fields eating insects, mice, and lizards. The male selects a nest site in trees or shrubs and attracts the female by pumping its head up and down while calling out. The female can lay 2-5 eggs, which both parents incubate; they hatch after 20-24 days. The young birds begin to fly after about a month.



**Pigeon Guillemots** Alcatraz is the only breeding site for this species in the SF Bay estuary. They are conspicuous because of the patch of white on their wings, their dark bill, and red legs. They are deep divers, diving as deep as 150 feet to feed on herring, crabs, worms, and shrimp. The nest is in rocky crevices or caves, and the male and female usually mate for life and use the same nesting site each year. The female lays between 1-2 eggs, which hatch after about a month. Both parents feed and protect the chicks, and when the young are ready to fly all go out to sea.

Since we often get questions about the birds, it is good as volunteers to know something about these birds so we can share that knowledge with the public.

For current bird sightings on the island, go to <https://ebird.org/hotspot/L253857>

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.audubon.org/news/alcatraz-being-overrun-seabirds-whos-complaining>

<sup>4</sup> Their near extinction was the reason the Audubon Society was formed, to protect these and other birds. <https://www.parksconservancy.org/sites/default/files/waterbirds-of-alcatraz.pdf>