

OUR MISSION IS TO BRING THE RESIDENT POPULATION TO MORE THAN 200 BIRDS IN FIVE YEARS.

Wood Duck nest boxes

Housing Opportunities

Rich Stallcup

THE LAST HALF OF THE LAST century and the first third of this one were dark times for wildlife in California. The gold rushes attracted a huge human presence, and most of these people were armed and ornery. Native animals large and small were relentlessly assaulted until some became extinct and others rare or extirpated. Some were killed for food or out of fear, but most for sport or for fun. It was man against nature, taming the wild West, and the carnage was pretty thorough.

In their 1927 *Directory to the Bird Life of the San Francisco Bay Region*, Grinnell and Wythe say of the Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*): "formerly present in some numbers but not known in a wild state from any part of the Bay region in recent years."

With enforcement of hunting regulations, *Aix sponsa* has made a gradual comeback within its former range in special places containing suitable habitat. Today its status in the state might read: "uncommon to rare, and very local along waterways supporting old-growth riparian woodland."



Wood Ducks naturally nest in tree cavities, from which the downy young jump at their parents' bidding, landing in water or on soft ground below. In suitable habitat, adults will use nest boxes attached to trees or posts.

Because of excellent agency protection, drainages along the San Andreas fault in western Marin County are such places, and a few Wood Ducks hang on there. In 1992, local birders placed 15 nest boxes to make up for lost housing opportunities when the biggest alders and willows fell toward the end of a seven-year drought during the 1980s. The Olema Valley population then grew, and 80 birds were counted near Point Reyes Station throughout the winter of 1994-95. With floods and lack of maintenance, most of those boxes are now gone or broken, but this winter they are being replaced with new ones made of weathered barnwood.

This is the essence of PRBO's Wood Duck nest box project: to provide the fault-line *Aix sponsa* with plenty of housing options. With landowners' permission, our volunteer corps of eight naturalist/carpenters have now built and hung 30 boxes (the ducks begin searching for cavities in early February) in public parks and on private ranches. Occupancy will be monitored, and the boxes will have annual maintenance and cleaning. Our mission is to bring the resident Wood Duck population to more than 200 birds in five years. ▲

The Patrol at 25



Moored at the island, the Farallon Patrol unloads supplies into PRBO's skiff (the plywood crate is then lifted to a landing 20' above sea level). Pictured here is the vessel *Grunt*, owned by one of the Patrol's life members and a PRBO Friend of the Farallones, Jeff Meyer.

stretches of coastal waters on the Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of the Farallones.

It all began when Charlie Merrill, an expert mariner who skippered the Grand Banks *Cimba*, answered PRBO's plea to the

THE QUARTER-CENTURY mark has arrived for PRBO's faithful Farallon Patrol, the volunteer skippers who provide the vital transportation link between the mainland and our Farallon Island Field Station. Since its inception in 1972, the Patrol has collectively delivered tons of supplies and crossed thousands of miles over one of them most challenging

Oceanic Society San Francisco Bay chapter for logistical support. Our Farallon Research Program was then four years old and growing. Charlie recruited a handful of volunteers to make regular runs to the island, carrying PRBO personnel, supplies, and mail. The Farallon Patrol swelled to 40 Bay Area skippers over the first decade under the auspices of Oceanic Society.

Having since allied itself directly with PRBO, the Patrol has amassed a solid, 25-year tradition, replete with stories of wildlife sightings, rough seas, and eventful landings at the island. Highlights will be recounted at the Farallon Patrol's 1998 annual dinner, especially by guest speaker Bob Boekelheide, a PRBO Farallon biologist from the late 1970s to mid '80s.

PRBO extends congratulations to the Farallon Patrol at 25 and tremendous thanks to all past and present skippers.

SKIPPERS LISTED here have made the island run in the short interval since our last *Observer*. Scheduled trips on November 15 with Peter Schultz in *Hanseatic* and on December 6 with Craig Isham in *Norma Jean* were cancelled due to foul weather. Thanks to one and all!

NOV 22	Matt Stone	<i>Saga</i>
DEC 20	Mike Alfred	<i>Dariana Ruth</i>
JAN 3	Craig Isham	<i>Norma Jean</i>