

We're 40 Years Old

By John Hewston, RRAS Historian [Reprinted from April 2008 *Sandpiper*]

In late 1968 some local members of National Audubon Society (NAS) decided to find out if there was enough interest to form a local chapter on California's north coast. They held a meeting attended by such members, other conservation-oriented folks, and professionals from state and federal natural resource agencies. At least 60 members were required to start a local chapter. The turnout at that first meeting indicated enough people and interest.

At the time, several conservation issues were stewing in the region. The first battle to preserve the old-growth redwoods had resulted in the establishment of Redwood National Park. Plans were in the making to establish a national wildlife refuge on Humboldt Bay. Talk of dams being built on streams on Round Valley and Butler Valley was making the rounds. People were discussing the protection of bird-nesting rocks along the coast and the urgent need to support the U.S. Fish and Game's attempt to get a proposed bridge across Humboldt Bay rerouted. The highway department planned to build a bridge from Eureka across to the Samoa Peninsula that would go right through a large grove of trees on Indian (Gunther) Island that was used as a nesting area by egrets and other water birds. This became a local battle around which to form a new conservation group.

The coordinating committee became the organizing committee and scheduled a second meeting. Paul Howard was invited over from the NAS office in Sacramento to inform those assembled about details and requirements to form and maintain a local chapter. The organizing committee then became the nominating committee to find prospective officers and board members for the proposed chapter and to come up with a name, constitution and bylaws, and meeting dates and locations.

One of the first activities in which the forming chapter took part as a group was the Centerville Beach to King Salmon Christmas Bird Count, originated by the Anderson and Crane families of Ferndale. Dr. Stan Harris led that task and has been doing it ever since. [*Editor's note:* See the notice elsewhere that, after nearly 40 years, Dr. Harris will no longer be compiling this count.]

At a January 1969 meeting, officers and board members were elected, the constitution and by-laws adopted, and other business taken care of. Most of the new officers had served on the previous committees. Four offices were created, 2 of which were for 2 years and 2 for 1 year so that officers would not all be leaving in the same year. Beginning the next year, all positions would be for 2 years. The first president was Chuck Kennedy (the one who was with the U.S. Forest Service; there were 2 Chuck Kennedys in the area then), vice president was yours truly, Colette Van Fleet was secretary, and Mrs. George Peterson was treasurer. The 3 board members, each elected for 2-year terms, were Frances (Moose) Mathews, Ted Trichilo, and Darlene Whiting. Five years later, the constitution was changed to add 3 more board members, making sure their terms did not all expire at the same time. Also, the vice-president position was eliminated and became president elect. The immediate-past-president position was also added to the board.

At our next meeting, in February, we received our provisional charter as an official chapter of NAS. The chapter leaders and members then appointed committees and immediately began taking on projects and activities, fighting conservation battles, and conducting field trips and education programs. And we've been at it for 40 years this winter. We received our permanent charter as an NAS chapter 2 years later. About that bridge battle: Perhaps you've noticed as you drive across the bridge from Eureka to Samoa that the bridge does not go straight across. It heads to the right end of Indian Island, then makes a slight jog to the left before continuing on to the peninsula. Bowing to pressure from the newly formed RRAS chapter, the local Sierra Club chapter, and others, the highway department altered its plans so that the bridge bypassed the egret rookery in the tree clump by 800 feet. Also, construction crews were not permitted to work during the egret nesting period on that portion of the bridge that rested on the island. The highway department received an award for "environmental design" of that bridge.