

12 bird species counted in Tenderloin

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geon and walks east on McAllister.

She talks about birds she hasn't seen in the TL, among them the Townsend's warbler, "spelled just like the street." Its head is patterned in striking yellow and black. Like the Brewer's blackbird, it's a common visitor in the winter months. "But I've never seen one here."

At the Turk and Hyde Mini Park she counts 25 more rock pigeons, "ropies," she's now calling them, a nickname she and her husband invented. They are shockingly "omnivorous." She tells a droll story, without breaking a smile, about being on a bus near a woman looking out at a pigeon eating vomit in the street and exclaiming, "Only in San Francisco!"

Harris, over the years, has counted more than 70 species that have come

to her fire escape, "and that's pretty wonderful."

At Turk and Leavenworth, she pauses to count four ropies while a brown-and-white, leashed pit bull a few feet away stares at them coldly.

On Jones, coming up to the Tenderloin Police Station, Harris is momentarily staggered. Her heart is a-flutter. Up come the binoculars. She glimpses a mysterious bird in the tree right in front of her.

"I don't know what it is. I'll just stand here. Oh, he's got yellow. There, you see?" She's leaning forward, binoculars glued to her eyes. "Oh, a surprise! There, some black and white." Absorbed in the aviary world, she drifts on thoughtless feet to the left.

"The first Townsend's warbler in the Tenderloin — and in a Brisbane box!" she announces, also nailing the

tree species in a way that would impress Edward R. Murrow. It's a male. The warblers are easily found in Mission Dolores garden and Sue Bierman Park, but not in the Tenderloin. "So exciting. That's why I do this work," Harris says.

Peering into Boeddeker Park at the locked gate is a comedown, only a handful more ropies. The final species count: 11. Then she adjusts the backpack for her trek south to Yerba Buena Gardens to work a section of SoMa not covered with her husband, eventually spending 5½ hours on the project and walking nearly 3 miles.

But as she heads down Leavenworth, two blocks away she spots two red-tailed hawks flying near the old Federal Building, probably those she has seen on the St. Boniface cross. It brings her species total to 12.

A few blocks away, in the gritty first



PHOTO BY MARK DONEZA

Maxine, the Anna's hummingbird that frequents the garden next to the YMCA, was not seen during the latest bird census and thus not counted.

block of Turk, people idle near the 21 Club's open door and 30 ropies mill about in the gutter, uncounted, eating abundant garbage in the sunshine before a police car pulls in and scares them off to who knows where.

And soon, in SoMa, things were continuing to look up for Mary Liz Harris. As usual. ■

The Tenderloin tally of species

Mary Liz Harris counted 602 birds in the Tenderloin during the Audubon Society's annual avian census. Here are the 12 species she recorded, their numbers and a few of her comments.

BY TOM CARTER

RED-TAILED HAWK

"They are always in the Tenderloin and you can see them often on the cross of St. Boniface Church." The red-tailed hawk is the most common hawk in America among 14 species. It dives for rodent meals at 120 mph.

PHOTO BY DEREK RAMSEY



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MEW GULL

"It's not always here and comes in when it's cold after the first rain. It sounds like a squeaking door. You see them at Fifth and Powell, U.N. Plaza and on light fixtures." It's the smallest of North America's white-headed gulls.

PHOTO BY AMAR AYYASH



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WESTERN GULL

"This is the big gull. Its eye is black. I think they've decreased in the Tenderloin." Average weight is 2.2 pounds, wingspan up to 58 inches. A red spot marks the lower bill near the tip. They eat everything from little sea creatures to garbage and have even been known to nurse on sleeping mother seals.

PHOTO BY DSCHWEN WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



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TOWNSEND'S WARBLER

"Not common in the Tenderloin — my first in 15½ years! But I've seen them on Telegraph Hill and at Laguna Honda. I never have heard it sing. It's a nervous bird. Beautiful head, yellow, black and gray. I think we'll see more as the Tenderloin gets more trees and vegetation as it has been doing."

PHOTO BY KEITH BAUER KEITHBAUER.SMUGMUG.COM



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YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER

"They're all over the city and up on Telegraph Hill, very beautiful. They are an energetic bird and hop from branch to branch, hard to see — warblers are like that. But its sound is very familiar to me and that's how I first recognize it's here. I love their coloration. They have a yellow rump." In winter, it will visit feeders for sunflower seeds, suet, raisins and peanut butter.

PHOTO BY DAN PANCAMO WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



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ROCK PIGEON

"It's the most prevalent bird in the Tenderloin but they are decreasing, too. I don't see them on my fire escape anymore. I think the Tenderloin CBD's cleaning (sidewalks) has done it." Pigeons have been accused of carrying human diseases, but no attempt to eradicate the prolific beggars from city life has succeeded.

PHOTO BY ALEXANDER GAMAUF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



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AMERICAN CROW

"They've always been here and they're recognized by their caw, caw sound. They're easily confused with the larger ravens. Totally black. They're gregarious. I see them on my fire escape." Used for years as symbols for impending doom, crows are the smartest of all birds and have demonstrated toolmaking ability and self-awareness in mirror tests. Their total brain-to-body mass ratio is equal to great apes, slightly lower than in humans.

PHOTO BY WALTER SIEGMUND WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



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EUROPEAN STARLING

"They came from England, I think, and I see more of them than I do red-winged blackbirds. They're in Tenderloin trees and all over the city, iridescent, I love seeing them." And what's startling about starlings is their ability to absorb sounds from their surroundings — including car alarms and even human speech patterns — and vocalize the stuff into their own calls. They are part of research now into human language evolution.

PHOTO BY LINDA TANNER WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



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BREWER'S BLACKBIRD

"Very common in the Tenderloin and you can tell them from the red-winged. The males are purplish and the females brownish. They're also found all over the city — very successful at living — and are gregarious." They are the West's version of the grackle but striking bright yellow eyes make it spooky and its raspy song isn't pleasant.

PHOTO BY LEE KARNEY USFWS



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RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

"I'm real happy to see more of it in the Tenderloin. It's in U.N. Plaza and Civic Center and near the Asian Art Museum where trees are. When they're together they make magnificent sounds and you can be serenaded." It's also the most abundant and best studied bird in America, some say. But during breeding season, watch out: Males swoop humans walking nearby.

PHOTO BY WALTER SIEGMUND



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HOUSE SPARROW

"They're not as common as they are in Chicago, but I think they're increasing and will with more green space. Very common to see them with pigeons and gulls. They're black, gray and white and my husband says it looks like they're wearing a Greek soldier's helmet."

PHOTO BY FLAGSTAFFOTOS.COM.AU



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BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD

"They seem to be expanding their territory in the Tenderloin. I used to see them just at Market and Jones and now I see them near the Asian Art Museum. Once I saw a hundred at the library." The female doesn't have a very nice profile. Bold and promiscuous, she flies to other nests to kick out an egg and leave one of her own. That baby shoves others out or takes most of the food. It's said cowbirds got this parasitic way by following roving bison herds and had no time to stop and nest.

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