Outreach to a New Population
By Barbara Millin

The mission of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society is to promote “enjoyment, understanding, and protection of birds and other wildlife by engaging people of all ages in birding, education, and conservation”. Among the many ways SCVAS has been fulfilling this mission for children is by offering an intensive Wetlands Discovery Program to grades three through five. WDP was started in 1989 and has served more than 1,000 students during this last school year alone. During the summers, teenagers are offered a week-long crash course in California naturalism, with opportunities to act as educators and field trip guides later in the year after their training. And the community as a whole, from kindergarten students to senior citizens, are offered classes, field trips, and lectures related to birding and conservation throughout the year.

But amongst the disabled community, there has been less opportunity to take advantage of all SCVAS has to offer in terms of conservation-minded education and recreation. With this population in mind, SCVAS has begun collaborating with the Palo Alto and Menlo Park Veterans’ Hospitals to provide field trips for patients in the polytrauma, or multiple traumatic injuries, and spinal cord injuries wards, as well as “at risk” veterans involved in VA housing programs. With the support of SCVAS staff, volunteers provide equipment and docent services at Charleston Slough wetlands where wide flat trails and a variety of stationary birds await discovery. The VA provides professional staff and transportation to allow these patients access to the outing.

This new program has been greeted with great enthusiasm by both VA staff and SCVAS volunteers. The first field trip was held Sunday morning, March 24, with six patients and four VA staff members, Craige Edgerton and Barbara Millin acting as docents. The group consisted of people ranging from their 20s to age 70, some using wheelchairs while others were ambulatory, setting a leisurely pace with a friendly and relaxed mood. Participants were inspired to talk about their past experiences of birding, hunting, and enjoying duck dinners, even sharing recipes.

Two more field trips have been scheduled for June. Outreach will continue to include other VA services as well as other organizations serving people with disabilities. Contact Barbara Millin if you would like to help develop or volunteer with this program at barbaramillin@gmail.com