

Home&Garden

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE AND SFGATE.COM | Sunday, February 2, 2014 | Section N



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Stewart Brand (left) and Ryan Phelan observe birds from the porch of the guest cottage at their weekend home in Petaluma, which sits on 55 acres.

A bird-friendly cottage

Century-old bunkhouse welcomes guests both human and avian

By Jody Brett Kelly

Birds. The first thing you notice driving up to the weekend home of Stewart Brand and Ryan Phelan is the sight and sound of birds everywhere. Egrets, red-winged blackbirds and red-shouldered hawks fill the skies, and hummingbirds flutter around feeders.

For the past eight years, the couple have been turning their second home, on 55 acres in Petaluma, into a bird sanctuary. Phelan — who has founded and sold two medical-related software companies — has been a keen birder for 20 years. She and her husband set up Revive & Restore (www.longnow.org/revive) using genomic technology to bring back extinct species; their current project is the passenger pigeon, which became extinct in 1914 after being present in the billions. Brand founded Whole Earth Catalog in 1968, a bible of the counter-culture, and was a “psychedelic fellow traveler” with author Ken Kesey. His controversial switch from anti- to pro-nuclear was recently featured in the CNN documentary “Pandora’s Promise.”

When they first spotted the property on a Sunday boat trip up the Petaluma River, it was overgrazed pastures and salt marsh with

Cottage continues on N5



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More inside

Audubon Society's tips for bird-safe environments. N5



Richard Tauber

Above: The library has an antique table surrounded by tapestry chairs and 2,000 books.



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Brand (left) and Phelan tapped Oakland architect Pete Retondo for the renovation, which includes windows designed to avert bird strikes.



Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

A spotting scope is aimed toward marshland through the window of the guest cottage at Stewart Brand and Ryan Phelan's weekend home in Petaluma.

Old bunkhouse welcomes guests, birds

Cottage from page N1

a 150-year-old farmhouse and milking sheds. Their home, a simple renovation rather than a remodel, now looks out onto edible and flower gardens, olive groves, beehives, a saltwater pool, an outdoor shower and multiple alfresco dining spots.

With friends and family wanting to visit this unusual retreat, two years ago they decided to hoist a dilapidated 100-year-old workers' bunkhouse (possibly a former schoolhouse) 120 feet across the hill and make it into a guest cottage. They loved the idea of having 7½-foot windows on all four sides but needed a glass that would stop birds from smashing into it and killing themselves. They knew that without an effective glass, there would be at least one bird strike a day.

According to the Audubon Society, up to a billion birds are killed every year by hitting windows, making it one of their largest threats. And as Brand points out, “You don't have to find a dead bird. Even if you just find feathers you know the bird has flown on but it will die eventually.” He quotes Vladimir Nabokov's “Pale Fire”: “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / by the false azure in the windowpane.”

They couple called in Oakland architect Pete Retondo, who first worked with them 30 years ago remodeling their tugboat home, Mirene, which is moored in Sausalito. Retondo recommended Ornilux glass, created by Arnold Glas in Germany to eliminate bird strikes. The Brand-Phelan guest cottage was the first time it was used in North America. Retondo says: “I hadn't been able to persuade any of my other clients to use it because of price. It was about 15

percent more for the cost of the total window ... but I think it's really worth it.” Bird-strike solutions usually alter the homeowner's view. Ornilux has a special UV-reflective, patterned coating that birds can see but people cannot. The technology is inspired by spiderwebs where the silk weavings possibly work to keep



Richard Tauber

The bedroom upstairs is accessed by a spiral staircase. The 700-square-foot cottage used to be a workers' bunkhouse, and possibly also a schoolhouse.



Richard Tauber

Two years ago, the building was moved 120 feet across the hill.



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The couple used Ornilux glass to prevent birds from striking their windows. A web of virtually invisible lines embedded in the glass (right) is easily seen by birds.

birds from flying through them. From a distance, Ornilux looks transparent, but up close you can see the pattern that is visible to birds. It does not help with bird strikes at night, though.

The 700-square-foot redwood cottage is two levels — the downstairs room has an antique table surrounded by tapestry

chairs and around 2,000 books, including a first edition of the “The Little Prince” that Brand's mother read to him when he was a child. The toilet flushes using graywater, and guests use the outdoor shower by the pool. The bedroom upstairs is accessed by a narrow circular iron staircase (\$6,000 from Salter Spiral Stairs) and once upstairs

you can see the hoist used to lift the bed through the back window. A nearby skiff allows guests to motor themselves to Petaluma restaurants and antique stores in 15 minutes. Phelan first thought guests would spend time reading in the library, but there proved to be endless other distractions including watching young owls learning to fly in the spring: “One night when most of the owlets had fledged but were still learning to fly and staying close to the nest box, we counted at least a dozen owls flying overhead, a mix of parents and young. It was crazy!”

Design: Pete Retondo, www.retondoarch.com

Ornilux: For more information on Ornilux bird-protection glass, go to www.ornilux.com

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