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Titanic lagoon restoration effort changes course for a tiny bird

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The earthmovers look huge, even from the gargantuan ribbon of cement known as Interstate Five. Their yellow, 80-ton masses huddle up in neat lines in the San Dieguito riverbed or putz around like golden monsters, hauling massive quantities of dirt in the process.

But the work of the mammoth machines is not unstoppable. In the ongoing \$86 million restoration of the San Dieguito lagoon, a three-ounce bird's tiny nest is enough to keep the day-glo dump trucks at bay.

"If there are birds nesting in the area, we have to identify it, clear it and make sure to get out of the area," Samir Tanious, Lagoon restoration project manager, said. "We have plenty of challenging activities that happen on a day-to-day basis."

And so goes another unpredictable episode in the two-year effort to return the San Dieguito lagoon into the haven for tideland-loving birds it was many, many years ago. A somewhat unlikely cast of actors — including an army of scientists, a major energy company and a large construction firm — are trying to excavate the years of sediment build-up that have effectively clogged the San Dieguito river, turning the once-marshy expanses near the Del Mar Fairgrounds into the sandy flats they are today.

The vision for the project is to remake 440 acres in the river valley into natural, ocean-connected tidal wetlands, a place where salt and fresh waters mix and mingle — and where endangered birds like the Belding's Savannah Sparrow can take refuge.

But before new habitat can be built, the old one must be excavated, and some of its current occupants aren't making that so easy for construction crews. By law, the crews are required to give bird nests a wide berth and to limit noise near them. The birds, of course, build nests where they feel like — and many seem to want to live in areas

where crews from Marathon construction were preparing to work.

"We had this three ounce little hummingbird stopping 80 ton trucks for two days until we figured out that it was OK, it wasn't affecting the bird," Mike Furby, president of Marathon Construction, said.

Bill Haas, a biologist and bird expert who consults for the project said, "It's very, very obvious that even though it's a biologically positive all-around project we still have to be sensitive. But even as a biologist you go, 'Oh my god, we've got a killedeer nesting here.'"

For its massive scale, the lagoon restoration is an unusual project aimed at mitigating the effects of the San Onofre nuclear power plant. Southern California Edison, the plant's owner, is funding the restoration and future maintenance for as long as it operates the Onofre plant.

Key to the project is returning the area to an actual, functioning wetlands, where salt and fresh water meet and mix. While the inlet that connects the river to the ocean has often been clogged or closed off, Edison will assume responsibility for keeping it open into the future. The removed soil will lower parts of the area to below sea level, ensuring that the ocean will flow in and help realize the habitat.

It will also create a truly tidal wetlands, which may be completely submerged under water or merely muddy, depending on weather and sea conditions. The restoration is expected to be a major boon to marsh-loving bird species, including the Savannah Sparrow and others whose habitats have largely been destroyed by coastal development.

"When one considers how little coastal marshland is left in Southern California, this is an extraordinary project," Haas said.

Project officials say they hope it will improve the human habitat, too.

"It'll be a lot prettier than a bunch of old tomato fields and grasslands," Furby said. "Everyone that lives around the lagoon, their property is going to go up in value because it's going to be a pretty lagoon."

Construction on the lagoon is expected to last into late 2009, when crews will have finished the major earthmoving work and left the newly restored wetlands to operate naturally for the first time in many years. They will also have created specific nesting sites to encourage

endangered bird species to stay.

For now, however, the myriad mix of wetlands scientists, construction workers and engineers operating under 21 different permits are just trying to do their work without impacting the existing wildlife. There are 28 heavy-duty vehicles on site moving tons of dirt; biologists, anthropologists, archaeologists and geologists analyzing their various impacts; and groups of federally endangered bird species all in close proximity.

"It's very challenging, but very rewarding ... a complicated restoration project but as well a project that's going to benefit the environment," Project Manager Tanious said. "Every day that you see something happen you kind of feel 'Well, we're getting there.'"

More information at www.sdlagoon.com