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# Bird-watchers flock to lagoon

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Ted Robinson, foreground, of Walnut Creek in Northern California and his brother-in-law, Martin Davis of Rancho Santa Fe, spot birds in the San Dieguito River Park off of San Dieguito Racetrack View Drive near the Grand Avenue Overlook Bridge.

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## HIGHLIGHTS

**Endangered species:** Look for California gnatcatchers in the coastal sage brush, least Bell's vireos in the willows, and Belding's savannah sparrows in the salt marsh.

**Other notable birds:** Killdeers, ospreys, sandpipers, terns, pelicans and hummingbirds.

**Online:** For more information on the San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project, go to [sdlagoon.com](http://sdlagoon.com).

**DEL MAR** — In the thick of bird migration season, bird-watchers are descending on a newly restored lagoon in the San Dieguito River Valley to see elegant ospreys, sandpipers and other species.

An \$86 million wetlands restoration that began in 2005 has transformed the lagoon near the Del Mar Fairgrounds into a thriving rest spot for birds.

Southern California lagoons are on the Pacific Flyway, a major migration route for birds that extends from

Alaska through South America. The lagoons provide critical feeding stops for the travelers and nesting places for birds that stay for the winter.

The restoration used man-made berms and slopes to create a functional lagoon with tidal flows within a 150-acre swath of a 440-acre area extending from the beach in Del Mar to El Camino Real about two miles inland.

Scientists assigned to monitor the lagoon by the California Coastal Commission have identified 159 species of birds, more than double the number counted when the wetlands project began.

“What we're going to be seeing is an exponential increase in bird-watching in the San Dieguito River Valley,” said Andy Mauro, president of the San Diego Field Ornithologists and a member of the Buena Vista Audubon Society in Oceanside.

Mauro said the restoration project already has achieved dramatic results.

“I knew we were in for good things last year when in midsummer I noticed an osprey building a nest on a pole in the dirt parking lot of the fairgrounds,” Mauro said.

“Ospreys hadn't been nesting there for many years, so that was a very exciting discovery.”

The lagoon's current residents include more than 40 pairs of nesting Belding's savannah sparrows, an endangered species. The northbound migration season peaks in late April.

The number of bird-watchers increased after local bird expert Paul Lehman spotted a semipalmated sandpiper a few months ago. The tiny shorebirds are rare, and it's unusual to find them this far west, Lehman said.

Yesterday morning, a great egret, cinnamon teal ducks and ospreys paced the shallow mud flats alongside the river. On the south side of the river, white pelicans, diving ducks and grebes enjoyed the bounty of a deep lagoon basin.

“Wetlands habitats in general are about the birdiest places there are, when it comes to variety and sheer numbers,” Lehman said.

The restoration project is funded by Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric Co. The power companies are required to pay for lagoon restoration and maintenance to compensate for environmental damage caused by the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station.

A milestone took place in December when crews opened a channel between the San Dieguito River and new earthen basins, creating the 75-acre tidal marsh. Steve Schroeter, one of the scientists monitoring the project, said he expected the channel opening to attract birds, but “the numbers and varieties of birds have impressed us,” he said.

Scientists said they hope to use this restoration as a model of how wildlife can be induced to colonize man-made habitats, Schroeter said.


Most of the lagoon area is still off-limits to the public, but two trailways are open and more are planned. A popular spot for bird-watchers is the Crest Canyon Overlook on San Dieguito Racetrack View Drive.

Most of the wetlands construction work is finished. The contractor, Marathon Construction, is removing invasive species and planting coastal sage scrub, cordgrass and other native plants. The project's next steps include improving beach access along the river and dredging the river inlet channel.

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