

DEL MAR TIMES

Wetlands flourish: How to best enjoy the budding habitat

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By Laura Petersen

The San Dieguito Wetlands restoration project, in its final year of construction, is flourishing with life, including more than 150 species of birds.

"We thought birds and fish would come in rather quickly," said Steve Schroeter, a marine scientist from University of California, Santa Barbara. "There's a remarkable increase in the number of bird species."

Experienced and novice bird watchers alike can take advantage of the restored wetland and lagoon habitats that are attracting such birds as sparrows, sandpipers, coots, hawks, hummingbirds and pelicans.

"It's still new," said Philip Pryde, a birder and board member of the San Dieguito River Park Joint Powers Authority. "Once more vegetation is in place, it's certainly going to be one of the best spots in the county."

How to get there

There are several places to access a trail and viewing platforms along the edge of the wetlands.

Visitors can find parking east of Interstate 5 and enter the trail at the southern end of San Andres Drive. Walking west, the trail will take visitors all the way to Jimmy Durante Boulevard, along the edge of the newest marshland and the San Dieguito River.

Nature enthusiasts can also access viewing platforms from Jimmy Durante, just east of San Dieguito Drive. It's a short walk along a raised boardwalk with some seating and informational signage.

Finally, the Grand Avenue Bridge-turned-viewing platform will provide views looking east across the new lagoon basin.

What to expect to see

Starting at San Andres, the trail first runs along a grassy area, where many sparrows will be nesting. Visitors may not see them, but will likely hear them.

"The song sparrow sings a lot, especially this time of year," Pryde said.

Also keep an ear out for a "witchety witchety" call - that's a warbler known as the common yellow throat. Birders will know they have found one if they see a yellow bird with an obvious black mask across its face, Pryde said.

In the water, there will be some wading birds, including tall, white egrets and the even bigger great blue heron.

There will be very few ducks this time of year because most have flown north. However, there are likely to be coots, a black bird with a white bill that many mistake for a duck, Pryde said.



Sage Canyon students get an up-close introduction to the San Dieguito Wetlands during Lagoon Week, hosted by San Diego Gas & Electric.

Photo by: Laura Petersen



Kildeer

Bird photos courtesy Abigail Smigel



Great blue heron

Terns will be flying around, sometimes low across the water to fish, but will not land in the water.

Shorebirds, like sandpipers, are taking longer to populate the wetlands because they forage for food in the mud flats, which take longer to become productive.

Predators might include the red tail hawk and ospreys, which feed on fish. A bald eagle was recently observed in the new wetlands, which was rare and unexpected.

"There are not many bald eagles in the county," Pryde said, and those are usually found farther inland around lakes.

What to bring

Be sure to bring a good pair of binoculars and a bird book to help correctly identify what's out there. Also, new birders will need patience - wildlife will not appear on demand.

"You never know what you are going to see, but you will see something interesting," Pryde said.



Belding Savannah sparrow



A young bird watcher scans the restored lagoon for new inhabitants during Lagoon Week.

Laura Petersen

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