

Wildlife on the comeback trail

Restored lagoon lets one wander in natural wonders

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DEL MAR — Stand on the Grand Avenue overlook, and you rapidly get a glimpse of the wildlife species that probably populated the San Dieguito Lagoon centuries ago.

As the tide flows in, California corbina, mullet and other fish flow with the onrush of seawater. Fiddler crabs congregate on the muddy shoreline as cliff swallows dart above. A snowy egret silently glides by.

The overlook at Grand Avenue, off San Dieguito Road a few hundred yards south of the Del Mar Fairgrounds, is part of a growing network of trails and observation platforms at the restored lagoon.

Rangers with the San Dieguito River Park have a simple message for the public: Please, stay on the trails and out of sensitive habitat.

As the \$86 million restoration of the San Dieguito Lagoon and surrounding wetlands nears completion, people are beginning to flood into the area to explore the wetlands off designated trails, fish and even kayak. All are prohibited and could result in hefty fines, rangers say. Hikers must also keep their dogs on leashes.

Rangers with the river park are now patrolling the 460-acre wetlands on the west and east sides of Interstate 5. Together, four rangers ensure that at least one person will patrol the area seven days a week from sunrise to sunset.

Southern California has lost most of its wetlands to development, and the restoration of the San Dieguito Lagoon is part of an effort that is slowly bringing protected areas back to the coast. Construction crews have



A viewing area at the restored San Dieguito Lagoon presents an inviting observation point. The lagoon's protected wetlands are open to the public, but folks are asked to be respectful of the sensitive habitat. - Eduardo Contreras / Union-Tribune

dredged large swaths of the lagoon, extending channels and enlarging wetlands. The crews also have built berms so biologists can access the interior of the wetlands and study wildlife. The berms may look like trails, especially from the freeway, but they're not intended for the public.

“Having a ranger presence here is really essential to the success of the restoration,” said Natalie Borchardt, one of the rangers. “Our presence helps educate the public about the importance of respecting and protecting this area.”

Restoration of the San Dieguito Lagoon and surrounding wetlands – stretching from the fairgrounds to El Camino Real – is being paid for by Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric.

The two utilities, principal owners of the San Onofre nuclear power plant, are being required by the California Coastal Commission to pay for the restoration to make up for environmental damage associated with the power plant. The plant kills fish and larvae as it draws in seawater for one of its three cooling systems.

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