

Bridge is platform of peace

San Dieguito River Park adds tranquil retreat

By **David Hasemyer (Contact)**

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DEL MAR — The end of Del Mar's Grand Avenue Bridge viewing platform offers the perfect spot to observe nature's playground.

A cliff swallow and Forster's tern play tag in the air, darting, slashing and dashing. A snowy egret fishes for a snack, but misses before tiptoeing off to another fishing hole.

Jacqueline Winterer watched it all with respect and awe.

"How beautiful," Winterer said, breaking the silence of a gentle, yet blustery breeze.

Winterer leaned against a weathered railing, her silvery hair mussed by the breeze and cheeks made pink by the persistent wind.

Winterer is president of the Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley and one of the champions of the platform, which was opened yesterday during a dedication ceremony.

"This is a place where man can watch nature do its own thing without intruding," she said. "The animals are on display here, but they are in their own home. We are visitors taking a peek."

At the ceremony, municipal dignitaries joined park officials and corporate sponsors of the project to say they hope the platform will bring the same tranquility to thousands of visitors as it does to Winterer.

"We see this as a place for people to come to sit a while and reflect on nature," said Dick Bobertz, executive director of the San Dieguito River Park, a recreational area and preserve that extends 55 miles inland from the coast.

The platform is on the south side of the river on San Dieguito Drive near the intersection of Jimmy Durante Boulevard.

It is an oasis of calm in the midst of urban hubbub. Interstate 5, with its relentless stream of cars, lies in the distance. The Del Mar Fairgrounds are nearby, too.

But the platform is quiet, as if hushed by Mother Nature, quiet enough to hear the sharp "eek-chirp" of a wren gliding on the wind.

Ed Mirsky was on bird patrol yesterday at the platform, equipped with a sharp eye, a honed ear and binoculars slung around his neck.

"As society gets more complicated it's nice to have little islands of solitude like this to relax," Mirsky said, quickly snapping the binoculars to his eyes to identify the flash of white in the distance.

The Grand Avenue Bridge was built in 1942 or 1943 to provide access to an 80-acre airfield used by the Navy to moor blimps and later to Del Mar's municipal airport. The bridge fell into disrepair and was slated for demolition as part of the San Dieguito Wetlands Restoration Project.

Environmentalists, though, had another idea, and they persuaded Del Mar city, the county and other agencies to convert the bridge into a viewing platform.

Winterer and the Friends of the San Dieguito River Valley touted its potential for fitting into the preserve master plan.

They grabbed the attention of county Supervisor Pam Slater-Price, who provided a county grant of \$35,000 to prepare plans to transform the bridge into a viewing platform, which corporate sponsors and municipal contributions subsidized.

Slater-Price said the platform links the past and the present. Original bridge timbers were used in construction, and it has become an intricate part of the current preserve.

"It's serendipitous, really, for what we have," she said.



The Grand Avenue Bridge, in the foreground of the view from Balboa Avenue in Del Mar, will be a viewing platform for the San Dieguito Wetlands. (Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune) -



A great blue heron flew among the clouds above the San Dieguito Wetlands yesterday. (Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune)