

The Community VOICE

Rohnert Park, Cotati, & Penngrove

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Wild animals abound on Alpha Farm

By Denise Cadman

Friday, August 29, 2008 3:31 AM CDT

The Laguna de Santa Rosa is a 250 square mile watershed draining the surrounding hills and plains of Santa Rosa, Cotati, Rohnert Park, Sebastopol and Windsor to the Russian River. Over 50 named creeks enter the Laguna channel, varying from large perennial creeks like Santa Rosa and Mark West Creek to small seasonal creeks like Gravenstein.

These many creeks drain a mosaic of landscapes, including floodplain, marsh, seasonal wetland and grassland dotted with valley oak. Other plant communities found in patches or hillsides include mixed woodland and chaparral. The variety of habitats provides for a rich diversity of wildlife.

The City of Santa Rosa purchased multiple properties adjacent to the Laguna as part of the recycled water program, using highly treated sewage from the Llano Road treatment plant for both agricultural and urban/recreational irrigation.

Many positive outcomes result from this program. Farmers have an economic incentive, helping to maintain farms and open space in the Laguna and providing a local source of food. Precious groundwater is saved for potable use instead of irrigation. Additionally, the farms are managed for native biodiversity. This is accomplished by creating buffers for biotic resources in the active agriculture lands.

For example, avoiding irrigation and farming within the drip-line of oak trees to allow for natural regeneration and creating a setback from creek corridors protects the natural resource and gives restoration opportunities. Areas that are highly sensitive or offer the greatest opportunity to increase species diversity or improve function are taken out of agricultural use and managed as natural areas.

Alpha Farm is a 425-acre property which was purchased by the City of Santa Rosa in the late 1970s for irrigation of recycled water. Portions of the farm are currently leased to two local farmers who graze livestock and cut hay on the property. The western edge of the farm is bound by the Laguna, and Roseland Creek runs through it. A 90-acre natural area was established in 1985 in the portion adjacent to the Laguna. A number of projects have been initiated to improve the habitat for plants and animals.

On Monday, September 8 Cotati Creek Critters is sponsoring an early evening hike to this beautiful farm. We will cross the agricultural fields and hike the preserve, entering the heart of the Laguna. Those who have experienced and tended the urban Laguna channel around Cotati and Rohnert Park will be delighted to see a wild Laguna de Santa Rosa.

We will explore the Laguna channel, seasonal wetlands, Roseland Creek and Windmill Marsh. Although wildlife is not always cooperative, many bird species as well as large mammals including badger, coyote, deer, bobcat and even mountain lions inhabit the preserve.

Denise Cadman is the Natural Resource Specialist for the City of Santa Rosa. She is responsible for the management of natural lands within the City's land holdings in the Laguna. She leads hundreds of visitors each year on tours of the Laguna.

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