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Past, present and future of Laguna de Santa Rosa

By Denise Cadman January 5, 2012 01:27 pm



The 254-sq. mi. watershed of the Laguna de Santa Rosa drains into the Russian River, forming its largest and southernmost tributary. The watershed is comprised of a 22-mile-long main channel that begins in Cotati and continues north, picking up creeks that carry water from the mountains ringing the Santa Rosa Plain. In Forestville, the Laguna joins the Russian River as it flows west to the Pacific Ocean.

The Laguna Watershed is a mosaic of wetland and terrestrial habitats, including open water, riparian forest, emergent marsh, vernal pool, grassland and valley oak savannah and woodland. With this diversity of habitats comes many plant and animal species. Seasonal changes in the habitat also drive changes in the populations of species over the course of the year.

For example, different birds live in wetlands, grasslands, forests, in your yard and even in the middle of downtown. Certain birds spend the entire year as permanent residents, while others are migrants. Winter residents, such as bufflehead, pintail and northern shoveler are examples of ducks that spend the winter in the Laguna.

These ducks migrate in the spring to breed in the far north where crowds are thin and food is abundant in the summer. Others are here for summer vacation; Bullock's oriole, western kingbird and yellow warblers are examples of songbirds that spend only their summers in the Laguna. These birds winter farther south where insects and fruit are more abundant. Some migrants pass through the Laguna in the spring and fall. They use the Laguna like a gas station, hotel or café, stopping only to rest and refuel before continuing their journey farther north or south.

Humans, living in the Laguna for over 10,000 years, have shaped the land for their needs in different ways. Local Pomo and Miwok tribes altered the landscape in ways to suit themselves, sustaining resources for thousands of years. Immigrants from Europe and Asia made other changes that radically altered local habitats. As habitats are altered or destroyed, so are populations of plants and animals. Certain species, such as rats, crows and raccoons, have benefitted from their proximity to human activities. Other species restricted to specialized habitats, such as Sebastopol meadowfoam (a vernal pool wildflower), have become so rare, they are in danger of extinction.

A growing re-understanding of the functions and benefits of a healthy environment has led to efforts by many groups and organizations to change human behaviors, improve habitats, and attempt to restore these vital functions. One example includes planting native trees to sequester carbon, hold soil, and shade water to create cooler temperatures and higher oxygen levels for fish. Replanting native vegetation near waterways and in floodplains creates critical habitat and corridors for many species, and a vegetation filter capable of trapping and neutralizing pollutants before they reach the waterway.

Enhancing habitats by adding vegetation promotes biodiversity and encourages resiliency against emerging diseases, climatic changes and other disturbances. A multitude of direct benefits to humans include flood protection, groundwater recharge, refugia for pollinators, building of topsoil and provisions of food and fuel.

Beyond these important benefits, we value the beauty and sense of place that comes from a healthy environment.

Denise Cadman is the Natural Resource Specialist for the City of Santa Rosa. She will be giving a presentation at the Ray Miller Community Center in Cotati Jan. 12 at 7 p.m., as part of Cotati Creek Critters' Inside/Outside Nature Education series.