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LAGUNA DE SANTA ROSA

JOHN BURGESS/PRESS DEMOCRAT

A great egret takes off from a pond Friday at the new Laguna de Santa Rosa Wetlands Preserve in Sebastopol as Patricia Bernard, left, with her daughter Brigitte, and Lisa, Jim, Noah and Adam Fain watch from the nearby path.

Preserving a portion of nature's treasures

Wetlands park starts small

By CHRIS COURSEY
Staff Writer

A snowy egret dropped out of the pale blue sky above the Laguna de Santa Rosa and plopped into the shallow water of what once was a sewage treatment pond for the city of Sebastopol.

He was one of the first visitors to the new Laguna de Santa Rosa Wetlands Preserve, a little slice of nature being nurtured back to health after decades of abuse and neglect.

The preserve opened last week with a small fanfare as city officials and conservationists gathered to celebrate the completion of its first phase.

Marked with an elaborate arbor near the Community Center on Morris Street, the park at this point consists of several hundred newly planted trees, four simple benches and a hard gravel path that winds along the western edge of the laguna behind the outfield fences of a pair of baseball fields at Sebastopol Youth Park.

"It's a beginning," said Kim Cordell, director of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation. "The ultimate vision — two or three generations from now — is for the entire flood plain of the laguna to be preserved and restored to natural habitat."

The first phase may be only a few hundred yards out of the total 13-mile laguna, but it represents an important step forward for the foundation's plans, which have been in the works since the mid-1980s.

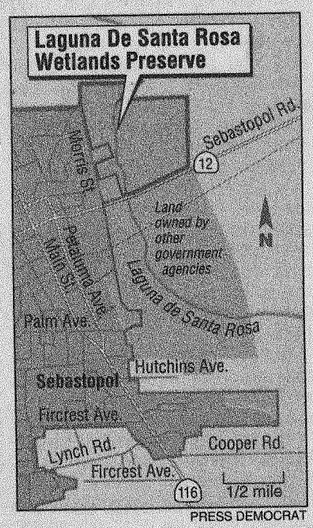
The restoration of the stream-side area and the rehabilitation of three old sewage treatment ponds are tangible evidence that conservationists are making headway in returning at least part of the laguna to its natural state.

"It's really exciting," said Cordell. "You can go out there at different times of the day and see different kinds of birds, an osprey in the morning or a heron in the afternoon. Someone saw a rare ibis the other day."

The trail that hugs the laguna and winds around the old treatment ponds is named in memory of Loretta Blincoe, who loved to walk in the area before illness confined her to a wheelchair. Her husband, Sebastopol contractor Emmett Blincoe, last year donated $200,000 to help jump-start the park-development process.

It's a peaceful walk along the waterway, which in between storms is a still brown channel. The bony fingers of oaks are reflected in the cafe-au-lait-colored water; blackberry brambles choke the banks.

A plaque embedded in a stream-side bench quotes Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the



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