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Education center helps public understand wetlands



Laura Hammer shows off Jazz, a great horned owl, during a presentation at the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation open house on March 8. (JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat)

By MEG McCONAHEY
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT
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IF YOU GO

Tips on visiting the Laguna de Santa Rosa Stone Farm Environmental Center:

On Your Own: The center is open to visitors free of charge daily, no appointment necessary. The public is welcome to bring a picnic and explore the grounds with a self-guided tour or birdwatch. Located at 900 Sanford Road, Santa Rosa; info: this link or 527-9277.

Open Houses: The center holds open houses the second Saturday of each month, with the next on

People are flocking like waterfowl to the Laguna de Santa Rosa two years after the foundation dedicated to restoring and enhancing the 254-square-mile watershed opened a new public educational center.

The barn-like Great Blue Heron Hall is now playing host to a wide range of nature classes and talks, not just for visiting schoolchildren, but also for the general public.

The Laguna De Santa Rosa Foundation has been ramping up its educational programs, offering at least two classes or lectures each month aimed at helping people better understand the wildlife and ecosystem of the vast wetland that stretches some 22 miles along the Santa Rosa Plain from Cotati to the Russian River in Forestville.

A workshop on Saturday in which local artist, biologist and storyteller Ane Carla Rovetta will show how to make chinks, paints, charcoals and inks from natural materials, is already full.

Some people showed up March 8 to meet a Great Horned Owl and learn more about these important predators, including how to identify different owls by their hoots.

The foundation holds regular open houses on the second Saturday of each month featuring special activities and guided tours of the whole Laguna Environmental Center, set on a low knoll just off Occidental Road between Santa Rosa and Sebastopol.

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April 12. Docent-led tours, hands-on activities and special classes are included.

Upcoming events

The Complex Social Life of Cliff Swallows: Charles Brown, a professor of biological science at the University of Tulsa, will share highlights of his 32-year research of the social behavior of cliff swallows, 7-8:30 p.m. in Heron Hall. Free.

Birds of the Laguna: Lisa Hag will give a slide show presentation from 6:30-8:30 p.m. March 28, focusing on birds of the Laguna. She will lead a walk on March 29 from 9 a.m. to noon to help people develop their sight recognition of various species. The public is invited to join one or both of the events, but registration is required.

The Laguna Re-Leaf Day: Formerly known as the Tree-a-Thon, this is an annual fundraiser for the Laguna. It is set up like a walk-athon, with volunteers seeking pledges and donations, then spending four hours planting hundreds of native trees and plants along the Laguna in Santa Rosa at Irwin Creek. The April 5 work party is followed by a pizza party. To sign up, email nancy@lagunafoundation.org or call 527-9277, ext. 109.

For more information about movie nights, art and nature workshops and outings around the Laguna, contact Anita Smith, public education coordinator, at 527-9277, ext. 110 or anita@lagunafoundation.org.

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Here, with its newly restored 1870s farmhouse framed by big canary palms that serves as headquarters for the foundation, are a number of natural attractions for visitors, including interpretive kiosks, gardens, an observation deck for bird watching, a small pond that showcases native Laguna plant life, a century-old hop barn and picnic areas.

Under construction now is a children's "playscape" with all natural structures to climb on and explore, like logs, boulders and a living willow tunnel to crawl through.

"We've always led walks on the Laguna trail, the Sebastopol preserve and to the delta pond rookery," said Christine Fontaine, director of education programs. "But now that we have the center we are having people here and have increased attendance at all of our events."

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