



# The Pickleweed

The Newsletter of the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy, Inc. (A Nonprofit Corporation)

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## A Message From Our Chairperson

*Jack Kirkorn*

Fall is here and with it come cool ocean breezes, migrating water fowl and higher tides. But this fall something else has arrived. From the Santa Ana River to Magnolia Street in Southeast Huntington Beach the earth moving equipment and dredging can also be seen and heard. I'm excited to report that the Conservancy's long anticipated Wetlands Restoration Project is finally in full swing.

On October 24, in front of over 75 guests, the official Ground Breaking Ceremony was held. A bottle of champagne was broken over a backhoe's bucket, the first



shovel of earth was dug, and the transformation of degraded wetlands cut off from ocean tidal flow for nearly 100 years began. By next spring over 67 acres of coastal wetlands will again be functioning as they historically provided habitat for both bird and fish life. The project also includes enhancements to the previously restored Talbert Marsh as well as deepening of the Talbert Ocean Access Channel to accommodate the higher volumes of tidal flow required to supply abundant sea water to the restored wetlands.

This project would not have been possible without funding from the California State Coastal Conservancy, the AES Corporation, the California Energy Commission, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (they administer habitat restoration actions under the Montrose Settlement Restoration Program), the City of Huntington Beach, and the Orange County Flood Control District.

Even though the restoration project is fully funded, there still is a significant need of funds for the day to day operation of the Conservancy. On-going maintenance of over 112 acres of wetlands, office supplies, utility bills, building maintenance, and many other needs require both individual and corporate donations. Please help with whatever you can so we can continue to restore and maintain our beautiful wetlands.

Thank you so much for your support of our goals of wetland restoration and maintenance, and please come by to observe the changes that are being made here along the coast in Southeast Huntington Beach.

## Restoration Of The HB Wetlands Begins

*Gary Gorman, Project Manager*

Planning for the restoration of the Huntington Beach Wetlands has been ongoing for a number of years. Plans and specifications were developed by Moffatt & Nichol. The actual restoration of the wetlands officially began on September 25 when our contractor, Earth Construction & Mining (ECM), started work in the Brookhurst Marsh located between Magnolia and Brookhurst Streets.



They began by clearing non-native vegetation, preparing a dewatering system and delivering equipment. The dewatering system has been installed, vegetation has been cleared and extensive excavation, grading and hauling operations are now underway.

The excavated mud from the excavation of the channels is being moved to an area near PCH and Brookhurst by large

off-road haul trucks where it will be allowed to drain before it is trucked to an off-site location. Close biological monitoring of all site work is being maintained as discussed in detail in the next article.

The project will restore approximately 6,000 feet of historic marsh channels. After the interior channels have been completed, the earthen flood channel levee bordering the wetlands will be lowered in some areas and removed in others to allow sea water to flow over these wetlands for the first time in nearly a century.

A 12" cutter-head suction dredge, similar to the one below will soon be delivered to the Talbert Marsh to begin dredging about 210,000 cubic yards of sand from the Talbert Marsh and the ocean inlet. The sand will be pumped to a site off-shore of Huntington State Beach. The dredge is expected to be electrically-powered so there should be little or no noise from the work site.



All work is scheduled to be completed before the annual bird nesting season begins in April.

### **Biological Monitoring Ensures Careful Restoration**

*Kristen Bender*

The big yellow tractors and backhoes are hard at work deepening and widening the old wetland channels so sea water can once again flow into areas of the marsh that have been isolated from the sea for many decades.

All this effort is for the wild animals and the plants whose homes were so badly damaged when we humans cut off the Santa Ana River and the Pacific Ocean from their marsh habitat. They will soon once again time their lives by the rise and fall of the tide and the occasional flow of fresh water down the flood control channels into wetlands that have been dry for nearly a century.

Marsh restoration is all about putting back the living things and the web of life that sustains them. Looking out for the unseen and inter-related living things, both present and future, is what biological monitoring is all about.

To the biologist, "the community" is that interconnected web of living things, some visible and many invisible to us humans, that make up the life of a marsh. If a restoration project like Brookhurst Marsh is not planned and constructed correctly, that community of hundreds of interconnected lives will not develop and function in the future as it should. Then many fewer living things will exist there with much less well-being among them. The whole biological community will be impoverished. This is

why restoration projects like the one happening now in Brookhurst Marsh require biological monitoring.

The first stage of monitoring is during the planning of the restoration and construction project. The more thoroughly site planning is done, the better the resulting biological community is likely to function.

The second stage is before construction begins. The more that is known about the living things that are present in the degraded marsh, the more accurate the future outlook will be. What is there, or absent, before construction can be compared with what should be there in a healthy community and efforts made to include what may be missing.

The third stage is during the construction process itself. Sometimes there are unexpected surprises in the mud or water on and under the surface that change the effect the restoration results will have on living things.

The fourth stage is after construction is finished. By then the biological community is gradually putting itself together, building populations of different kinds of living things, and connecting them up with each other in webs of food, shelter, protection, and interdependence. Adjustments can then be made to the restoration as these populations develop to make a better and more complete result.

The more information that can be collected about the restoration project area at each and all of these stages, the more complete the finished restoration will be, and the better the restored biological community will function. This improves the lives and increases the populations of all the birds, fish, clams, insects, snails, and countless other kinds of animals who live there, as well as the plants that they live on and among.

### **Updates On Two Of Our Wetlands' Endangered Birds**

*Dick Zembal*

One of southern California's most endangered birds, the Light-footed Clapper Rail, lives in our wetlands, but good luck seeing one. Although they are resident in our marsh,



they are extremely secretive and we currently have few of them in the Huntington Beach Wetlands. This little breeding population was first discovered in 2006 in the



thickest, tallest cordgrass in the complex just down coast of the river in what is known today as the Santa Ana River Marsh, formerly Newport Slough.

The site they occupy was restored by the Army Corps of Engineers in 1985, and replanted in the 1990s. They did a great job the second time around. The cordgrass is extensive and robust, something not easily achieved in a dampened tidal regime. The edge of the cordgrass-dominated northern part of the marsh runs parallel and adjacent to the down-coast river dike and is readily observed from the edge of the bike trail. Consequently, under low tidal conditions, and with a lot of patience, you could actually sight a Clapper Rail there nearest the tide gate end. Manage to get a photograph of a banded rail in the HB Wetlands, and you could win a reward from the Conservancy.

The Conservancy sponsors the annual state-wide population survey of Light-footed Clapper Rails. The HB Wetlands was one of only 19 breeding sites in 2007 when its 4 pairs contributed to the state total of 443 breeding pairs. In addition to call counts, we conduct nest searches in selected wetlands, provide and monitor artificial nesting platforms, conduct behavioral observations, captive propagation, release of captive-reared progeny, and banding and telemetry, while attempting to inform and involve the public. The captive propagation program is done in partnership with Sea World, the San Diego Wild Animal Park, and Chula Vista Nature Center. Since 2001 we have released 186 Clapper Rails into the wild. There are opportunities for getting involved with the Clapper Rail work; contact Dick Zembal through the HB Wetlands Conservancy for more information.

The California Least Tern used to abound on the southern California coast where it still nests today on open sandy



beaches. It was declared endangered in 1970 due to loss of its breeding habitat to people using the beaches for sunbathing and other recreational pursuits. These tiny terns migrate into our area to breed in early May and have usually flown south by September. In 1973 there were 600 breeding pairs. In 2007 there were at least 6,705. Endangered species management is leading to the tern's recovery.

There are about 36 sites along the coast that are protected and managed for nesting least terns. We are fortunate to have one such site directly across PCH from the HB Wetlands at the Santa Ana river mouth on Huntington State Beach. We monitored tern nesting activity in 2008 and will continue to do so at the request of the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

We observe the terns on nests and feeding young from portable blinds made out of PVC and a cut up duvet. Walking the colony is a bit nerve-wracking considering how camouflaged the nests, eggs, and young are. However, treading carefully on the beach through hundreds of endangered terns, their eggs, and chicks is the kind of endeavor that led me to become a field biologist in the first place.

Although we had 68 nests plundered by gulls early in the season, the terns did great with 454 nests usually containing one or two eggs each (we had one 3-egg nest) and 267 fledged young. This probably represents the nesting and re-nesting efforts of 385 pairs of California Least Terns.

One of the most important aspects of the successful comeback of the California Least Tern is the constant monitoring of the colony done from outside the fence by participants like you. If you would like to get involved contact David Pryor at (949) 497-1421 and ask about the Eyes on the Colony Program. It takes a major effort to monitor and respond to issues in the tern colony. During the 2008 nesting season, for example, over 720 hours of observation were accrued by the biologists and volunteers.

### Volunteer Connection

*Teresa Guido*

Here are two of our young volunteers at the Talbert Marsh on California Coastal Clean-up Day this past September.



It is great to have such enthusiasm in caring for our environment. The Wetlands Conservancy invites all groups, whether they are Scouts, youth groups, students looking for community service hours, families, companies, or individuals, to come participate in caring

for this wonderful and diverse natural resource. In restoring wetland habitat, we are learning about what plants and animals are native to the area, which ones are present now and what we can do to bring back others that are no longer present.

The second Saturday of each month is restoration day. Come meet a Conservancy member at our new Interpretive Center from 9:00 A.M. to Noon at 21900 Pacific Coast Highway (Newland and PCH) in Huntington Beach. Our "to do" list is always growing and we can always use some fresh faces to help get things done. While you are here you will also be able to get a closer look at the major restoration project in progress at the Brookhurst and Talbert Marshes.

Here are some examples of what we do on a typical Saturday:

- Invasive plant removal
- Native seedling planting
- Trash removal
- Tidying up of storage facilities
- Maintenance of buildings
- Native plant nursery
- Repair of trail signs

With Orange Coast River Park, we sponsor a nursery at our location that needs volunteers to tend and transplant native plant seedlings every Tuesday and Saturday from 10 A.M. to 2 P.M.

The Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy was created by dedicated volunteers and continues to be serviced by an all-volunteer Board of Directors. We are committed to educating the public about the environmental benefits of

our wetland habitats and the need to restore them to their former glory.

**Fundraising Program for Our Interpretive Center**

*Gordon Smith*

In the last issue of our newsletter we outlined our plans for the interpretive center the Wetlands Conservancy intends to develop in our newly completed Wetlands and Wildlife Care and Education Center. A fundraising program is now underway to build the center's interactive displays that will illustrate the ecological value of coastal wetlands, the process of habitat restoration, and the operation of the wildlife hospital housed in the facility. Tax-deductible contributions will be recognized through permanent tiles bearing the donor's name and/or a memorial statement to be installed on the front of the building. Tiles may be purchased in four sizes: 12"x12" for \$5,000, 8"x8" for \$2,500, 6"x6" for \$500, and 4"x4" for \$200. Room naming opportunities are also available with larger donations. Detailed plans for the interpretive center can be found on the HBWC website under Current Projects. If you would like to contribute, please send us your donation payable to the WWCEC Capital Campaign, or contact the Wetlands Conservancy for more information.

**Our Board of Directors**

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**WE CAN ONLY RESTORE THESE VITAL WETLANDS WITH YOUR CONTINUING SUPPORT**

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**Please join our contributors with your personal donation to wetlands restoration and maintenance activities**

*With your annual tax deductible contribution you will receive our newsletters, invitations to special events and our thanks for your help with this exceptionally worthy cause.*

- This is a new contribution
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Please cut this out and mail along with your contribution to: **HBWC, PO Box 5903, Huntington Beach, CA 92615**