The Pickleweed

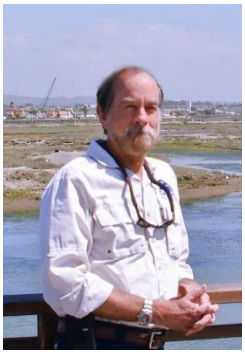
The Newsletter of the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy

Spring 2016

A MESSAGE FROM OUR CHAIRPERSON

Our History is Personal

by *Gordon Smith, Ph.D*



You've probably heard the news that Dr. Charles Lester, Executive Director of the California Coastal Commission, was fired from the job he held for five years. Lester was a strong advocate for the coastal protections and public access embodied in the Coastal Act of 1976, the legislation the Commission is charged with enforcing.

Despite overwhelming support for Lester from Commission staff, former members of the Commission, and from citizens and elected officials up and down the state, the appointed commissioners voted 7 to 5 to oust him.

Lester's firing raised alarms among supporters of the Coastal Act. What was behind the firing? Did a majority of the Commission members decide he was too rigorous in his application of the Coastal Act's protections? Will moneyed developer interests now have undue sway over coastal planning decisions? Time will tell, but for me it's personal—40+ years worth of personal.

In 1972, just out of college, I circulated petitions for Proposition 20 and campaigned for its passage. Prop. 20 was a California citizens' initiative to put a hold on out-of-control development along the state's 1,100 mile coastline. Passed by a firm majority of voters, it created the Coastal Commission, and it put an immediate brake on development in sensitive coastal areas. The Coastal Act of 1976 put the provisions of Prop. 20 into state law; it was enacted by the Legislature and signed by then-Governor Jerry Brown.

In the 1980s, I stayed involved in coastal protection. I spoke at Coastal Commission hearings on behalf of the Sierra Club and other environmental groups, and I served on the Huntington Beach Coastal Advisory Committee to help create the city's coastal planning element required by the Coastal Act.

It's no exaggeration to say that Proposition 20 saved the Huntington Beach Wetlands. When I joined with several local residents in 1983 to start a campaign to preserve this vital and increasingly scarce ecological resource, our cause was strengthened when the California Department of Fish and Game officially declared them historical but degraded wetlands, and thus affording them the strongest protections under the Coastal Act. It took some doing over several years to convince the City Council to place protective zoning on the wetlands parcels, but when that zoning was ultimately applied, the stage was set for the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy to acquire and restore the wetlands.

So while we've saved the Huntington Beach Wetlands, many of us worry that other sensitive coastal resources may be in jeopardy if the firing of Dr. Lester portends a change of course by the Coastal Commission. As the late Peter Douglas, the Commission's first executive director, was fond of saying, "The coast is never saved; it's always *being* saved." It's personal.

Watch for news about anticipated Coastal Commission actions affecting the Huntington Beach Wetlands in future issues of The Pickleweed

California Least Tern Natural Preserve at the HB Wetlands

by *Lena Hayashi*

Springtime is the best time to catch a glimpse of the California Least Tern as it performs its mating ritual among our wetlands. In April, the terns will return to their protected reserve at the mouth of the Santa Ana River. From our restored Talbert Marsh, you can watch the terns hover and swoop and dive for tiny silver fish, which they will carry back to the nesting site to present as proof of their hunting skills to a possible mate.

A major reason we restored Talbert Marsh was to provide protected waters for the terns to hunt for fish, since the shore line and ocean waters are crowded with beachgoers and surfers. During their nesting season, visitors can watch the action as the California Least Terns forage in the marsh located across Pacific Coast Highway from the State Preserve. Entrance is from both Brookhurst Street and the Santa Ana River bike trail, and is open to the public 24 hours every day.

The Least Tern is the smallest of terns that nest on open beaches and islands free of vegetation. It is distinguished by its small size, 9 to 10 inches long, a black cap and stripe through the eye, white forehead, yellow to yellow-orange bill, and *ki-dik* call.

Our Least Tern, *Sterna albifrons browni*, breeds along the Pacific Ocean coast from Monterey Bay to the Mexican border and winters in southern Mexico and South America. Since people have overrun most of California's sandy beaches where they nest, the California Least Tern has been state and federally listed as an endangered species since 1970.

In 1973, at the mouth of the Santa Ana River, the California State Parks established the first fully protected and fenced Natural Preserve for the Least Tern. At that time, there were only 600 nesting pairs in all of California and only seven pairs in Orange County. In 2013, there were some 5,607 nesting pairs in California and 347 pairs at the Huntington State Beach Natural Preserve, one of four California Least Tern preserves in Orange County.

Our tern is a colony nester. Each pair nests within a few feet of other terns, making it possible to enclose their nesting site with fencing, keeping the chicks from wandering onto the sand and shore, and protecting them from beachgoers and terrestrial predators.

The terns arrive from their wintering grounds in April and begin their mating ritual. The male flies out over the ocean and saltwater marshes and dives to catch fish to offer a potential mate. Both parents take turns incubating the two to three eggs, feeding the hatchlings, and teaching the fledglings to fish on their own. The California Least Tern completes its breeding season by August and heads south for the winter.

Although our tern population has grown since the preserve was created, their success rate for raising babies fluctuates greatly each year due to terrestrial and avian predators, and available food supply. To keep this species thriving, the California Least Tern Natural Preserve needs to be continually watched and monitored during breeding season. There is a wonderful opportunity for volunteers to help protect these endangered birds and ensure their continued success. Volunteers educate the public against walking dogs on and off leash on the beach, flying kites over the preserve, and reporting predators, such as crows, squirrels and raptors that can decimate the population in a matter of hours.

If you are interested in volunteering, or need more information on the California Least Tern, please visit the Sea and Sage Audubon site for information, training and monitoring opportunities. http://seaandsageaudubon.org/Conservation/LeastTerns/LETE.htm

Fun fact

Most birds need lighter bones so they can fly using as little energy as possible.

Can you imagine how hard it would be to flap your arms as if they were wings and lift yourself off the ground? What if you had to fly all day, like birds do when they migrate? Some birds, like loons that dive for their food, need to be heavier, so they have more solid bones. Why would a diving bird need to be heavier than a non-diving bird? Can you work it out?

Upcoming Events

Earth Day at GWC

The Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy will be at the Earth Day event at Golden West College.

Day: April 21, 2016

Time: 9:00 am – 2 pm

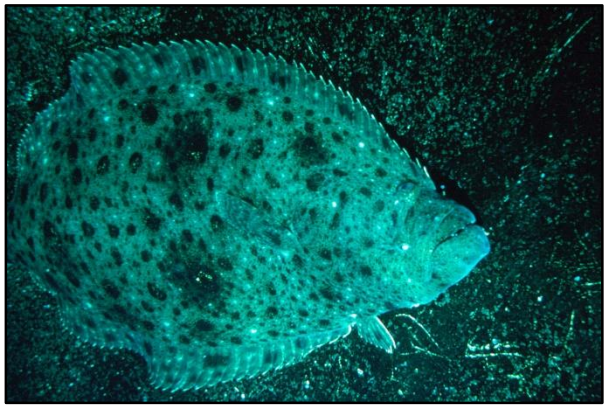
Location: Cafeteria Quad

A Sanctuary for Juvenile California Halibut at the HB Wetlands

by *Pat Petric*

The restored Huntington Beach wetlands are made up of three marshes--the Talbert, Brookhurst and Magnolia marshes—which are important habitats for the California halibut *(Paralichthys californicus)*. It's here in the tranquil wetland waters along the coast where halibut come to spawn. Halibut are broadcast spawners, which means they release their eggs and sperm into the water where — with luck —they will find each other. The peak spawning season is April and May, and once fertilized, the eggs stay close to the shore.

A typical five-year-old fish releases about 300,000 eggs at a time, though the number of eggs depends on the size of the fish. Baby halibut have a relatively short free-drifting larval stage (less than 30 days), before they transform and settle to the bottom when they are about 0.3 to 0.5 inches long. It's in the enriched coastal wetlands--fed by the rhythmic rise and fall of clean tidal waters--where halibut offspring spend the early stages of their life, eating and growing until they are large enough to venture out into the open ocean.



Small juvenile halibut in our wetlands eat crustaceans, including copepods and amphipods. Once they reach 2.5 inches, they are large enough to eat small fish, such as the gobies that are commonly found in bays. As juvenile halibut increase in size, the percentage of fish in their diet increases. Newly settled and larger juvenile halibut are frequently taken in plantless shallow-water embayments, and only infrequently on the open coast, suggesting that embayments are important nursery habitats. Predators of juvenile halibut in the bays and estuaries include shore birds and fishes.

The shallow waters of our coastal wetlands are an important nursery for the California halibut — and other species that use wetlands during their early lives. Southern California fish populations may be limited by the amount of nursery habitat available in local coastal areas. The Southern California halibut stock is currently depleted to 14% of its potential spawning biomass, and few young fish reach a size where fishermen can harvest them. Environmental conditions have been poor over the last decade in Southern California, and the dredging and filling of bays and wetlands have caused a decline in shallow water habitats the juvenile halibut need to grow.

The restored Huntington Beach wetlands are providing ideal habitats for young halibut. Come and visit soon!

Sea Level Rise in the Huntington Beach Wetlands

by *Gordon Smith, Ph.D*

Mean sea level in Southern California will rise at least three feet by the end of the century—so predicts NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. If you look at these pictures of our Brookhurst Marsh, it seems like it's already occurred! You can also see the dramatic range between low and high tide levels.

This last Thanksgiving week, the "King Tide" broke records for the highest sea levels ever observed at Southern California tide stations. Sea levels have been rising due to the warm El Nino ocean conditions off California, on top of global warming.

King Tide at Magnolia Marsh, Nov 26, 2015; photo by Marinka Horack

As the planet and oceans continue to warm, and as glaciers and ice sheets melt, we can expect more of these very high tides. Unfortunately, our marshes were designed several years ago such that the islands used for nesting sites will always to be at least two feet above the highest tide. But global warming and rising seas will take a toll on the Huntington Beach Wetlands, along with coastal developments around the world.

Low Tide at Magnolia Marsh, March 2016

Bringing the Native Plant Nursery Back to Life

by *Lena Hayashi*

You may have noticed there's a plant nursery at the end of the Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy (HBWC) parking lot. What's it doing there?

The nursery was built to propagate plants for the planned 1,000 acre Orange Coast River Park (OCRP) with a $30,000 grant from the Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks. HBWC, as part of OCRP, had the land for the nursery and the need for plants to restore the Brookhurst and Magnolia Marshes. When in 2010, we reached the point where tidal flow once again inundated Magnolia Marsh, the workings of the nursery slowed to a halt.

Today, we're planning to revitalize the nursery. The first project was to construct a compost bin to recycle the leftover vegetables from feeding the animals at the Wetlands and Wildlife Care Center. We will be creating rich soil to propagate drought-tolerant native California plants. With volunteers, HBWC hopes to construct a demonstration garden and provide native plants for future restorations and for local residents to use in their gardens. Community involvement

and education will dominate the activities, and we will need volunteers with a variety of skills in construction, repairs and gardening to ensure our success.

If you are interested in helping with the nursery, please contact us at info@hbwetlands.org or call 714-536-0141.

Our Board of Directors

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Jack Kirkorn, Vice Chairperson

Bill Weisman, Secretary

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Lena Hayashi

Jim Robins

Dick Zembal

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WE CAN ONLY RESTORE AND MAINTAIN THESE VITAL WETLANDS WITH YOUR CONTINUING SUPPORT

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.
□ This is a renewal of my annual contribution.
□ Great Egret ($10)
□ Belding's Savannah Sparrow ($25)
□ California Halibut ($50)
□ Least Tern ($100)
□ Brown Pelican ($250)
□ Other Amount ($_____)

Name: _____

Address: _____

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My interests include:

□ Docent training □ Docent walks □ Wetlands restoration
□ Native plant propagation □ Newsletter articles □ Wildlife monitoring
□ Interpretive center staffing □ Other _____