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Exploring the Laguna de Santa Rosa

By Jenny Blaker

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There are many ways and many reasons to explore the Laguna de Santa Rosa. From the Mayacamas and Sonoma Mountains in the east, west across the Cotati Valley and Santa Rosa Plain, and north to enter the Russian River near Forestville, the Laguna de Santa Rosa watershed is a habitat of literally global significance.

The 250-square mile Laguna de Santa Rosa watershed is the largest tributary to the Russian River. The larger coastal region in which it lies, stretching along the Pacific coast from Oregon to Baja, is known as the California floristic province, one of 34 biological hotspots worldwide. This means that it contains some of the rarest habitat on earth, that at the same time is among the most vulnerable.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa contains oak woodlands, grasslands, streams and creeks, and wetlands, including vernal pools. As a result of impacts from agricultural and urban land uses over the last 150 years or so, less than 10 percent of these original habitats now remain. Yet the biologically diverse Laguna still contains plant and animal species so rare that they are found literally nowhere else on Earth.

Here we are in midst of it, yet many people living here don't know or don't care. For as many as 220,000 people live within six miles of the Laguna, and many who live in the cities of Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park, and Windsor may not realize that the little creeks near their backyards, and even their urban stormdrains, run into the Laguna.

"Is that the Laguna? But I go there all the time!" This came from a little boy with excited, shining eyes, as he realized for the first time that the Laguna channel near his home and school runs into the mythical Laguna de Santa Rosa, home of the valley oak and 200 species of birds, and mammals including coyote, bobcat, and river otter.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation runs a program called Learning the Laguna, which involves classroom activities and field trips into the Laguna with trained docents. The program encourages active, hands-on learning through observation and discovery and is led by docents passionate about the Laguna, about learning more themselves, and about communicating their enthusiasm to children. For more information visit <http://www.lagunadesantarosa.org>.

The Cotati Creek Critters planting project has wound down now for the summer, while the ground is hard and dry. It will resume once the winter rains begin, and Native tree and shrub planting will resume when the soil is soft and the roots grow, soaking up the rains and allowing the plants to become established before the next dry season.

New this summer, the Critters are offering several opportunities to explore and discover the southern Laguna area with local experts. June 4 will offer an evening guided bike ride along the creeks of Cotati and Rohnert Park with retired Sonoma State geology professor Rolfe Erickson and Wade Belew, Critters stewardship coordinator. They will point out hydrological and geological features along the way.

In July, a guided walk by Joe Honton of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation will explore the routes of possible future trails along the Laguna west of Hwy 101 towards Sebastopol.

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