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Bolsa Chia

Center affords visitors closer look at wetlands

By John Westcott
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Least terns, gulls and cormorants flutter overhead and scan the mudflats for food. A fiddler crab skitters into a patch of cord grass, while ghost shrimp squirm in the nearby tide.

Soon, another species will join the scene at the Huntington Beach wetlands, though only as observers: humans.

The object of a four-year restoration effort, the wetlands soon will have a visitors' center to give people a better look at the fruits of that effort. A total of \$10,000 was donated for the center — \$6,600 by the McDonnell Douglas Employees Foundation in Long Beach and \$3,400 from the McDonnell Douglas Foundation in St. Louis.

The center will consist of a trailer near Brookhurst Street and a bike trail. It will boast exhibits relating to the wetlands and be a draw for elementary school classes and other groups, said Gary Gorman, leader of the wetlands restoration effort that started planning in 1985. Tours will follow dirt paths into the wetlands.

The 27-acre preserve is beginning to spring to life, said Gorman, a Long Beach firefighter. To the untrained eye, the wetlands, on the inland side of Pacific Coast Highway between Brookhurst Street and the Santa Ana River, are little more than a muddy mess. But large numbers of birds, fish and other animals are returning to the mud flats, long degraded because nearby development shut off the regular flow of seawater.

Volunteers spent long hours planting



Jebb Harris/The Orange County Register

It took four years, but Huntington Beach wetlands have been restored.

cord grass and other marshland vegetation. But the key was realigning and improving the Talbert flood-control channel that runs parallel to the Santa Ana River. The channel, redug by the Orange County Flood Control District, now enables seawater to flow freely into the wetlands at high tide. The nutrient-rich water should help the wetlands flourish, Gorman said.

The sightings of least terns and Belding's savannah sparrows — both endangered species — is encouraging, said Victor Leipzig, a member of the seven-member, non-profit Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy board and a Cypress College biology professor. Another good sign is the flourishing of the cord grass.

"It's a relatively picky plant that only likes certain conditions and terrain and doesn't like to be transplanted," Leipzig said. As the restoration progressed, volunteers gradually gained skill in planting the cord grass.

The restoration has cost about \$1 million, Leipzig said, with most of the money spent on the Talbert channel. Funds came mostly from the county and the California Coastal Conservancy.

Years from now, Gorman and Leipzig and other conservancy members have bigger dreams for the wetlands: a larger, more permanent visitors center, possibly housing an animal-rescue group focusing on injured birds.

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