

Wetlands adoption gets students working

By Scott Thomsen

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HUNTINGTON BEACH — Field trips, dissecting frogs and chemistry experiments weren't enough for the Santa Ana High School Science Club.

To quench its thirst for scientific pursuits, the 20-member group has adopted the 300-acre Bolsa Chica Wetlands Ecological Preserve.

One weekend each month, the students meet at the wetlands to clear dead plants, install signs and perform other wildlife-management duties under the guidance of the state Department of Fish and Game and the Bolsa Chica Conservancy, a group dedicated to research and education in

wetlands science.

"You pass by a place, and you realize how important it is when you're involved," said junior Manuel Brito, club president. "It's a really special place. We're enjoying ourselves, and we're doing some good."

The group is removing ice plant from the reserve to allow revegetation of native dune wildflowers, including sea rockets, beach primrose and sand verbena.

The flowers provide a habitat for insects, food for many of the more than 200 bird species that visit the wetlands, said Louann Murray, conservancy research director.

"(Iceplant) is fine for the highways," Murray said. "It's always green, uses little water, (but) it has no wildlife value."

The student group has more projects in store, including painting the preserve's boardwalk, removing a palm tree, picking up trash and posting signs.

Junior Milton Gomez, club vice president, said he likes the hard work.

"It makes you feel better that you're trying to protect something nature gave us."

Junior Jose Garcia added: "You can lose it quickly, too. This is about the only place in Orange County where you can see birds like this."

Besides clearing unwanted plants and trash, club members are learning about the wetlands and the birds, fish and insects that inhabit it. Conservancy members

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point out the species and explain how each fits into the ecosystem.

"Every time, we learn something new," Gomez said.

During an April workday, the group uncovered a California legless lizard.

"It was a shocking surprise, but a nice one, too," Garcia said.

Science teacher and club sponsor Diane McGann said she started the group a year ago to get more students involved in science and the world around them.

The club's president quickly convinced Murray that the members were serious about adopting the wetlands.

"Manuel was very serious, very dedicated and interested in science," Murray said, adding that the group agreed to a trial workday. "It was absolutely incredible the amount of work they did in one morning."

Although the work might be hard, convincing classmates to join the club in working at the preserve wasn't, Brito said.

"After work, we go to the beach," he said.

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