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# GAYE LeBARON'S NOTEBOOK



## Honk if you love geese

**L**isten! If you thought you heard a goose honk, you might be right. Not since they paved the Cotati Valley grainfields and called it Rohnert Park have there been so many Canadian honkers and their smaller cousins spending the winter in Sonoma County.

Nobody is more excited about this visitation than the Friends of the Laguna, a group of citizens working to protect and preserve the Laguna de Santa Rosa — no, more than that, they are working to see the Laguna restored to the idyllic lake, wetland and wildlife haven it was before "civilization" started messing things up.

Some of the Friends, on an excursion last Sunday, were delighted to come upon a band of 44 wild geese only a mile or so from Sebastopol. They took it as a positive sign, a signal to keep plugging away politically — like a Visitors Bureau for birds — to bring these beauties and their friends and relatives back next winter.

Actually, the flock the Friends spotted wasn't even the half of it. Dave Hillendahl, a retired Water Agency supervisor who knows every waterway in the county like the back of his hand (he's also a member and former chairman of the county's Fish & Wildlife Advisory Board), estimates the goose population on the Laguna this winter at nearly 150, "more this year than I've ever seen, honkers, specks and cacklers.

"Geese are very social creatures," Hillendahl said. "They don't mind people. You can find them in the middle of cities (Reno is one, Vancouver another). But only if they have enough to eat. They love that huge city land along the Laguna. Those geese graze like cows, you know, and that land has all that green feed on open land with no one to disturb them."

It is reminiscent of the old Rohnert Seed Farm land which brought literally thousands of migrating geese in a Christmas rush, filling the sky and making their distinctive honk a familiar sound in Santa Rosa.

The Laguna isn't the only spot with lots of geese this year. Hillendahl estimates there are 300 to 400 wintering on the old Lake Ranch below Lakeville on the Petaluma River and a whole bunch on the lake at the Gallo ranch, formerly Frei Brothers, off Guerneville Road. (A word of caution: None of these places are hunting sites. So forget it.)

Geese are not the only birds who enjoy the sanctuary of the Laguna. And it is a sanctuary. Hillendahl estimates that there are only two or three spots where any hunting goes on and that fully 98 percent of the waterway is an effective haven for birds, native and migrating.

The days when herds of elk forded the Laguna near the present site of the Highway 12 bridge are gone forever, but the Friends and a second group of preservation-minded citizens, the Laguna Advisory Committee, would hope that such 19th century pastime as boating and picnicking on the Laguna can be restored in time.

The geese have been here since mid-December and they will stay until February, maybe early March, depending on the weather. The two Laguna protection organizations will work year-round to keep it safe for them. They have two immediate priorities. One is the presentation of the advisory committee's report to the Sebastopol City Council Tuesday night. The comprehensive study has been a year-and-a-half in the works and committee members are proud of its scope and content. The other is the public hearing Jan. 21 before the county planning commission on the controversial Occidental Road bridge. Friends of the Laguna members fear that a new and bigger bridge, destroying more wetlands, is only step one in a Sebastopol by-pass project which would destroy even more of the delicate waterway.

If there are 150 geese on the Laguna this year, will there be 200 next year? Is the Laguna on the way back? Those are questions, for now. The answers are still to come.

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