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Like an oasis in the desert, Sonoma County's little-known Laguna de Santa Rosa remains a tenacious temple of nature's legacy in the midst of one of the fastest growing regions in the Bay Area.

Hidden from most eyes despite its stature as Northern California's second largest freshwater marsh, the Laguna — bearing a name bestowed upon it when Spanish cattle mixed here with tule elk — meanders 14 miles through a varied stretch of pastoral Santa Rosa plain and communities which seem more interested in seeking perfection in pavement than in preserving natural beauty.

The Laguna begins a crow's hop away from Highway 101 near the Rohnert Park/Cotati urban complex, winds past busy settlements through miles of pasture and cropland, and ends up discharging into the Russian River northwest of Santa Rosa.

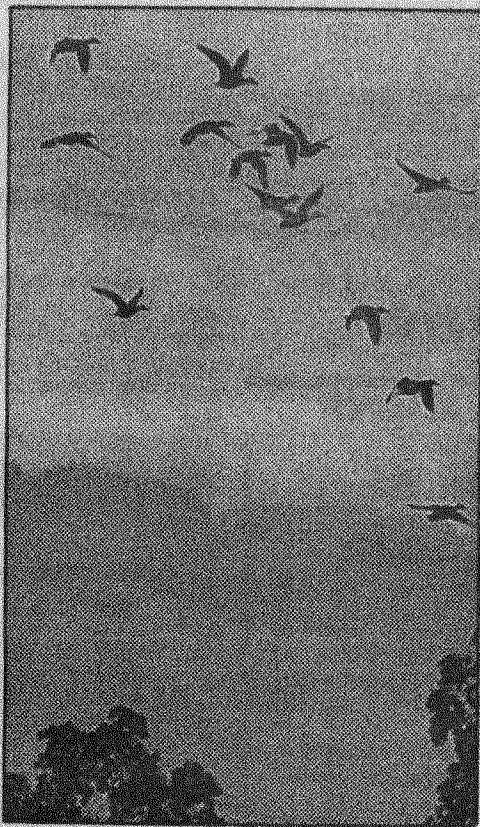
Once a necklace of sparkling ponds, small lakes, lagoons and upland grasslands dotted with massive valley oak, the Laguna today has been made into something less than that by the human need to turn nature's timeless beauty into time and money.

Second in area only to Clear Lake Marsh in Lake County, the Laguna's 7,000-acre flood plain was largely drained around the turn of the century by farmers and ranchers eager to use its rich, oak-sprinkled uplands for cattle and crops.

Development on either side of the Laguna, situated as much of it is between rapidly growing Santa Rosa and the city of Sebastopol, has narrowed even further the untrammled remains of this ancient waterway. A half-million years ago, it was the bed of a Russian River that ran into greater San Francisco Bay before nature's uplifting forces turned it back on itself to empty into the Pacific at Jenner north of Bodega Bay.

"It's simply because most people can't get to it that much of what remains in the Laguna is still there," said Joan Vilms, a Sonoma Land Trust officer as well as a

## *Despite development pressures, a little-known freshwater marsh clings to existence as an oasis for birds and wildlife*



**Mallards take flight**

member of the county's Fish and Wildlife Advisory Board. "Even if you do get a landowner's permission, it helps to be a duck if you want to see it."

Much of it has been filled or drained for residential and agricultural development, eliminating almost 80 to 90 percent of its original, riparian vegetation.

Santa Rosa disposes much of its treated waste water through the Laguna by dis-



**French lop rabbit takes a rest**

charge to the Russian River in winter and by upland irrigation in summer — a practice which, though politically unpopular in some downstream quarters, has enabled the Laguna to survive as a wetland in dry times because the area's natural water supply has been altered by human use.

Despite such pressures, the Laguna's heart remains clearly nature's — a diminished jewel, perhaps, but still shining with

the tangible gift of wildlife in the five ecosystems it encompasses.

And, given recent attention by a newly-awakened public, as well as the recent passage of state Proposition 70 which earmarks some \$4 million for Laguna restoration, prospects of eventual preservation and enhancement of its natural qualities exist as well.

The Laguna supports more than 235 listed species of birds, 20 species of mammals, 200 species of plants, 16 species of amphibians and reptiles and about 20 species of fish, including bass and catfish.

Steelhead enter the Laguna from the Russian River in the high-water winter months as they search out tributary streams, such as Santa Rosa creek, for spawning.

The creek, which empties into the Laguna several miles west of Santa Rosa between Sebastopol and Guerneville Road to the north, still draws steelhead into Santa Rosa's downtown core as the spawning fish swim up through the heart of that city.

The Laguna, drainage area for a watershed of some 160,000 acres, is at its scenic best in winter when rising waters provide a major habitat for fish-seeking egrets and herons, as well as a major resting place for literally thousands of waterfowl migrating along the Pacific Flyway.

Being an arm of the Russian River, the Laguna floods during high water on the river, acting as an aquatic storage tank, helping to prevent some flood waters from flooding downstream dwellers.

In 1964, during record river flooding, officials estimated the Laguna lowered the flood crest at Guerneville by 14 feet.

It is also during the winter, or at least through spring in wet years, when the public has the best chance to view the Laguna's wildlife from the limited access points along its length.

Most of its banks are generally some distance from public roadways. The roads are privately owned or are under the juris-

See Page E3, Col. 4