

Those who know these waters advise avoiding them except on the calmest days.

Once on the Laguna, boaters should remember that a tangled web of shrubs, tree branches, thick marsh grasses and even fence posts and barbed wire can be hidden just below the surface. To avoid most of those hazards, paddle in the relatively wide-open channel between Sebastopol's Laguna Park and the Occidental Road bridge.

Respect private property. Almost all of the land on both sides of the Laguna is privately owned.

- CHRIS COURSEY

conducted in the late 1980s. This lowly, stagnant, abused body of water is home (or at least a vacation spot) to 286 species of plants, 230 species of birds, 25 different mammals, 19 varieties of fish, nine kinds of reptiles and seven types of amphibians.

And very, very few human beings.

Laguna lovers envision a network of trails along public land the length of the waterway. In the late 1980s, first Rep. Doug Bosco and then Rep. Frank Riggs floated plans before Congress for a Laguna national wildlife refuge. But that idea



Water on flooded farmland along the Laguna reflects a winter scene.

"really isn't happening any more," says Kim Cordell, former executive director of the Laguna Foundation.

Instead, the state Department of Fish and Game has been buying property from willing

sellers — about 400 acres so far. Still, limited access and unreliable flow keep most boaters off what may be the North Bay's most interesting waterway.

But for those willing to get

their boots muddy at difficult put-ins and their faces scratched in a branch-choked channel, the rewards are great.

It's like paddling into the past.

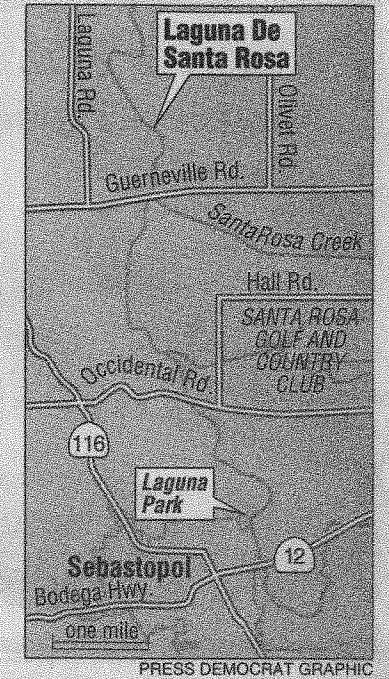
Thousands of years ago, the Russian River followed this path

Photos by John Burgess/Press Democrat

as it meandered south between what now are Santa Rosa and Sebastopol, past Rohnert Park and Petaluma and into San Pablo Bay. Geologists figure an earthquake caused the river to make its right turn to the Pacific, an event that robbed the Laguna of its greatest source of water and reversed its flow from southward to northward.

Historically, the Laguna served as a general store for Native American residents of the area, a place where they could fish and hunt and gather acorns for food and sedge and rushes and grasses for basket-making.

When the first settlers arrived in the mid-19th century, they found a series of lakes between what is now Rohnert Park and the Russian River. Places such as Lake Jonive near Sebastopol and Ballard Lake near Mark West Creek were nice spots for boating and fishing for some, but others saw them as impediments to progress — wagons couldn't cross them and plows couldn't work them. So the natural dams that created the lakes were broken, and the Laguna drained away into the river.



Today, it's a trickle for much of the year.

During storms, such as the ones early this month, it's a raging inland sea, with life-threatening currents and

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Brian Moe works his way through overhanging branches.



Laguna de Santa Rosa has been a traditional home to hundreds of snowy egrets.