

Laguna

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five-foot wind waves that swamp anything in their path.

But at other times — those periods of winter and spring when the rains abate but the water remains — it's a tame waterway into the wilderness.

Fog hangs low over the green pastures, turning the bare branches of oaks into gnarled black fingers against the gray sky. Traffic rumbles over the bridge on Occidental Road as a convocation of great and snowy egrets settles into the marsh grasses below. Above, a squadron of white pelicans patrols to the north.

Sinking in muck and slipping in mud, we slide our canoes and kayaks into the still brown water and push off.

The classic view of the Laguna — a pastoral landscape of oaks and pastures — lies upstream, to the south. We point our bows north and float under the bridge.

All around is evidence of much higher water. Clothes, paper and plastic bags hang in the branches of trees above the channel. The grasses along the banks bear watermarks above our heads. A duck blind lies on its side, wedged in the gnarled limbs of a toppled tree.

Without a doubt, these waters have recently been violently turgid. But today, if there is current here, it is imperceptible.

Even so, maneuvering is tricky around fence posts and through the branches of willows, and at times the way squeezes down to little more than the width of our narrow boats. But then it opens to a flat channel, about 20 feet wide, and we pick up a paddling rhythm. It doesn't last.

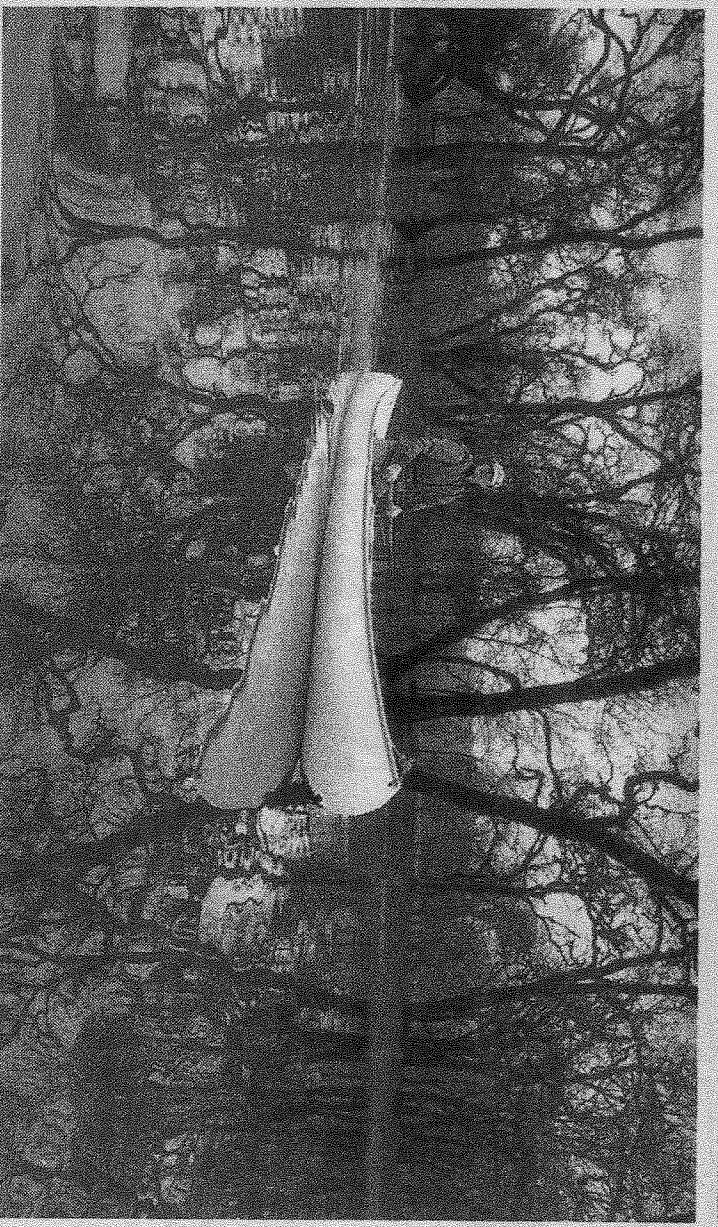
Trees choke this channel, their branches dipping down from above to snag a shirt or a hat or rising out of the water to knock a paddle off its stroke. At times it's easier to pull your way through than to paddle.

But as soon as this bush-whacking becomes tedious, the branches back off and the channel widens once more. A half-mile north of Occidental Road the water spreads out of the channel, spilling through willows and grasses to the west.

Fish and Game owns about 150 acres straddling the Laguna in this area. Allan Buckmann of the department's Younville office says the area is popular with duck hunters, "but access is a problem."

No roads or trails lead into the area, so those who walk — we saw one hunter on foot with his dog — must trespass across private property to get here. Buckmann said hunters do, however, have the right to get into the area by boat.

But where do you put a boat in the water without trespassing? That's a tricky proposition on the Laguna. Greg Condon, a kayaker who's been paddling these waters since he was a teen-ager, says he's developed relationships with land owners who allow him to use their property. He also uses the public access points in the narrow rights of way alongside of Occidental and Guerneville roads — which can be



Steve Hart paddles his canoe down the Laguna de Santa Rosa.

JOHN BURGESS/PRESS DEMOCRAT

hazardous because of fast-moving traffic and lack of parking.

Perhaps the best put-in is at Sebastopol's Laguna Park, at the north end of Morris Street near the Community Center. At the back of the park, between two baseball fields, a break in the fence leads to a worn path along the west side of the laguna. A short walk north finds a gentle slope into the water.

"We don't particularly encourage or discourage that," says City Manager Paul Berlant. "We don't own or control the Laguna. Our concern is that people aren't out there in storms or flood waters. There are submerged trees and fences and barbed wire — it can be very dangerous."

On this day, though, all is calm. A furry head pushes through the water, leaving a V rippling behind it. We follow, and see it squirm up a tree. The sleek brown mink watches our four boats pass like it's never seen such a parade.

About a mile north of Occidental Road, the water spreads out to the east, across a nearly submerged water line. As we approach, the water comes alive. Hundreds of ducks take flight, their wings slapping the water with a staccato roar. A shotgun booms in the distance.

Bill Graham and Frank Vonada, both of Santa Rosa, float through the mist in their small boat, which is powered by a quiet electric motor. Their clothes are camouflaged from head to toe; their faces are painted green and brown and yellow. They report that they've bagged "a couple" of ducks, but that they wouldn't really care if they'd come up empty.

"I just really like coming out here," says Graham, his smile a startling slash of white across his camouflaged face. "Even in the summer — there's hardly any water, and it stinks, but it's still nice. There's all kinds of wildlife, and it's always a little bit different."

They stick to the channel in this section, explaining that the wide water to the east is the domain of a private hunting club. We move downstream, again

alternating between open channel and overgrown slalom courses. A vineyard appears on the west, then homes on the hillsides along Frej Road.

For the first time, we notice a current in the water. And though the Laguna flows here, a green scum collects along the banks and against obstructions. It's a reminder that despite the beauty of the last two miles, we've been floating down a near-stagnant body of water that collects the agricultural and urban runoff from much of the Santa Rosa Plain and, during the winter, is an open pipeline to the Russian River for the treated sewage effluent of four cities.

Scott Stinebaugh, manager of the subregional treatment plant, says the highly treated wastewater is released into the Laguna in two places — near the plant south of Sebastopol and from Delta Pond, a huge storage pond just upstream from the bridge at Guerneville Road.

The berms of the 650-million-gallon Delta Pond loom over the Laguna at its intersection with Santa Rosa Creek. As we turn right to paddle up the creek, the point where effluent enters the water is clearly marked by a cross-stream current and rolling mud coming from beneath the surface. While the Laguna has been a cate-au-lait color the length of our trip, the creek upstream from this point is a deep green.

State regulations allow a release of effluent at a ratio of 1 percent of the flow of the Russian River when that river flows at more than 1,000 cubic feet per second. Clearly the Laguna flow is a fraction of that, meaning the ratio of effluent here is much greater. But other than the disturbance in the water, there is little indication of what's happening here at ground zero of the wastewater wars.

The more apparent evidence of urban intrusion into this watery wilderness is found upstream in Santa Rosa Creek. The creek here is a bermed and widened flood-control channel, a freeway for runoff from Santa Rosa streets. In the brush along its banks are tangled the sad tales of interrupted street games: a football, a baseball, a couple of soccer balls, several Frisbees and enough tennis balls to float a good-sized raft. In low branches hang a milk carton, a styrofoam take-out tray, a cardboard coffee cup.

About a mile-and-a-half downstream from here, the Laguna intersects with Mark West Creek north of River Road. Mark West then meanders several miles to the Russian River west of Wohler Road.

But we'll save that stretch for another day. We turn our boats back south. The round trip, about four miles, has taken about three hours.