

Event draws attention to marshy wetlands

By JODY KLEINBERG
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SEBASTOPOL — Darcy Miller stood mesmerized as she watched the wind ripple across the marshy wetlands at the Laguna de Santa Rosa in Sebastopol on Sunday afternoon. The lanky 19-year-old knew she should be inside, listening to presentations about ecology, Pomo Indian history, ranching techniques and preservation.

But she just couldn't tear herself from the beauty and mystery of the site itself.

"It's like it has its own spirit," she said, removing a wisp of long blond hair that had whipped across her face.

Hers was precisely the reaction organizers had hoped for when they

planned Sunday's first-ever Laguna de Santa Rosa Day. "The whole purpose of the event is to bring greater awareness of the laguna to the community," said organizer Jeff Edelhelt. "We want people to see what is here — that there are wetlands and vernal pools and endangered species all in the laguna."

And, he said, he wants the community to grow attached to the 13-mile strip of land between Forestville and Cotati and to join the fight to protect it.

A former Pomo hunting and burial ground, the laguna is the second largest freshwater wetland in California. It is home to more than 200 types of birds, including the marsh harrier, the burrowing owl and the peregrine falcon, and a known

migratory habitat for the steelhead trout. Twice, it has been proposed as a national wildlife refuge, but the proposal has never been accepted, Edelhelt said.

Sunday's events took place at the Sebastopol Community Center and included lectures, earth-based music, the presentation of Valley Oak acorns that will be germinated and planted along Morris Avenue, slide-presentations and nature walks.

"Eventually we would like to have an ecology and nature center," said Bill Haigwood, president and charter member of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation. "We already have teachers who take kids down to the laguna."

Like the students, the close to 200

residents who attended Sunday's event learned about the laguna's history. They learned that the settlers drained the laguna in the 1880s so that they could grow hay, oats, clover and other agricultural products. They were told about how in the 1950s, the laguna was badly polluted by wastewater from Sebastopol and Santa Rosa. Then, they were told about the restoration attempts that began in the 1980s.

"I think it's incredible what they did back then," said Miller, who eventually made her way inside. "I mean, didn't they think about the people who came after them?"

One of the main reasons for the event,
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which Edelhelt plans to hold yearly, is to convince local and state representatives to pay more attention and allocate more funding to the laguna.

"Personally, I would like to see the Sebastopol City Council be more supportive of this," Haigwood said. The council recently rejected funding for the laguna in favor of baseball and other active recreation needs in Sebastopol.

The Santa Rosa City Council is considering a proposal to build an 18-hole golf course on property adjacent to the laguna, which Haigwood said is a mistake.

Sonoma County Supervisor Mike Reilly, Assemblywoman Virginia Strom-Martin, D-Duncans Mills, and Sebastopol Councilwoman Katherine Austin spoke at the event and pledged their support to protect the area.

Reilly spoke about the need for trails and the wonder of walking in the Sonoma County landscape. But he said too much emphasis on recreation also can be dangerous.

"We need to be careful about how we use the laguna for intense recreational purposes," he said. "And that includes golfers."