

Laguna

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BLINCOE ISN'T the only laguna fan. More than a few people, it seems, are downright zealous about the place. "When you come out here, you'll feel the essence of the laguna," Edelhelt says. "You have to feel her. All of the wildlife is nurtured by her."

Even stoic scientists start to wax poetic when it comes to the laguna. "There's an expansiveness to it, and I don't want to get soppy about it, but there's a sense of peace," says hydrogeologist Kim Cordell, director of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation. "The appeal is the same as the ocean. There's a consistency, but every time you go it's different."

This time of year the laguna looks like a waterway in the Deep South—a swampy, slow-moving river, trees and shrubs hanging over the banks and trailing in the brow-green water.

Himalayan blackberries, growing eight feet tall along the banks, have been ripped out, replaced by native trees and bushes. Volunteers salvaged native bunch grasses from the Walmart construction site in Windsor, replanting more than 500 little clumps of green grass along the laguna path. Benches line the path, offering sweeping views of willows and valley oaks reflected in the water, Mt. St. Helena visible in the distance across fields bright with yellow mustard.

The laguna is central to the area's Native American history, its abundant natural resources sustaining settlements for more than 8,000 years. "That laguna is so important: it supported a village that went from Palm Drive Hospital to the apple cannery. That was a large community of people," says Foley Benson, coordinator of Native American studies at Santa Rosa Junior College. "It was a major trade route to the coast."

The park's first group of docents is going through an extensive training program, with the goal of providing classroom education and trail experience for elementary school classes in the region. In addition to spotting green egrets and bunch grass, kids who have Evans as a tour guide will be sure to pick up some tips on wastewater and its role in the laguna's restoration. First lesson: Don't call it sewage.

"It's tertiary treated," Evans barks. "It's clean. It would be potable in 99 percent of the countries of the world."

The water quality of the laguna has improved enough in the past 10 years that the bird population count and number of species are dramatically up, Evans says. But the restoration efforts are far from complete.

"We're all looking for the yellow-billed cuckoo," he says, opening up his *Field Guide*. "It's a riparian bird and lives in waterways with thick growth. When we have our first yellow-billed cuckoo back, that will mean we were successful. We'll have a huge party."

The Loretta Blincoe Trail will be dedicated at the second annual Laguna de Santa Rosa day, Sunday, May 2, starting at 9 a.m. For more information, call 823-9428.