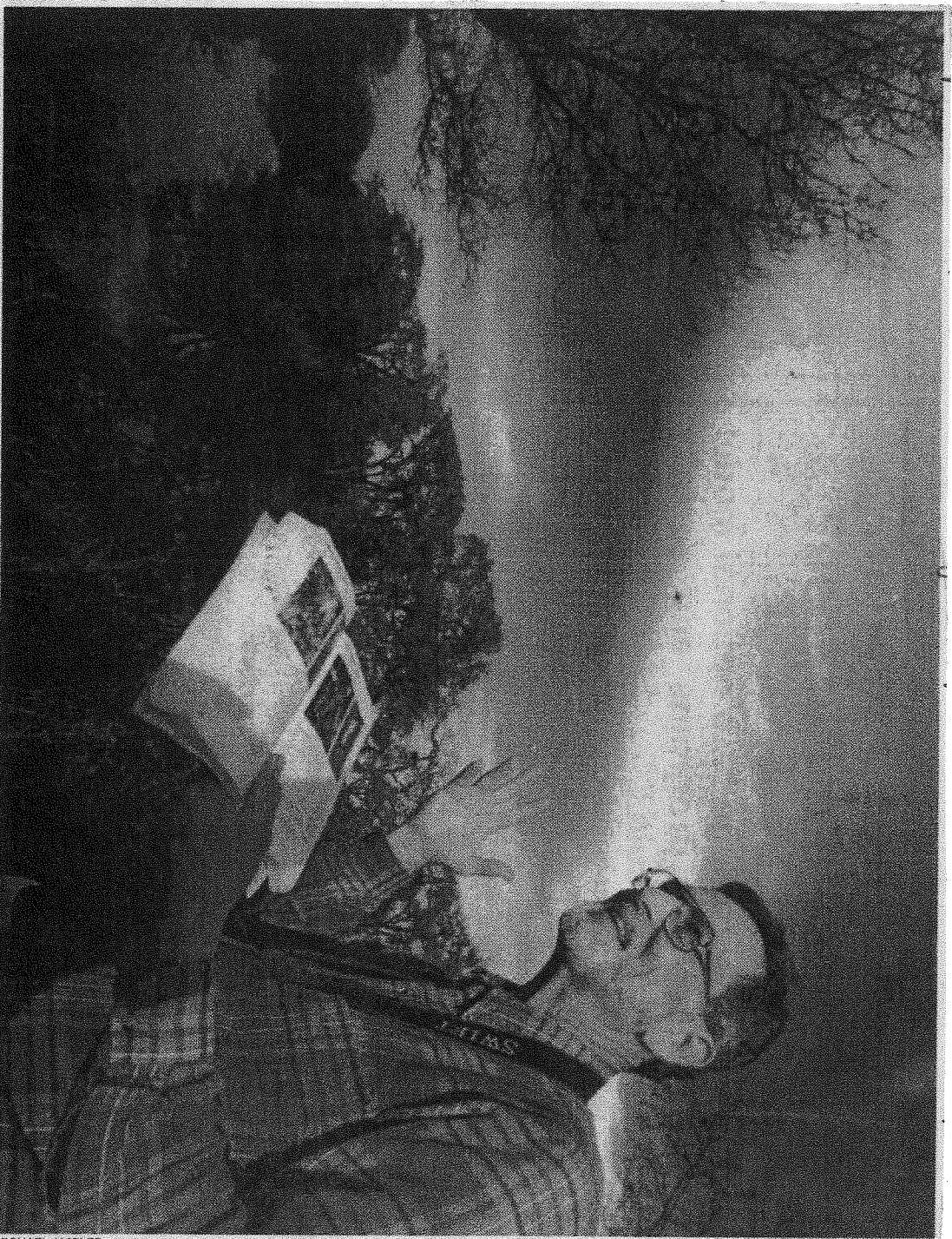


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Nature's way: Docent chief Bob Evans identifies wildlife living in the newly restored Laguna de Santa Rosa—one of the county's conservation success stories.

MICHAEL AMSLER

Duck & Cover

Sebastopol's Laguna de Santa Rosa goes from wasteland to wetland

By JANET WELLS

DON'T TAKE a picture of that bird!" yells Bob Evans, waving his arms at a photographer getting ready to capture the serene twilight scene of a duck skimming along a pond in Sebastopol's Laguna de Santa Rosa. "It's a farm duck. It's not native," says an indignant gray-bearded Evans.

Evans, carrying a well-worn *Field Guide to Birds* that seems to be an extension of his hand, is understandably territorial about the lagoon. Head of the new preserve's docent program, Evans sees a place transformed by community donations and countless volunteer hours from a trash heap to a thriving riparian wetland that plays a crucial part in the area's ecology and cultural history.

Bragging like a proud father, Evans says that the pond—covered in a startlingly bright green scum called duckweed—is one of the best refuges in the country for migratory diving ducks. "It's right on the [Pacific] flyway,"

says Evans, eager to showcase the lagoon's potential as magnet for native flora and fauna. "You want a list? Ring-neck, ruddy, grebes, common loon, scaup—that's s-c-a-u-p—red-head, American widgeon."

Evans interrupts himself to grab his binoculars and peer at a flock flapping overhead. "The nice thing about taking people into the lagoon for the first time," he says, "is their eyes get wide with the beauty."

Most people, Evans, adds, have seen the lagoon only as they drive along Highway 12 into Sebastopol, through grassy fields that flood every winter. But those fields are only a small part of a waterway 14 miles long stretching from River Road to Cotati, the largest tributary of the Russian River.

Depending on the time of year, the lagoon is wetlands, stream, or floodplain, providing habitat for nearly 300 species of plants and more than 250 kinds of birds. For years the city of Sebastopol used the land for sewage treatment ponds and as a dumping ground. Then, 20 years ago, the lagoon was recognized as a resource worth

restoring when Sebastopol's general plan identified the 75-acre city-owned site as a potential park and efforts started to protect it from development.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation received a jump start from retired builder Emmett Blincoe, who donated \$200,000 to make improvements to the park, including the just completed mile-long trail in memory of his late wife Loretta, and the planting of more than 1,500 trees and shrubs, and debris cleanup.

This week, Blincoe announced that he is giving an additional \$200,000 for further restoration and improvements, including a bridge and a path along the east side of the lagoon. The 71-year-old nature enthusiast is intensely private, bestowing his gifts through his attorney.

"Most of us have never met him. We talk to him only through his lawyer," says Jeffrey Edelhelt, a board member of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation. "His wife loved it here. We gave him a tour and he said, 'This is it.'"

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