

January 28, 2007

Dedicated to nature

Laguna de Santa Rosa's lead docent shares love of the outdoors with students, adults, new volunteers

By RAYNE WOLFE
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



How much does Dana Blake love nature? So much so that in addition to working full time as a real estate appraiser, and volunteering as a lead nature docent at the Laguna de Santa Rosa, her first thought when she sees a spider at home is to grab her "Snapy" tool.

"Snapys are little humane bug catchers we sell that let you quickly capture the spider. Then you can release it. I respect spiders. They eat flies," said the outdoorsy Sebastopol resident.

Five years ago, Blake signed up for the volunteer training at the Laguna and is now a lead docent at the watershed that encompasses grassland and oak woodland habitats, riparian forest and wetlands that reach from Cotati to the Russian River.

The Laguna is home to river otters, badgers, deer and turtles. Bird species include white pelicans, great blue herons, egrets, kites, hummingbirds, quail, short-eared owls, mourning doves, red-tailed hawks and Nuttall's woodpeckers.

"Ever since we moved here 25 years ago, I've been so grateful for the outdoors. I've

always loved camping. But Sonoma County really offers so many ways to enjoy the outdoors," said Blake, who hikes, walks, skates and kayaks for fun.

She is among about 50 nature docents who lead approximately 1,000 young students and at least 500 adult visitors on walks each year. With an upcoming training scheduled for early March, she's looking forward to welcoming new volunteers.

"Sometimes I can't believe the quality of docents here. We have wonderful, dedicated people who are passionate about learning and sharing. It's scary how fun this can be for the right person," she said.

Volunteers are trained to visit classrooms in advance of docent-guided nature walks and to lead adult visitors as well. Along the trail, each step is an opportunity to enjoy a richer relationship with nature.

"Dana has an ability to frame things several different ways, so whoever she is with will understand what she is sharing with them," said Mary Abbott, the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation education director.

Over the years, Blake has built a reputation as a volunteer who goes the extra mile.

"She has worked with Spanish-speaking students to learn the Spanish words for things. Then she shared that information with other docents," said Raini Vallarino, who helped create the foundation's education program.

"Her interest in Spanish-speaking students helped us decide to create a Spanish-language flier. It encourages the parents and families of students to come back for a nature walk together," Vallarino said.

For those interested in becoming a volunteer docent, an orientation is scheduled from 7 to 9 p.m. Feb. 12 at the Santa Rosa Library downtown branch.

The training itself starts March 12 at the Laguna Water Treatment Plant classroom and runs for 10 weeks through the end of May. Cost of the training and materials is \$145 and includes many reusable tools and reference materials.

Applications, which are due by March 1, are available by mail or on the Laguna Foundation Web site, www.lagunafoundation.org. For more information, or to request a brochure, call Mary Abbott, 527-9277, ext.102.