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NEW LIFE FOR BAY SANCTUARY

Once farmland, salt ponds, Bair Island now protected and ready for restoration

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The biggest undeveloped island in San Francisco Bay, hidden between Redwood City and San Carlos, is a haven for the harbor seal, the great egret and the salt marsh harvest mouse.

Yet Bair Island might have been home to malls and high-rises instead of marine mammals and herons had it not been for a group of conservationists.

Today, the 3,000-acre island -- twice as big as the Presidio in San Francisco -- is ready for restoration. Old earthen berms diked for farming, grazing and salt production will come down, letting in the tides for the first time since the 1800s. Construction starts this summer, but it could take four years to finish the project and a decade more for the marsh plants to return.

Restoring the tidal marsh will benefit the estuary and open a window to the wild side of the bay to visiting schoolchildren, photographers, bird-watchers, hikers, bicyclists and kayakers. Eventually, a parking lot for school buses will be built. A pedestrian bridge from Redwood City to the nearest part of the island will lead to a 1.8-mile trail, ending in two wildlife viewing platforms. Another viewing platform will be built on the outer island.

Tidal marsh is the foundation of a healthy estuary, scientists say. The soggy ecosystem will help control floodwaters, including those caused by rising seas. The marsh also will catch pollutants and act as a rich nursery for mussels, oysters, worms and crustaceans at the base of the bay's web of aquatic life. Without a functioning tidal marsh, there's not much to eat for young Dungeness crab, salmon and steelhead.

Over the past 200 years, the growing California population built towns, roads and other development on top of filled tidal marsh, cutting the bay's original ring of 190,000 acres to 40,000 acres -- an 80 percent loss.

Local natural resource managers set a goal of restoring 100,000 acres in 2000. So far, about 13,000 acres have been returned. Creating 1,400 acres of tidal marsh at Bair Island and completing work at

some 15,000 acres of other former salt ponds would easily double that number.

Last week, Ralph Nobles and Florence and Philip LaRiviere, three saviors of Bair Island, met at their old haunt, Waterfront Restaurant in Pete's Harbor in Redwood City. From a deck, the white-haired octogenarians admired the island, a prize they savored and won.

In 1982, Nobles and his late wife, Carolyn, fought for a referendum that stopped a Redwood City Council plan to build a new town on the island and transform it into another Redwood Shores, a town of 15,000 people with office complexes such as the towering Oracle Corp. headquarters.

The referendum passed by only 44 votes.

When Nobles, a nuclear physicist, read about the development plans, he said he cried out, "They can't do that" and began gathering friends.

"Islands are special," Nobles said last week. "They're isolated from urban predators, and that includes people."

Yet even the public vote on the island's future didn't stop subsequent development proposals from such companies as Leslie Salt Co., Mobile Development Corp. and, the final one, the Japanese multinational corporation Kumagai Gumi.

In the mid-1990s, Florence LaRiviere traveled to Japan to meet with environmentalists there working to convince corporate executives to sell Bair Island for a refuge. Bay Area activists took out a full-page ad in the New York Times to put pressure on Kumagai Taichiro, president of the company. Weeks later, the corporation agreed to sell.

In 1997, the Peninsula Open Space Trust bought the island using \$15 million raised from private donors and government agencies. The group turned over the island to the government, and today the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages it as part of the San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

Bair Island, said to be named after a long-ago hay farmer, is a throwback to days when fish jumped in the sloughs and scented pickleweed and cordgrass carpeted the shores.

During high tide on a recent warm day, Fish and Wildlife Service Ranger Sean Reier headed out Redwood Creek in a motorboat to survey the island. Two wavy sloughs, or channels, divide the island into three sections.

Thousands of visitors each year walk and bicycle on the 3.3-mile Bay Trail along inner Bair Island, starting at a land bridge that connects at Whipple Avenue. Middle and outer Bair are almost entirely off limits to people, and rule violators face a \$125 fine.

As Reier putted through Corkscrew Slough, the only mammals in view were clusters of harbor seals lounging along the banks, eyeing the advancing boat.

"I've seen 20 harbor seals hauled out at one time," said Reier, who was careful not to get too close to the timid seals. They inhabit only a few isolated spots in the bay, including Mowry Slough and Greco Island. Humans have scared them away from other spots, and scientists suspect that this prevents the bay's population from growing beyond about 700.

Buffleheads, ruddy ducks and scaups safely flew over the bay water. Grebes circled in the water and took off en masse. Two heron stood, watching to see if the Reier's boat posed a danger.

On the outer island, biologists have put up nesting boxes to help out the great blue heron, black-crowned night heron and snowy egret. Red foxes, nonnative predators that can swim to the island, had been eating the eggs before wildlife officials started trapping and removing them. Now, the hope is that the birds' numbers will rise.

Once a month for the past four years, volunteers with Save the Bay visit the island, pulling nonnative ice plant and planting about 1,700 plants, including marsh gumplant, alkali heath and salt grass.

The work is part of the restoration overseen by the Fish and Wildlife Service. Already workers have begun to build up parts of the inner island with dredge spoils from the port of Redwood City. The island had sunk from farming. Without the extra soil, the island would become a lake at high tide instead of a salt marsh.

On a January day, Suresh Raman, a 36-year-old computer software engineer at eBay, was one of the volunteers who canoed out to middle Bair to work.

"I'm just a big eco-nut. I'm interested in all environmental issues. This is my chance to practice to what I preach to other people about being eco-friendly and having a minimum impact on the environment," Raman said.

Other bayside gardeners include high school students, retired executives and others just wanting to do something for the bay.

Ginny Anderson, 71, an Atherton author of "Circling San Francisco Bay: A Pilgrimage to Wild and Sacred Places," was another volunteer on the January trip. She worked to spare the island from development in the 1990s. Digging up invasive plants is "a nice opportunity to helping to sustain this wonderful spot that's really a treasure in the middle of the bay," she said.

Back at the Pete's Harbor, Nobles, active and ready to take on other development battles at 87, acknowledged that winning protection for Bair Island "was a very uphill battle because nobody was on our side."

But as he looked over the island and thought about the upcoming restoration, he said, "I just feel so full of pride and happiness that it's hard to describe. Every time, my wife, Carolyn, and I would drive by, we'd say, 'That's our monument.' "

Bair Island at a glance

History: Diked in the late 1800s, the island was used for agriculture until 1946, when it was converted to salt ponds. In 1982, a voter-approved measure halted development plans

Critters: Animals on the island include the harbor seal, California clapper rail, salt marsh harvest mouse, great blue heron, black-crowned night heron and snowy egret.

Plants: Pickleweed is a native salt marsh plant species that supports a variety of habitat, including the salt marsh harvest mouse. Native species of cordgrass is prime habitat for the clapper rail. Also found in the salt marsh are alkali heath, salt marsh dodder and jaumea. Marsh gumplant is found at higher elevations

Size: 3,000 acres

How to help: Call Save the Bay at (510) 452-9261 or the San Francisco Bay Wildlife Refuge at (510) 792-0222.

How to visit: Contact refuge officials at (510) 792-0222 or go to www.fws.gov/desfbay. An easy and popular 3-mile hike starts at a trailhead off Whipple Drive. A boat launch is available off Seaport Boulevard. Hunting is allowed under state regulation during the season, which ended in January.

Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Save the Bay, California Department of Fish & Game

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