

TRACKS

A Publication of the Newport Bay Naturalists & Friends

December-February
2005-2006

It's finally begun!

Expect to see dredging equipment being staged at Lower Castaways, next to the PCH bridge, by the start of the year.

The ground-breaking ceremony for the long awaited US Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) Upper Newport Bay (UNB) Restoration Project took place at the Peter and Mary Muth Interpretive Center on October 11th. Senator Diane Feinstein was the principal speaker. Thanks to her efforts, the US Senate authorized \$7 million of federal money for this project in Fiscal Year 2006. And, thanks to the efforts of Representative Christopher Cox, the House authorized \$2 million. As this article goes to press the Senate-House Conference Committee is meeting to decide what federal funding will be provided this fiscal year.

However, the California Coastal Conservancy has authorized expenditure now of all of the 35% local share of the overall project cost of nearly \$40 million, thus allowing a multi-year construction contract to be awarded. The current construction contract focuses on performing many of the habitat restoration components that make this project more than just a "dredging" project.

The first sign of construction activity will be a small hydraulic dredge traveling slowly up the middle of Back Bay removing sediment from the existing access channel. A hydraulic dredge works like a giant submarine vacuum cleaner loosening sediment with a telescoping cutting tool and immediately sucking it up through a long hose. Suction is provided by a powerful pump mounted on the deck of the dredge. On this project the sediment will be discharged into scows (large flat-bottomed boats designed for transporting bulk materials). Once filled, the scows will be towed out to the designated deep-water disposal site for all uncontaminated dredge material that cannot be used beneficially elsewhere.

One of the destinations of the dredge is the west side of the Bay opposite 23rd Street. Here is a mound of dredge spoils resulting from the deepening of the

"water ski area" below the salt dike in 1970. At that time the intention was to turn the Back Bay into a recreational area. But the ecological importance of the Bay was becoming increasingly recognized and publicized and five years later the UNB Ecological Reserve was created. Some of the mound of spoils, which is now overgrown with non-native grasses and other plants, will be removed to recreate some of the inter-tidal mudflat that will be lost in implementing other components of the project and that existed at the site in 1970 prior to filling with dredge spoils.

Another major habitat restoration activity that is expected to take place before next spring is the removal of top soil and vegetation from the "hot dog" Tern Island below the Friends Lookout (Vista Point) and backfilling with a layer of sand. This island at the north east corner of the Bay is a breeding site for the endangered California Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum browni*). The tern creates a hollow nest in the sand in which it lays its eggs.

Historically the tern nested on the beaches of southern California, but this has been disrupted by the encroachment of people as the coastal areas have been urbanized. Hence protected sandy areas such as Tern Island, and fenced areas near the mouth of the Santa Ana River and elsewhere along the coast are so important. Each year in late winter Newport Bay Naturalist & Friends (NBNF) volunteers cross over to Tern Island to remove as much vegetation as possible to maximize the area suitable for nesting. However, this has become somewhat of a losing battle, so the radical facelift that will be given to the island is eagerly anticipated.

Timing is critical on many of these activities to avoid disruption of the breeding of the very endangered species of birds that this project is aiming to protect in the long term. Thus the "hot dog" Tern Island facelift must be completed before the least tern breeding season starts. Likewise, construction work near the main nesting areas of the light-footed clapper rail (*Rallus longirostris levipes*) will be carefully controlled to avoid disturbance to nesting marsh bird species. Other restrictions have been specified to minimize the effects of construction.

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Yes, I want to be a Friend in 2006 at the membership level noted:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$1,000 Heron | <input type="checkbox"/> \$500 Osprey |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$100 Egret | <input type="checkbox"/> \$50 Tern (Family) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$25 Pelican (Individual) | |

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

My check payable to the Newport Bay Naturalists & Friends* is enclosed.

Please charge my Visa Mastercard Discover

Exp. Date _____

Card # _____

Signature _____

I wish to make an additional gift of: \$ _____
to the Robinson fund.

Total Amount given: \$ _____

Please send me information on Planned Giving

*A registered 501 (c) 3 non-profit organization. Your donation is deductible to the full extent of the law.

Mail completed form and payment to:

Newport Bay Naturalists & Friends
P.O. Box 10804
Newport Beach, CA 92658-5008

Membership Benefits:

Heron: \$1000

Two exclusive private guided walking, canoe, kayak or electric boat tours for up to 8 people. 11x14 signed color photograph by renowned photographer Russ Kerr. Scheduled kayak tours with 50% discount. Free scheduled canoe tours. Quarterly TRACKS newsletter. 10% discount on NBNF merchandise.

Osprey: \$500

One exclusive private guided walking, canoe, kayak or electric boat tour for up to 8 people. 8 x10 signed color photograph by renowned photographer Russ Kerr. Scheduled kayak tours with 50% discount. Free scheduled canoe tours. Quarterly TRACKS newsletter. 10% discount on NBNF merchandise.

Egret: \$100

Laminated color brochure, Local Birds of Orange County. Scheduled kayak tours with 50% discount. Free scheduled canoe tours. Quarterly TRACKS newsletter. 10% discount on NBNF merchandise.

Tern \$50 (family) and Pelican \$25 (individual)

Scheduled kayak tours with 50% discount. Free scheduled canoe tours. Quarterly TRACKS newsletter. 10% discount on NBNF merchandise.

**For additional information, please call
(949) 640-1751 or visit us at
www.newportbay.org.**

Letter From the President

I am honored to have been asked to serve as President of the Board of the Newport Bay Naturalists & Friends (NBNF). When I retired from UC Irvine, where I had major fundraising responsibilities for the campus, I looked at how I could "give back" to my community now that I had more time. I was drawn to this rare remaining estuary in our beautiful Southern California area and enrolled in the ten-week Naturalist program that enabled me to increase my knowledge of the ecological balance and wonder of this habitat.

I work at the desk of the Muth Interpretive Center, assist with the "Friends" Saturday morning walking tours and serve on the NBNF Board. One of the most rewarding aspects of this involvement is sharing the interest and dedication of the staff and volunteers who all work "for the Bay." We each have a responsibility to steward this exceptional natural resource in our midst in our own way. How did YOU contribute this year?

Perhaps you:

- Helped with Cleanup Day,
- Took a kayak tour in Back Bay to educate yourself about the importance of the Bay,
- Brought your children or grandchildren to the Interpretive Center so they could learn more,
- Worked to restore the habitat surrounding the Back Bay,
- Wrote to your congressional representative to support the dredging of the Back Bay, or
- Contributed financial support to NBNF

One of my goals this year as your President is to increase awareness in our community of the treasure we have "in our backyard" and to ask YOU to become more involved in preserving, protecting, restoring, interpreting and enjoying UNB.

This year we have offered restoration and education trips to many disadvantaged children in Orange County by partnering with the Sierra Club Orange County Inner City Outings Group and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Tustin. With your financial help we hope to increase the number of trips we underwrite in 2006.

Next year promises to be a year of significant change at UNB. Work is starting on the roughly \$40 million UNB Restoration Project and a contract will be awarded by the City of Newport Beach for detailed design of the Big Canyon Restoration project. On the West Side of the Bay, County Harbors, Beaches and Parks is ready to seek bids on a major habitat protection/access and restoration project. Also, a contractor will begin construction of the new Back Bay Science Center on Shellmaker Island.

A restoration project that we have undertaken is at Vista Point, located at the junction of Back Bay Drive and Eastbluff Drive and the site where the "Friends" tours started over thirty years ago. We will restore the habitat and install an improved viewing platform and a plaque to honor Frank and Frances Robinson, who were instrumental in the preservation of the Bay. Many of you have already contributed to this effort and we have obtained in-kind donors of engineering and construction time and materials. However, we still need to raise about \$10,000. As you think about your tax-deductible year-end contributions, help us with the final phase of fundraising to complete Vista Point for all to enjoy and to honor the Robinsons who started us all in stewarding the Back Bay.

As a non-profit organization, we operate with the financial support of individuals and families, corporations, foundations, event sponsors and partnering organizations such as the Southern California Plein Air Painters Association who raise money for us through the sale of their fine art.

If you are a "Friend," thank you for your past support and we hope that you will renew your membership in 2006. If you have not joined, please complete and return the 2006 Friends Membership form on the left.

If you are interested in Gift Planning with the Newport Bay Naturalists and Friends in mind, please indicate on the form or call me directly at (949) 759-7591 to talk about how Gift Planning can be beneficial both to you and NBNF.

Think about what more YOU can do this year to help preserve and restore this estuary and to educate ourselves and future generations of its value to us all. Join in! It's fun and a rewarding experience!

*Regina Fodor, President Elect
NBNF Board of Directors*



Upper Newport Bay Calendar of Events

December 2005 – February 2006

Steward Days—Every Wednesday, 9:00–11:00 a.m.

Support the Bay's unique genetics at our restoration sites by collecting seeds & propagating plants. Learn how to grow natives in your backyard, attract wildlife and conserve water. For information call (949) 640-0286. Location code: BBSC

Kayak Tours—Every Saturday, 10:00 a.m.–Noon

Join a trained naturalist for a guided kayak tour of the Back Bay. Meet at the Newport Aquatic Center. \$15/person, 8 & up. \$10/NBNF members. Be prepared to get wet. Reservations (949) 923-2269. Location code: NAC

Kayak Tours—Every Sunday, 10:00 a.m.–Noon

Join a trained naturalist for a guided kayak tour of the Back Bay. Meet at the Newport Dunes Resort. \$20/person. \$10/NBNF members. Parking fee. Reservations (949) 729-1150 or 729-3863. Location code: NDR

Scout Programs—Tuesday through Saturday upon request

Join a naturalist for our 2 hour Brownie or Junior Girl Scout Try-it or badge programs; or join us for Tiger Cub, Bear Cub or Webelo badge programs. Call (949) 923-2269 or email scoutssi@sbcglobal.net. \$7/child includes patch. Location code: BBSC

Sharkmobile is available for your school

Sharkmobile is an outreach program that will bring sharks, rays, sea stars and other marine animals to your school. Participants will enjoy learning about local marine habitats through hands – on activities. Free. More information at www.backbaysciencecenter.org. Reservations (949) 640-9956. Location code: BBSC

Walking Tour—Saturday, Dec. 3, Dec. 17, Jan. 7, Jan. 21, Feb. 4, Feb. 18, 9:00 a.m.

Join a trained Naturalist for a 2 hour walk along the bay. Bring binoculars and sun protection. Free. No reservations needed. For information call (949) 923-2269. Location code: BBSC

Canoe the Back Bay—Saturday, Dec. 3, 10, 17; Jan. 7, 14, 21; Feb. 4, 11, 18; 8:30 a.m.

Join a trained naturalist for a guided 2-hour canoe tour of the Back Bay. \$10/person, 8 & up. For reservations call (949) 923-2269. Location code: BBSC

Plein Air Painting for Kids—Sunday, Dec. 4, 1:00–4:00 p.m.

Sunday, Jan 22, 1:00–4:00 p.m.

Sunday, Feb. 19, 1:00–4:00 p.m.

Enjoy a wonderful time painting the Back Bay. Jean Marie will present and demonstrate traditional Plein Air techniques. All materials are provided. Bring drinking water. \$15/child, 8–18, \$20/adult. Registration (949) 923 2275. Location Code: MIC

ROOTS Restoration Teamwork—Saturday, Dec. 10, Jan. 28, Feb. 25, 9:00 a.m.–Noon

Help restore Back Bay habitat by installing and maintaining native plants while learning about wetland ecology. Reservations required for groups of 5 or more. Refreshments, tools provided. (949) 640-0286 for information and location.

Friends of Newport Bay Walking Tour—Saturday, Dec. 10, Jan. 14, Feb. 11, 9:00, 9:15, 9:30, 10:00, 10:15 a.m.

Walk along the Back Bay listening to Naturalists and visiting Interpretive Stations featuring natural history specialists. Free. No reservations required. Information (949) 923-2269. Location code: EB

Holiday Nature Crafts for Kids—Sunday, Dec. 11, 10:30 a.m.–Noon

Come learn how nature can be part of holiday tradition. Make nature crafts to take home. \$7 per child, ages 5–11. Registration (949) 923-2275. Location code: MIC

Electric Boat Tour of the Bay—Saturday, Dec. 17, Jan. 14, Feb. 11, 11:30 a.m.

Join a Naturalist on a 2-hour guided tour of the bay on our comfortable electric pontoon boat. \$10/person. Reservations (949) 923-2269. Location code: BBSC

Marine Discovery—Saturday, Dec. 17, Jan. 14, Feb. 11, 8:30–11:30 a.m.

Marine biology students ages 8 and up are invited to participate in a variety of marine life monitoring programs in Newport Bay. Under 16 must be accompanied by an adult. Free. Reservations (949) 640-9956. Location code: BBSC

Monthly Naturalist Meeting—Thursday, Jan. 5, Feb. 2, 6:30–8:30 p.m.

Join the Naturalists for a presentation related to the Upper Newport Bay. Refreshments are at 6:30 p.m. and presentation is at 7:00 p.m. Free. For information call (949) 923-2269. Location code: MIC

Bird Watching for the Complete Novice—Sunday, Jan. 8, 1:00–4:00 p.m.

Join us for this introduction to the joy of bird watching. No experience necessary; all birding materials provided. Come prepared to hike. \$4 per person, ages 8 & up. Registration (949) 923-2275. Location code: MIC

Night Hike—Saturday, Jan. 21, 6:00–7:30 p.m.

Join us for night hike and learn about the wonders nighttime brings to our nature preserve. Dress warmly. May be rescheduled due to bad weather. \$5 per person, ages 5 & up. Registration (949) 923-2275. Location code: MIC

Back Bay Mini Cleanup—Saturday, Jan. 21, 8:00 a.m.–Noon

Help clean up trash from the Back Bay. For information and reservations call (949) 640-9956. Location code: BBSC

Train for a Day, Become a Volunteer—Saturday, Jan. 28, 9 a.m.–3 p.m.

Become a part of this dynamic estuary! Learn about the habitats and wildlife of the bay. Participate in habitat restoration and special events. Assist with tours. Greet and educate visitors. Registration (949) 923-2295. Location code: MIC

Astronomy Night—Saturday, January 28, 6:30–8:30 p.m.

Join members of the O. C. Astronomers for an inspirational tour of the night sky including observation with telescopes. Family program. No fee; suggested donation of \$2/person. Registration (949) 923-2275. Location code: MIC

Campfire Program—“The Special Inhabitants of the Back Bay” Friday, Feb. 3, 7:00–8:15 p.m.

Join a Park Ranger for a campfire talk about the endangered and other interesting species living in the Back Bay. Dress for the weather. Rain cancels. \$4/person, ages 8 and up. Registration (949) 923-2275. Location code: MIC

Toddler Time

Join a Park Ranger for a parent – child experience with stories, movement and hands-on fun. \$5 per child. Call (949) 923-2275 to register. Location code: MIC

“Holiday Nature Crafts” – Wednesday, Dec. 14, 10:30–11:30 a.m. (ages 3-5)

Make nature crafts while learning how nature can be part of holiday tradition.

“Hungry Animals” – Wednesday, Jan. 4, 10:30–11:30 a.m. (ages 3 - 4)

Learn about the food chain in the Upper Newport Bay.

“Whooo’s That Owl!” – Wed., Jan. 18, 9:00 (ages 2-3) or 10:30 (ages 3-5)

Learn about the owls that inhabit the Upper Newport Bay.

“Ugh a Bug” – Wednesday, Feb. 1, 10:30–11:15 a.m. (ages 3-4)

Learn all about the creepy crawly bugs that live near the Bay.

“Sharks and Rays” – Wed., Feb. 15, 9:00 (ages 2-3) or 10:30 (ages 3-5)

Learn about sharks and rays that live in the Upper Newport Bay.

Dr. Sue “The Bug Lady” Programs

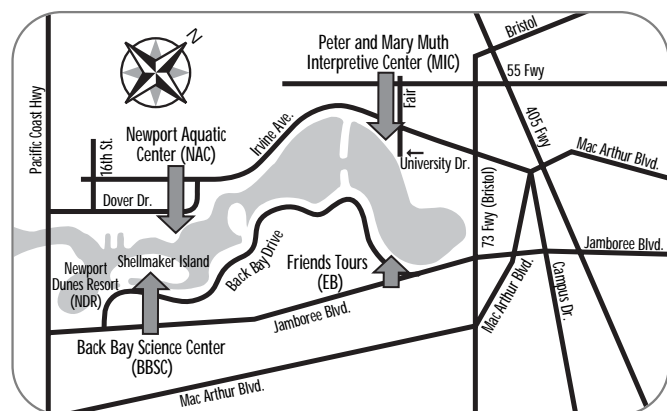
Join Dr. Sue and her traveling zoo for a learning experience all about bugs. \$10 per child, ages 5 and up. Call (949) 923-2275 to register. Location code: MIC

“Basic Bugs” – Saturday, January 14, 2:00 p.m.

Learn all about those creepy crawly critters that live near you.

“Millipedes and Centipedes” – Saturday, February 11, 2:00 p.m.

Learn all about those creatures with so many legs.



WEB SITES

Newport Bay Naturalists & Friends: www.newportbay.org
 Peter & Mary Muth Interpretive Center:
www.ocparks.com/unbic
 Back Bay Science Center: www.backbaysciencecenter.org
 California Coastal Commission: www.coastal.ca.gov

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LOCATION KEY

Peter and Mary Muth
 Interpretive Center (MIC)
 2301 University Drive
 Newport Beach, CA 92660

Back Bay Science Center (BBSC)
 600 Shellmaker
 Newport Beach, CA 92660

Newport Aquatic Center (NAC)
 1 Whitecliffs Drive
 Newport Beach, CA 92660

The Secretive Clapper Rail

Upper Newport Bay (UNB) is home to several endangered and/or threatened bird species. Probably the most intriguing of these is the light-footed clapper rail (*Rallus longirostris levipes*). Many of our Naturalists have never seen this secretive bird, even though the Back Bay has the largest and, some believe, the only viable subpopulation remaining in the USA. More than 170 breeding pairs were tallied in the last count performed earlier in 2005. So what makes the Back Bay so critical to the future of this species?

The clapper rail is very dependent on coastal saltmarsh habitat. Specifically it needs an abundance of tall cord grass (*Spartina foliosa*) to build its unique floating nest in the lower marsh areas that are flooded at high tide. This avian artisan weaves dead grass stems between and around growing stems to form a platform nest that can rise and fall with the flow and ebb of the tide, and then bends and intertwines the tips of the surrounding stems to form a canopy above the nest. The canopy holds the nest in place during high spring tides and provides protection from flying predators. UNB is blessed with large stands of dense, cord grass, and the cord grass grows at what seems to be



Photo © Russ Kerr, majesticbirds.com

the optimum elevation in relation to mean low water.

The clapper rail is a poor flyer, and moves about on foot under cover of the cord grass and other vegetation. When it does venture out, it is most likely to be seen in the early morning scurrying about looking for snails, crabs, insects and other food in the tidal debris at the edge of the marsh. Please treasure any fleeting glimpses you may have of this shy bird from marked trails and designated water areas, but do not intrude into the saltmarsh or side channels and disturb the delicate nesting process. For more information, visit www.clapperrail.com

Dredging (continued)

All activities will be closely monitored by agency and third-party biologists and wildlife experts.

An even bigger issue that had to be addressed during the project feasibility study stage was the relative areas of open water, mudflat and saltmarsh habitat to be achieved and maintained. Each is important in its own right. Open water habitat is needed for the spawning of many important ocean fish, and to sustain the prey base of small schooling fish on which the tern feeds. Mudflat, rich in worms, shellfish and other invertebrates, is a critical feeding ground for migrating shore birds. Abundant saltmarsh provides the nesting habitat for the endangered clapper rail. After much study, it was resolved that the project should result in no net loss of saltmarsh habitat and no more than a 10% decrease or increase in any other habitat type. The project was then designed to meet both those goals and the sediment storage goals mandated by the Regional Water Quality Control Board imposed for the control of turbidity in the Bay.

For information on the entire Restoration Project, please see the June–August 2004 issue of Tracks at newportbay.org/track3q4.pdf or visit www.spl.usace.army.mil/newportbay/uppernewport-bay.htm

Roger Mallett, Naturalist
 Newport Bay Naturalists & Friends