Along with Caspian terns, visitors to Upper Newport Bay may see skimmers, too.

Photo © Hal Beral, Outdoor California Photography Award Program, 1998

Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve

"When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world."
- John Muir (1838-1914) American conservationist

Willet, marbled godwits and sandpipers at Upper Newport Bay.

Photo © Daniel Broussard, Outdoor California Photography Award Program, 1994

A great way to appreciate that all living things are interconnected is to visit California's Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve, a place connecting hundreds of wildlife species to a unique nature preserve.

By Chamois Andersen

Located along the heavily urbanized Orange County coast, just 40 miles south of Los Angeles, Upper Newport Bay was established to preserve one of the largest remaining salt marshes in Southern California.

Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve is a shallow 752-acre estuary, a place where saltwater from the Pacific Ocean flows and mixes with fresh water from San Diego Creek. It is also here that plants, insects, fish and other inhabitants long ago adapted to Newport Bay's climate, landforms and soils.

Today, thanks to a cooperative agreement between the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG), Orange County Parks and the Newport Beach community, the Bay continues to sustain thousands of fish, amphibians, mammals and birds.

Upper Newport Bay harbors a variety of wildlife species both on and offshore. Grebes, ospreys, egrets and endangered brown pelicans come to the Bay's shallow waters to feed on topsmelt, California killifish and halibut. Coyotes, raccoons, and cotton-tailed rabbits make their tracks in the sandy dunes and establish their dens in the coastal sage vegetation along the Bay's steep bluffs.

Amid Upper Newport Bay's wetland world of pickleweed, cattails, mudflats and tidal sloughs, wildlife seek refuge and Californians take solace in nature.

Outdoor enthusiasts come to Upper Newport Bay to kayak, hike, bike, or drive along Back Bay Drive, and to just watch nature's show in this quiet sanctuary.

Upper Newport Bay is one of California's best-kept secrets for excellent bird watching year-round. Nearly 200 bird species have been identified in the reserve and up to 30,000 birds are present from August to April. Six threatened or endangered bird species inhabit the area and the Bay is Southern California's largest estuary and a major stopping place for birds migrating along the Pacific Flyway.

Migration begins with a few bird species showing up in midsummer and reaches its height between October and March. Approximately 56,000 birds visit Upper Newport Bay, including species such as the Northern harrier, Wilson's warbler, cliff swallow and ruby-crowned kinglet.

"Upper Newport Bay is a wildlife mecca and a great place for the public to escape urban life in Newport Beach," said John Scholl, the DFG's education coordinator for Upper Newport Bay.

At Upper Newport Bay, one might hear the clapping sounds of a light-footed clapper rail in the distance, smell the salty ocean in a gentle breeze, or watch black skimmers glide along the water's surface

DFG photo by Herb Clarke

The California light-footed clapper rail is just one of the many species that inhabit the Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve.

DFG photo by Chamois Andersen

When farmers discovered a market for feeding domestic chickens calcium enriched crushed seashells, dredging for shell deposits began on what became known as Shell Maker Island.

poised to scoop up fish in their orange elongated beaks.

One of the most rewarding experiences for watchable wildlife enthusiasts is observing animals going about their business in their natural habitat. In Upper Newport Bay, the keen and knowledgeable eye runs across the wetland landscape automatically checking for food areas, escape cover, perches, good burrowing soil, and dozens of other special places to find wildlife in action.

Wildlife observers need only a good set of binoculars, a field guide and a little patience to see a variety of shorebirds, waterfowl and seabirds in the reserve. Looking closely, one might spot a great blue heron walking slowly in a salt pond searching for small fish, or a double-crested cormorant dive under the water's surface for up to 30 seconds to pursue prey.

"At Upper Newport Bay, seeing animals up-close is a regular occurrence," Scholl said.

Only a few decades ago, this natural landscape was considered high-priced real estate. The Newport Beach community, however, recognized the importance of preserving Upper Newport Bay for the betterment of wildlife, and, as a result, several local interest groups united to save Upper Newport Bay from Newport's encroaching development.

"A part of the reason the reserve is here today is in its well founded partnerships and volunteers," Scholl said.

The vast interconnected web of species preserved in Upper Newport Bay is largely due to the Newport Bay Naturalists and Friends (NBNF), an organization composed of more than 2,000 members dedicated to protecting and restoring Upper Newport Bay's native habitat.

These volunteers enhance wildlife habitat through a variety of restoration projects, including ridding Upper Newport Bay of noxious weeds, invasive plants that can take over the area's native plant communities.

From local fishing clubs sponsoring kids fishing events, to Eagle Scout troops building fences and picking up litter, the Newport Beach community takes pride in caring for Upper Newport Bay as well as informing others about the area's rich natural resources.

Many NBNF volunteers help inform the more than 800,000 annual visitors about the intrinsic values of Upper Newport Bay to a network of animal species. The DFG was instrumental in this effort by establishing the reserve in 1975 to ensure that the land would be managed to provide optimal benefits for fish, wildlife and the public.

Visitors of Upper Newport Bay are afforded a variety of recreation activities as well as hands-on environmental learning opportunities. The DFG offers scheduled canoe, kayak and walking tours with on-site naturalists that provide the public a great way to explore the island while learning more about wildlife and their needs. School tours are offered throughout the school year.

"If we're going to survive, we have to keep our ecological resources intact," said Arline Parker, a volunteer naturalist at Upper Newport Bay. "And to do that we need to learn how to protect them."

For more than 10 years, Parker has informed youths about the importance of preserving Upper Newport Bay for a myriad of animal species. While guiding scout troops along Upper Newport Bay's sandy nature trail, pointing out the various animal tracks and food sources, Parker explains why trash is harmful to wildlife and water quality, and that even

Restoration activities at Upper Newport Bay include removing invasive species like pampas grass which compete with native plants.

Photo © D. Charles Smith, Outdoor California Photography Award Program, 1995

the tiniest animals such as ants are important to the ecological food chain. Parker's hands-on philosophy is simple.

"Ninety percent of what kids do, they remember," she says. "Kids are important in this effort, because they're our future land stewards."

A visit to Upper Newport's Back Bay promises to leave all visitors with a lasting impression of the importance of preserving habitat for wildlife.

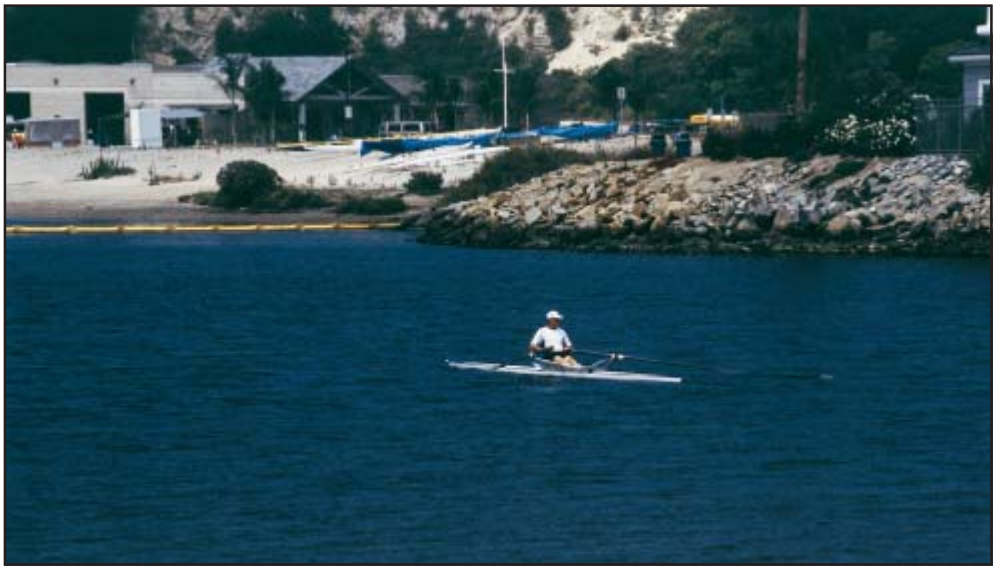
Although Upper Newport Bay has always been a haven for wildlife, many years ago it was recognized for another resource — seashells. In the early 1940s, shortly after farmers discovered a market for feeding domestic chickens calcium enriched crushed seashells, they began dredging for shell deposits on what became known as Shellmaker Island.

This process created 140 acres of bluffs and sand dunes surrounding the estuary, a matrix of decomposed seashells, clams and mud that today provides shelter and a protective environment to nesting shorebirds and waterfowl.

Human disturbance and the loss of protective habitats for suitable nesting sites have contributed to the decline in many bird species throughout the nation in recent decades. In California, less than 50,000 acres remain of the state's vast historic coastal wetland acres for wildlife. Wetlands serve as a linchpin to wildlife as well as the plant communities they depend on. Cattails, sedges and other plants that grow in wetlands have the special ability to take oxygen from the air or water and send it to the plants growing in those areas.

In Upper Newport Bay, this process has produced nutritious forage such as willows that attract a variety of animal species. Insects eat the willow leaves and are then eaten by various bird species. Willows, coastal sage vegetation and other plants also provide a protective cover for nesting birds. The DFG manages California's ecological reserves such as Upper Newport Bay to protect these habitat areas for the diversity of species found in the entire ecosystem. In doing this, individual endangered species are also preserved. The six endangered species that take refuge in Upper Newport Bay are the California least tern, Belding's Savannah sparrow, brown pelican, coastal California gnatcatcher, peregrine falcon, and light-footed clapper rail.

Upper Newport Bay also serves as important breeding grounds for a variety of breeding birds. In 1992, more than 70 percent of the nation's remaining light-footed clapper rail population occurred and bred in the estuary. Other species such as Anna's hummingbird, the great horned owl, marsh wren and red-tailed hawk all breed either in Upper Newport Bay's tall grasses, along the sandy shoreline or on the surrounding bluffs.



DFG photos by Chamois Andersen

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Upper Newport Bay is also wintering grounds for species such as canvasback ducks, Western sandpipers, willets, caspian terns, ring-billed gulls and brown pelicans. As with all living things, everything at Upper Newport Bay is interconnected. The bay waters connect bay shrimp, anchovy and mussels to piping plovers, sandpipers, clapper rails and other shorebirds. And mullet, California killifish and halibut help feed herons, ospreys and snowy egrets.

"We all have a niche in nature," Scholl said. "And if it's going to stay that way, we need to protect the beautiful parts that remain."

Chamois Andersen works in DFG's Lands and Facilities Branch.

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