

Neary Lagoon Wildlife Refuge and Interpretive Trail System

The City thought it would be useful to provide a similar example of an open space where targeted special funds are used very successfully to preserve and enhance a unique coastal habitat, provide access for the community and visitors and operate an exceptional interpretive program.

Neary Lagoon Wildlife Refuge is a City-owned and managed open space located within the Coastal Zone. Featuring wetland and riparian habitats, Neary Lagoon is a successful example of a resource dependent multi-use trail system within an Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Area (ESHA). The wildlife refuge features interpretive displays, a floating boardwalk, and paved multi-use trails. Neary Lagoon is very popular for bird watching, especially waterfowl. Dogs are prohibited.

The boardwalk, approximately ¼ mile in length, allows visitors to experience the open water area and marsh habitats. The floating boardwalk design was needed in order to provide access within the open water area. This type of trail is expensive to construct and maintain. It is presently funded through a City Sewer Service enterprise fund (not General Fund) as mitigation and leveraged by funds from the expansion of the City's wastewater treatment plant.



The paved pathways are ADA accessible and open to pedestrians and bicycles. In addition to providing access to the wildlife refuge, the paved pathways are also used by community members to travel through the open space between the west side of Santa Cruz and the lower central core area of Santa Cruz, to the Main Beach area.

The Neary Lagoon Management Plan, which guided development of the trail system, ensured entrances to Neary Lagoon were conveniently located to adjoining neighborhood areas. Three trail entrances are provided. The Bay/California Street entrance is located to the west, Chestnut Street entrance to the east, and the Blackburn Street entrance to the north. To the south, Neary Lagoon is bordered by the City's wastewater treatment plant and a bluff. The Management Plan was approved by the Coastal Commission.

Local residents and visitors to Santa Cruz enjoy Neary Lagoon as an open space refuge within the central core of the City. Interpretive displays provide information about wetland and riparian habitats, waterfowl, and other species found within Neary Lagoon. Self-guided brochures have also been created to provide more detailed information about the sensitive resources and trail system.

The Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History sponsors popular docent-led outdoor programs for elementary school children at Neary Lagoon. The Neary Lagoon Wetland Walk for 3rd grade explores the unique characteristics and vital functions of a wetland habitat and the importance of wetland preservation. The two-part experience includes an interactive classroom discussion, followed by a hands-on field trip which includes providing binoculars to students for a bird count and close-up views of the lagoon's abundant bird life. More recently, a Watershed Walk has been added for 5th grade classes. This program focuses on the importance of watersheds and their role in the health of the environment, methods used to assess water quality, and water conservation efforts. Hundreds of school children learn about these habitats through the Neary Lagoon Interpretive program each year.