

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Carpinteria Salt Marsh Makes Comeback

The estuary, once pushed to the brink of destruction by development, is flourishing again thanks to restoration efforts



It doesn't take a botanist or an avid birder to be wowed by the 230-acre Carpinteria Salt Marsh. (Chuck Graham / Noozhawk file photo)

By [Karen Telleen-Lawton](#), Noozhawk Columnist | **UPDATED** | Published on 11.06.2009

The pickle weed knows it's November. Its small, succulent leaves are hued from gold to maroon. If you lie prostrate on the decomposed granite path past the Trex boardwalk at the [Carpinteria Salt Marsh Nature Park](#), it looks a little like a miniature New England.



A belted kingfisher, distinctive in her craggy crest and blotchy red chest, hunches in her accustomed spot on a chain-link fence above the estuary. Kingfishers can dive down, spear a fish and return to their perch within two seconds, according to the current [National Geographic](#).

It doesn't take a botanist or an avid birder to be wowed by the Carpinteria Salt Marsh. The [Land Trust for Santa Barbara County](#) calls it "one of the largest and most ecologically important coastal estuaries in California."

Any time of day, with or without field glasses, you can spot magnificent blue herons, great egrets, snowy egrets and savannah sparrows. A host of others appear at the day's edges, from black-crowned night herons to a kitten-cute family of gray foxes. The marsh's dramatic tides bring leopard sharks in to breed, and bat rays also are common. Fish such as diamond turbot, starry flounder and California halibut depend on the marsh as an important nursery.

The areas adjacent to the wetland have been inhabited by humans for more than 9,000 years, but the 20th century was hard on this tiny strip of coast. A railroad, roadways, adjacent development and flood-control measures pushed the habitat's sustainability to the precipice. The marsh tipped toward the 90 percent of California sea marshland destroyed in the name of development. It has translated to the demise of at least 11 of the native plants and animals of the Carpinteria estuary. It also compromised the natural self-cleansing and flood-control properties of the ocean that depend on the marsh's filtering capacity.

The tide began to turn in 1977, when 11 families from adjacent Sandyland Cove donated strips of property to the [University of California Natural Reserve System](#). Decades later, when it again faced the threat of more development, a partnership formed to buy the remaining portion of the coastal wetland. The partnership included nearby homeowner associations, the UC reserve, the land trust, the [State Coastal Conservancy](#), the [city of Carpinteria](#) and the county [Flood Control District](#). Community fundraising supplemented grants from public agencies and private conservancies to provide more than \$2 million for the restoration.

The land trust-directed project began by removing invasive species such as ice plant, castor bean and mustard, smothering it with acres of black plastic sheeting. Historic tidal circulation channels were restored using historical aerial photos. This rehabilitated the breeding grounds for invertebrates such as the California oyster and shellfish, reduced the buildup of silt and algae, and provided public access.

Finally, a starter crop was planted of 18,000 native wetland and upland plants such as the pickleweed (*Salicornia virginica*) and coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*). The project was completed a year and a half ago, and nature's abundance has since been filling in the holes.

Does the kingfisher notice the difference? Hard to say. Maybe the true sign of restorative success would be a clutch of little kingfishers atop the chain-link fence, taking spearfishing lessons from their mom.

[Noozhawk's note: Docent-led tours investigate the marsh every Saturday or by arrangement, at 805.684.5405. A volunteer planting project is planned for this Saturday at the marsh entrance near the mobile home park.]

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*