

Karen Telleen-Lawton: A Winter Weekend on Santa Cruz Island

Professionals and volunteers are treated to the opportunity to witness the islands heal

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 02.24.2011 1:15 p.m.



There's something about waking up to a multitude of birdsong in the lemonadeberry, to being serenaded by meadow larks while watching the South Coast meld into sunset. The islands increasingly belong to the native plants and animals that evolved there more than the 5 million years since they rose from the sea.

Modern-day island regulars include day hikers, overnight campers and a growing legion of volunteers serving in many capacities. Last weekend's [Santa Cruz Island](#) inhabitants included volunteers and their professional leaders from the [Channel Islands Naturalist Corps](#), [Channel Islands Restoration](#) and the [Montrose Settlements Restoration Program](#).

As a "blue shirt" CINC volunteer, my primary task is leading day hikes. After shepherding a group of English, Russians, Germans, New Yorkers and a few South Coast residents on a hike up to Cavern Point, I returned to the ranger station to find a trio of hardy CIR volunteers enjoying lunch before heading back to the mainland.

Dave Edwards, Jerry Mitcham and Greg Sweel began their work three days earlier by hauling heavy gear such as polaskis, loppers and shovels to the work site between Potato Harbor and the Montagnon trail. They put in a good day's exercise before even beginning. Hikers will appreciate their efforts restoring trails from winter flooding and improving trail safety and access.

On my last day, I visited Scorpion Rock, an arrowhead-shaped plug in the sea just outside Scorpion Anchorage. There, volunteers labor to lure back endangered

populations of ocean birds by restoring the native plant habitat. Their leader, Laurie Harvey, is something of a rare bird herself.

The day I first met Harvey on [Santa Barbara Island](#) in 2009, she had craned thousands of gallons of water from a [U.S. National Park Service](#) boat to a dock perched on the edge of the cliff-bound island. Then, after carting at least four backpack-loads of supplies to the cliff-top ranger station, she hand-watered hundreds of endangered plants. When I asked her what was the worst thing about her job, she thought awhile before answering, “I can’t think of anything.”



Volunteers are at the heart of conservation efforts on Santa Cruz Island. (Karen Telleen-Lawton / Noozhawk photo)

Harvey is the seabird biologist for the Montrose Seabird Habitat Restoration Project, a job created by the National Park Service with settlement money from a DDT lawsuit. When she accepted the assignment, her charge was to restore the Channel Islands populations of three endangered seabirds: Xantus’ Murrelets, Cassin’s Auklets and Ashy Storm-Petrels.

Islands are an essential habitat for ground-nesting seabirds, since their isolation brings relative safety from trampling and predation. You wouldn’t imagine there’s any place to roost on Scorpion Rock, much less room to dig and plant. Nevertheless, once you make a timed leap from the Zodiac at the top of a wave swell, a scramble to the top reveals about an acre and a half of space.

For decades, thatches of African iceplant species kept the seabirds from nesting. Now Harvey, David Mazurkiewicz and a host of volunteers pull iceplant and

replant giant Coreopsis, buckwheat, rye grass and other natives grown on an island nursery from seed gathered on or near the rock.

I suppose if you didn't enjoy it, you could call any of these tasks back-breaking, tiresome or even dangerous. But the volunteers are attracted by the overwhelming beauty, the camaraderie and the rewards of jobs well done for the Earth and all its inhabitants.

Harvey probably speaks for all of us when she sums up what brings her here. For professionals and volunteers alike, the best part is the opportunity to witness the islands heal.

"I like to do my small part in saving the Earth," she says.

— *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.*