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NATIVE PLANTS AND BIRDS ARE MAKING A COMEBACK ON SANTA MONICA BEACH

By Andrew Dubbins



Beach evening primrose (left) and beach sand verbenas bloomed this summer inside the three-acre Santa Monica Beach

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restoration area

Imagine Santa Monica's flat-combed beach covered in pink and yellow wildflowers. It may sound outlandish, but it's happening as we speak inside a small fenced-off restoration area just north of the Annenberg Beach House.

"Look at this big guy," says The Bay Foundation's Rod Abbott, giddy as a schoolboy, examining the pink flowers of a red sand verbena sprouting up next to a hummock of ice-green sea scale. "I don't have kids, so these plants are like my kids," he jokes.

Last December marked the one-year anniversary of The Bay Foundation's pilot project to transform three acres of Santa Monica's flat, highly groomed beach into a beautiful and healthy ecosystem. The goals are to provide a refuge for invertebrates, birds and native vegetation as well as evaluate shore protection from climate change and— on a beach that receives millions of visitors each year — show that human recreational use can be compatible with ecological restoration.

"Plover one right there!" exclaims Abbott, the foundation's watershed programs coordinator, pointing to a small bird in the shallows. With a white body, gray wings and black spots around its eyes like smeared makeup, the western snowy plover is listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

Last April, inside the restoration area, The Bay Foundation's ornithologist spotted three plover eggs in a nest of twigs, rack and dried kelp, marking the

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An advertisement for the Valley Recovery Center in Santa Clarita, CA. It features a man's face on the right and text on the left that reads: "VALLEY RECOVERY CENTER SANTA CLARITA, CA", "PERSONALIZED ADDICTION TREATMENT FOR MEN", "DRUG & ALCOHOL DETOX • RECOVERY IN SANTA CLARITA, CA", "CALL 1-866-986-2486", "Live Chat", and "WE'RE AVAILABLE 24/7".

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first time in almost 70 years that the bird has nested in the Santa Monica area.

“The entire conversation changed,” recalls biologist Karina Johnston, The Bay Foundation’s director of watershed programs. After the sighting, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service mobilized, posting signs and erecting a metal enclosure over the nest. Although high winds destroyed the nest, Johnston counts the plover’s return as a major victory of the project. “It shows that even a small restoration area where we stop grooming and allow native vegetation to thrive changes the way a species [like the plover] views the beach.”

Before the Santa Monica Beach restoration project’s launch in December 2016, some Santa Monica residents worried the restoration area would interfere with beach recreation and enjoyment. But in public outreach meetings, The Bay Foundation won them over with artist renderings of the low, unobtrusive fence-lines, the path through the area and unenclosed perimeter along the water’s edge. “By the end of the presentation,” says Johnston, “the folks who were skeptical became enthusiastically supportive.”

“Protecting our beach is protecting the essence of Santa Monica,” said Santa Monica City Councilman Kevin McKeown, a governing board member of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission, which supported the pilot project. “I look forward to the initial restoration’s continued success and our expansion of such mitigations to make sure generations to come get to swim and surf like we did.”

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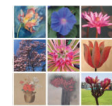
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Funding and support for the project came from the Environmental Protection Agency, the Annenberg Foundation, Patagonia and various environmental organizations.

“The Bay Foundation continues to be a grassroots leader in finding solutions to the environmental crisis,” said Patagonia spokesman J.J. Huggins, who oversaw Patagonia’s \$4,000 grant to The Bay Foundation as assistant manager of the outdoor giant’s Santa Monica store.

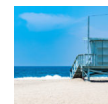
“This project is a terrific model because of its cost-effectiveness,” says Johnston. “Whereas some restoration projects may require heavy equipment or moving sand ... the cost of this project — other than monitoring and manpower — is the expense of the seed.”

A lot of seed, actually. More than 60,000 seeds have already been planted here — a mix of four native plant species: beach burr, sea scale, red sand verbena and beach evening primrose. Most of the growth has taken place inside the restoration area, but some seeds, carried by the wind, are taking root outside the fence-line, as distant as the opposite side of the bike path. “They’re hearty to survive in this wind,” says Abbott, his jacket flapping in the winter gusts. “Weeds can’t take it. You don’t see ’em.”

When it comes to beach restoration, the East Coast has a big head start over Southern California. For decades, places like the Hamptons and Cape Cod have utilized walk paths across their beaches, allowing native shrubs to take root and grassy dunes to form.

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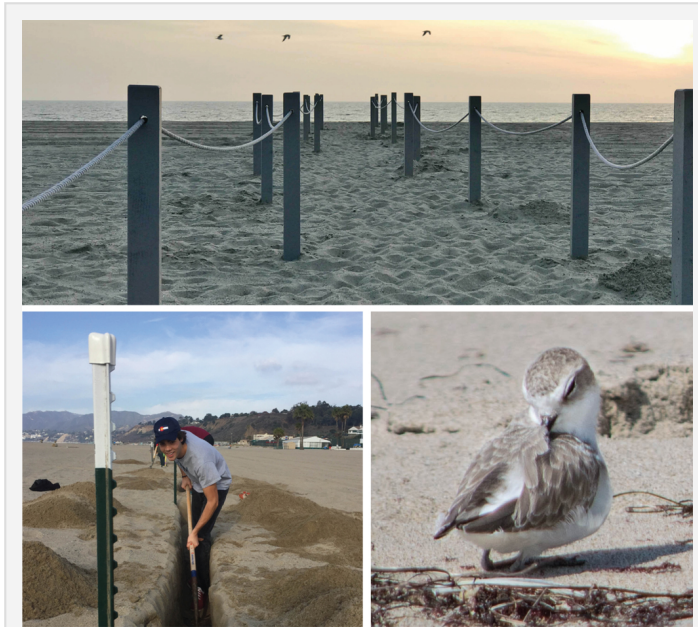
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Santa Monica's daily beach grooming and raking, on the other hand, prevents local plants from growing.

Abbott — tasked with monitoring the restoration area — says beach vegetation was a foreign concept to him growing up. "I'd go to Zuma as a kid and I didn't realize that sand grew plants."



Above: A pathway through the restoration area preserves public access to the beach Left: The Bay Foundation carved out the restoration area in December 2016 Right: A western snowy plover spotted on Santa Monica Beach in September

Plants not only beautify the beach and provide a habitat for insects and birds, says Abbott, but also stabilize the dunes, which can already be seen forming inside the restoration area. Santa Monica, Malibu and several south coast cities are looking at dunes as a natural and inexpensive protection against climate change effects such as water-level rise, erosion and storm surges.

A year into the pilot project — which has a 10-year clearance from the city of Santa Monica — Abbott says initial skepticism has given way to enthusiastic

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community support. Lifeguards, sanitation workers, and nearby beach club members keep an eye on the project site, steering away beach-goers who wander inside the fence. Bird watchers are flocking, says Abbott, and many surfers use the walk path on their morning commute to and from the waves.

The Bay Foundation's first-year report on the pilot project cites the return of the plovers, dune formation, and vegetation growth. In the coming years, Johnston anticipates a major boost to the area's entire ecosystem.

"The fence means more invertebrates. The kelp that rushes ashore — known as rack — supports the invertebrates. Then the birds eat the invertebrates. So ultimately, the whole trophic web is supported," she explains.

Near the fence, Abbott finds a pile of prickly sea scale seeds. "These are the first I've seen since I've been out here," he says, scooping them up and studying them in his palm. "That is so cool," he whispers, a proud sparkle in his eyes.

Learn more about the project at santamonicabay.org.

