



Kurt Ellis

Santa Cruz surfer Mark Hillenga and his dog Jordan check out the scene at end of Jetty Road.

How earthquake helped wildlife

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Thanks to the Oct. 17 earthquake, a Moss Landing wetland is undergoing a metamorphosis.

Those, and there have been plenty, finding their way past barricaded Jetty Road at Moss Landing Beach in recent months have noticed an upsurge of wildlife activity in the surrounding areas. There have also been ecology groups streaming to the site which lies adjacent to Highway 1. And here've been surfers come to catch a wave, or paddle their way to the sea.

Their curiosity has been aroused by the results of increased tidal flow created from

a road culvert that collapsed after the Oct. 17 earthquake.

While the wetland traditionally has been a haven for birds and marsh creatures, the augmented water circulation has introduced a wildlife situation of a magnitude not seen by officials in recent decades.

"It's a real significant increase in the wildlife habitat," said Ken Gray, manager of resource services for the central coast region of the state Department of Parks and Recreation. To his recollection, an environmental cornucopia of this nature hasn't existed since the 1940s, the last time full tidal exchange was present at the site.

In an effort to maintain it,

Gray has been compiling a report, the basis for a hydrology study the Moss Landing Marine Laboratories will turn into the state along with its recommendation on how to rebuild the earthquake-damaged structure.

"We want to design a culvert system to perpetuate the best situation for wildlife in this area," Gray said.

About 2,000 acres of wetlands have been affected by the impacts of the rushing waters, which flow in and out from Moss Landing's north harbor with the tidal cycle.

When mud flats are exposed at low tide, birds have the opportunity to feast on worms, crabs and other invertebrates

which reside in the silt. At high tide, pickle weed, the predominant vegetation of the marsh is washed and resupplied with insects carried along in the water flow.

Also in recent weeks, fish have been migrating into the channel and providing yet another source of food for the swarms of birds hovering over the wetland. American avocet, black-necked stilts and sandpipers are among the featured beneficiaries of organisms now dwelling in the marsh.

Even exotic breeds have been sighted by bird watchers. Earlier this year, members of the Audubon Society of the

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Monterey Peninsula discovered a reddish egret, normally found in Florida and central America, feeding in the marsh. "It's rare to get one this far north," said Robin Roberson, past director of the society.

However, the fancy visitor's northern stay was short-lived. Last month it was found dead by society members.

All this wetland activity has sparked the interest of the nearby Elkhorn Yacht Club, whose commodore intends to arrange for wildlife experts to present seminars on the subject to his members.

"We're really excited about it," said Tim Clifford, adding, "It's the first really positive thing I can say about the earthquake."

Gray agrees. "This is an opportunity to see some positive benefits that happened sort of by chance."

Gray hopes the \$15,000 study can be approved by the state's department of general services right away so that reconstruction of the road can be completed by this summer. In addition to the destruction of the 36-inch diameter culvert, the road was split into deep fissures along its route. Repairs to that thoroughfare and to the earthquake-damaged parking lot at Zmudowski State Beach will be funded separately from Gray's study.

While the state owns the wetland, it is managed by the Moss Landing Harbor District, whose officials this week were reportedly attempting to relieve the water pressure from the channel and keep it from flowing into adjoining farm land.

REFERENCE