

# Creating A Home For Wild Ducks

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Earl Harris agrees with Paul the Apostle that "every creature of God is good," but were he given his choice he would prefer to see more wild ducks and fewer "Easter Egg" ducks in the city of Santa Cruz.

Harris has dedicated his retirement years to restoring to the city the rich abundance of wild ducks and other wild waterfowl that bred or visited here long ago.

"The city is on the great Pacific Coast Flyway," Harris said. "If the city would just take out a few acres of the tules in Neary's Lagoon and create a bigger lake I think we would get some fine birds breeding or visiting here again."

Thanks to Harris, Hugh Bikle of THRUST IV and the city Parks and Recreation Department, there has been a resurgence of wild ducks and other waterfowl here in recent years.

Harris got things going by creating a little refuge at Neary's Lagoon to which he brought injured wild ducks to breed and otherwise live out their lives under protected conditions.

He journeyed to Seattle to get wood ducks and the superb Mandrin, which he considers to be "the most beautiful bird that flies." Harris is the first person to raise the Mandrin here, working under a breeder's license obtained from the Department of Fish and Game.

Harris explains his hobby: "Around 25 years ago there wasn't a wild duck or even water to speak of in Neary's Lagoon except in the winter."

Pointing around the lagoon from the

catwalk of the sanctuary and holding pen on one of its shores, Earl adds, "This place used to be a real mess, a place where people just dumped things, good enough only for a sewer treatment plant, in the opinion of some."

Harris and his father bought eight acres of this "mess" off California Street 35 years ago. He recalls, laughing, "Some of the land here was used for a slaughter house."

The Harris family gave much of this acreage to Robert Hughes, a then-employee of Harris Bros. clothing store, because of their pride in his war service and his contributions to the defense of the U.S.

But down among the wild growth of part of it is an "inviolable area" that is now the haunt of wild ducks, geese, quail, pheasants and doves . . . all living as their ancestors did in the long ago before the blight of urban growth virtually destroyed the pristine beauty of Neary's Lagoon.

Aware that far more work than he could do would be needed to restore wild waterfowl to the area, Earl secured the imaginative and financial aid of Bikle of THRUST IV, builders of Shelter Lagoon, to convert the lagoon into an ecological resource for the city.

Bikle put clam dredgers to work scooping out tules, junk and other debris to create a series of interconnected "lakes" where the waterfowl could cruise and eat undisturbed. Nesting islands were created. The city of Santa Cruz got a grant to create Neary's Lagoon Park and Waterfowl Refuge here and has played a key role in making the glories of wild life available for the joy of residents in the heart of the city.

"The thing that bothers me now," Harris said, "is that the city Public Works Department dumps street dirt and trash next to the park. They shouldn't do that. And I am worried that one of these days the city will try to claim more land here to expand the sewer plant."

But Harris says he cannot praise the city too highly for the work of the Parks and Recreation Department. "The people who come to this area to play tennis or picnic or to sit in a quiet place and enjoy the birds on the water or in flight owe a lot to these parks people. This is a great thing the city has here."

Yes, the wild ducks and other waterfowl are beginning to return. Recently, in fact, the federal Bureau of Fish and Wildlife, in cooperation with the California Department of Fish and Game, came to the refuge to band a flock of wood ducks, Canadian honkers and American pintail, or sprig.

These creatures were trapped through the cooperation of the city Parks and Recreation Department and put into a holding pen. The birds will be released to fly off as usual, and one day the bands will be recovered to tell where the birds got to on their journey from Santa Cruz.

The number of wood ducks and Mandrin ducks has doubled or tripled since Harris began his work, and it is a beautiful sight to watch the wild ducks come in to get their share of the food handouts tossed onto the water at either Earl's sanctuary or by others at Shelter Lagoon or in the park.

Harris allows schoolchildren to make scheduled visits to the sanctuary and gives them information on the ducks and other waterfowl he has acquired during a half century of active membership in the Santa Cruz Duck Club.

In the last 20 years, Harris has added to his knowledge of the birds by close study of them at the sanctuary. He buys corn and bread by the truckload to feed the creatures and is glad to get such donations that restaurants and individuals make.

Harris was once offered the entire Neary's Lagoon for \$28,500 in 1935. "Donald Younger said I could have the whole 47 acres for that," Harris recalls, "but in those days I was only making \$45 a week."

Still, his dream for the lagoon is coming true . . . and on a recent day he was able to point out speckled-breast geese, snow geese, Canadian geese or honkers, mallards, wood ducks, Mandrins, sprig, gadwall, baldpates, cinnamon teal and shoveller (spoonie).

"It's been great," Harris says. "Maybe I haven't created a new street, but I have been able to help bring some wild birds back here for Santa Cruz to enjoy."

Harris stresses the word "wild," and this is why:

At Schwan Lake, the vast majority of the ducks people see are what Harris calls "Easter Egg" ducks.

"People get these ducklings for their children around Easter and they keep them for a while and then take them here and let them go," Earl said.

"Well, a mallard will mate with anything, and that's most of what you see here: the results of mallards mating with domestic ducks. Oh, you do see a few wild ones. But right now, standing here, I see only one or two wild ducks, the rest are domestic and domestic crosses with the mallard."

Harris smiled. "It's good people come here and enjoy the birds and feed them. But I prefer wild ducks and I want them here in their right places in Santa Cruz."

