

A RAINY YEAR SERVES TO REMIND US

By Cindy Hardin, LA Audubon Director of Outdoor Education

The significant amount of rain received in Southern California during this past winter was much in the news, and celebrated or bemoaned, depending on your point of view. The paucity of precipitation over the last several years left many Angelenos with distant memory of what a real rainstorm feels like, me included. Images of rain swollen rivers, landslides, road closures and flooded streets were dramatic reminders of the type of winter that had not been experienced for quite some time. In the aftermath, the much heralded “Super Bloom” of wildflowers brought people to the outdoors in droves.

On a very local level, there was equally dramatic evidence of the rainy season at the Ballona Wetlands. Although some will tell you differently, historically Ballona was primarily a fresh water wetland. Prior to the channelization of Ballona Creek and the diversion of rainfall through storm drains and directly out to the ocean, vernal ponds and freshwater streams coursed through the marsh. Large sandbars would often close off the mouth of Ballona Creek, backing up the water flowing off our hills to create seasonal freshwater habitat, providing ideal conditions for frogs, insects and overwintering migratory birds. During this especially rainy winter, visual proof of this historic past was abundant. The salt panne was covered in standing water for months, and small waterborne invertebrates that remain dormant in dry conditions came alive.

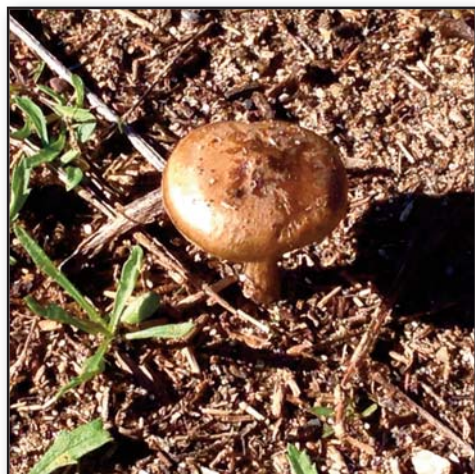
This provided fodder for hundreds of Black Bellied Plovers, which were present throughout the winter. Ponds came to life below the Playa del Rey bluffs, and Pacific Chorus Frogs are still filling the nights with their ridiculously loud song. Normally dry trails flooded, and lichen and mushrooms turned up everywhere.



The historic salt panne at Ballona. Standing water covered the entirety of the salt panne for most of the winter.

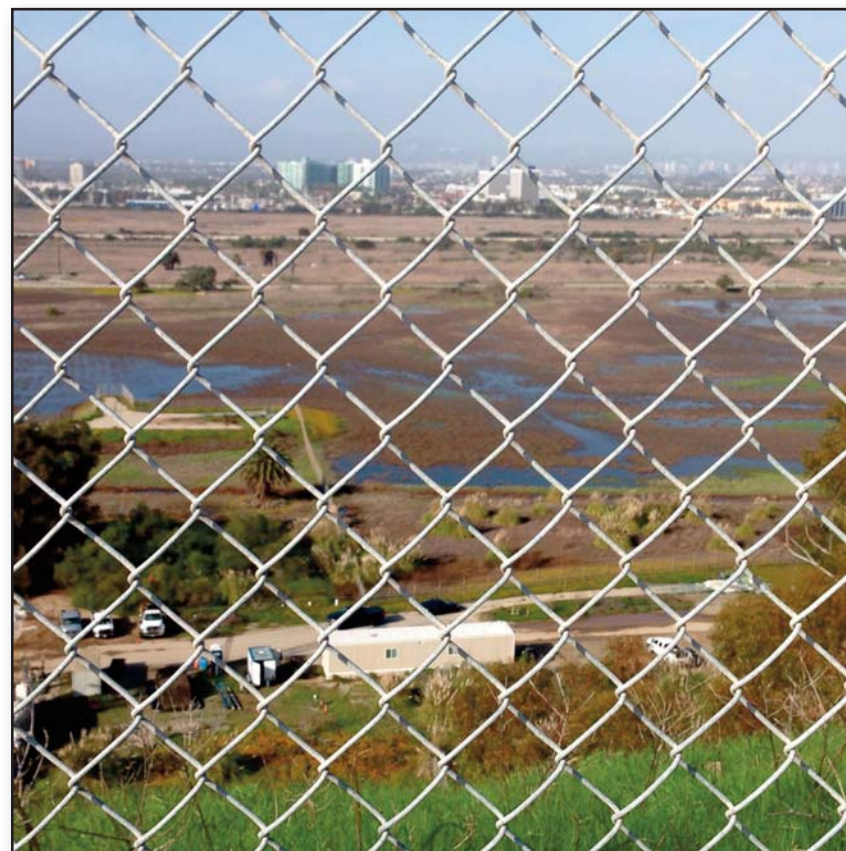


This is the trail that school children use to access the wetlands for their field trips. More than a few trips had to be re-scheduled due to rainy conditions.



Moisture loving mushrooms were popping up everywhere!

The part of the wetlands known as Area B south displayed accumulated water and rivulets during January, February and most of March. This section lies south of Culver and directly below the bluffs, and still has a major stand of Willow trees, even during dry years.



Large ponds below the bluffs were present for weeks after the last rainfalls. Meandering streams connected some of these ponds.

The Willow trees are indicative of the high level of groundwater that is always present at the site. The rains of 2018-2019 re-charged this aquifer, and allowed rainfall to accumulate at the surface, enhancing the habitat for countless species. It was quite a year. During some storms, huge volumes of water ran through swollen gutters and over paved roadways, mimicking ancient streams that once flowed freely through the hilly terrain above the lowlands of Ballona.



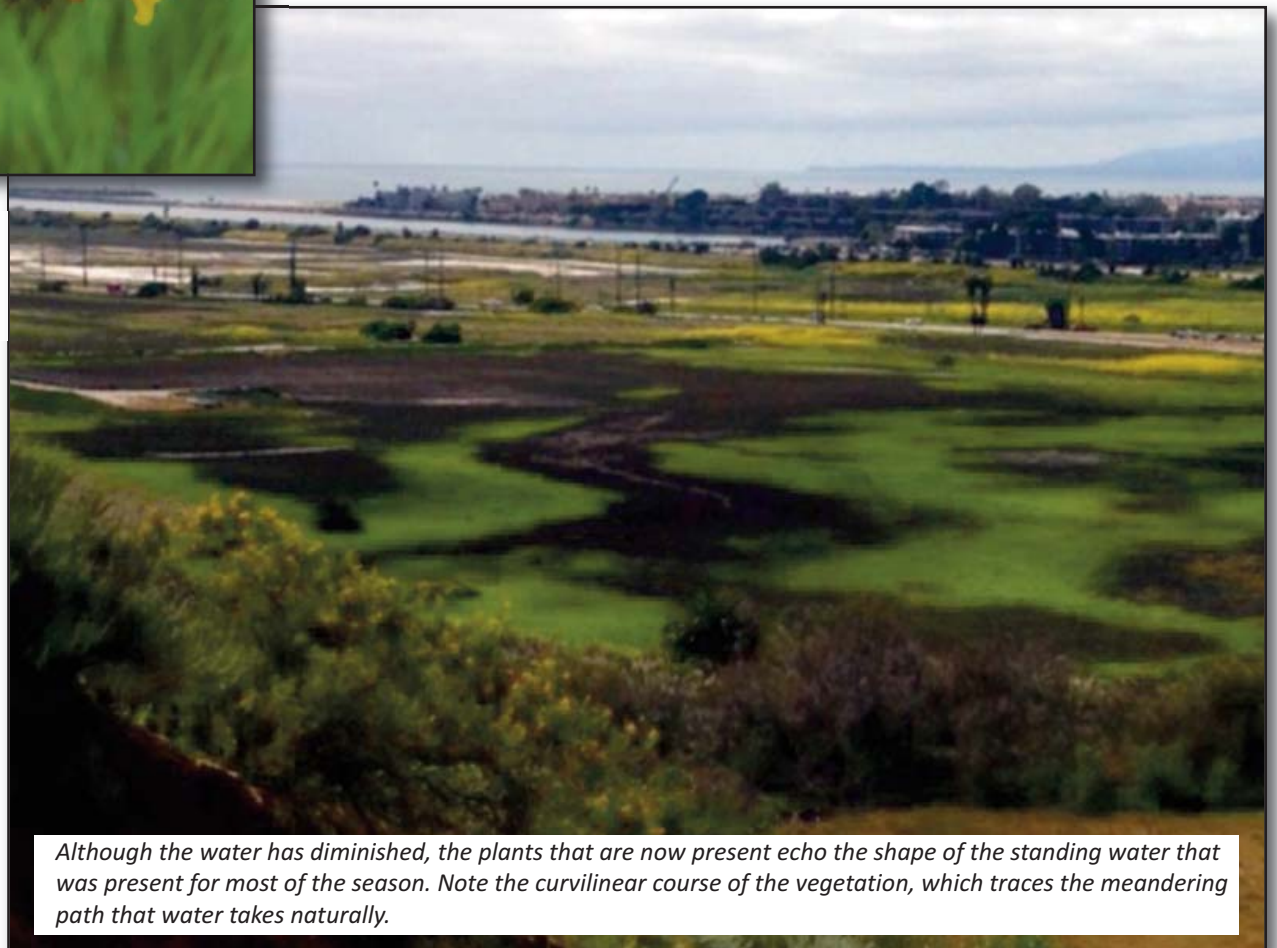
*No need to drive great distances to see a “Super Bloom”. It is here in our own backyard, and can be viewed at our next Open Wetlands on May 4th.
Photo by Jonathan Coffin*

It seems that the rains have now abated for the season, and extravagant displays of wildflowers are now present throughout the wetlands. Lupine, sunflowers, deerweed and many other natives are showing off their spring finery.

Although much of the standing water has evaporated, left in its place are vast expanses of green that perfectly outline the shape of the ponds and streams that were present for months. These “souvenirs of the season” can be easily viewed from above along the One Westbluff Trail, just off Lincoln Boulevard.

Most of the shots that accompany this article were taken from this trail, which is open to the public every day from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. This walking path overlooks all of Ballona, and features beautiful native plants and their accompanying pollinators, birds and other wildlife. Right now is a great opportunity to be reminded of what once was, and could be again if decisions are made to encourage more freshwater habitat at Ballona. As most of you know, the revised Environmental Impact Report regarding the future of Ballona is due to come out at some point this year. It would be most appropriate and correct if one of the alternatives offered allowed the freshwater that was once an elemental part of the wetlands to re-establish itself.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Army Corp of Engineers, and other stakeholders: Are you listening to the land? And to the frogs? 🐸



Although the water has diminished, the plants that are now present echo the shape of the standing water that was present for most of the season. Note the curvilinear course of the vegetation, which traces the meandering path that water takes naturally.