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HABITAT SUCCESS WHERE SEA MEETS LAND

If you’ve driven along Jamboree Road in Irvine between University Drive and the 73 Toll Road, then you’ve passed the San Diego Creek Salt Water Marsh. The flat wetlands of the marsh stretch for acres around the thin line of San Diego Creek.



San Diego Creek

At first glance, the flat terrain carpeted in short grass ranging from golden brown to green seems like not much more than a vacant patch of land, but get inside and you’ll find that the marsh is teeming with life and complex, diverse ecosystems.

Located not far from Upper Newport Bay, the salt water marsh provides significant habitat for more than 68 species of birds – including grebes, herons and egrets. During peak migration periods, hundreds of thousands of birds migrating along the Pacific Flyway descend upon nearby coastal waters in search of refuge and food.

In the 1990s, the Transportation Corridor Agencies (TCA) purchased, restored and preserved 2.4 acres of open space at the San Diego Creek Salt Water Marsh. The acreage is part of a larger coastal wetland habitat used by the endangered California least tern and other small birds as a place to nest and find food. San Diego Creek and the surrounding area also form part of a wildlife movement corridor linking the Upper Newport Bay to the San Joaquin Hills.

Found where sea meets land, salt marshes like this one provide some of the world’s most productive ecosystems and natural pollution filters. A large variety of plant and animal life thrive in the salt marsh’s delicate balance between tidal salt water and nutrient-rich fresh water.

“Salt marshes are very important natural habitats,” said Celia Kutcher, a member of the board of directors of the California Native Plant Society - Orange County chapter. “The salt marshes in Upper Newport Bay are a jewel in OC’s crown. Their preservation and ongoing restoration are a credit to all who have worked and continue to work on them.”

SALT-LOVING PLANTS

Salt marsh plants are a big part of what makes salt marshes such an important natural habitat, Celia Kutcher of Orange County’s California Native Plant Society says.

The plants are adaptive and take advantage of soils where fresh and salt water meet, and where tides ebb and flow. The following salt marsh plants are common in the Newport Bay area and form habitat for the wide variety of animals that live in these unusual conditions.



California cordgrass

This California native plant, also known as Pacific cordgrass, is often one of the tallest plants in the salt marsh. Its roots take in seawater and pump it out through special pores in its tough, thick leaves, leaving salt crystals on its blades.



Pickleweed

A grey-green succulent named for its resemblance to pickles, this California native plant is eaten and used for nests by different birds and animals in the salt marsh. In the summer, it grows tender green tips that some human gourmets use in salads and other recipes.



Salty bird’s-beak

This federal and California endangered plant grows in only a handful of locations in the state, including the Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve. Its many branches are covered in fine thin hairs that secrete salt crystals, giving it a “sugared” appearance.



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