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At this month's open house, only a handful show up to see the Ballona Wetlands' rare wildlife and scenic vistas. "Most people don't know this place even exists. But they should," a volunteer says.

May 16, 2010 | By Louis Sahagun, Los Angeles Times

A dozen conservationists gathered at the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve on Saturday to introduce visitors to the natural rhythms of life in some 600 acres of restored marshlands that are laced with brackish rivers and hiking trails.

The volunteers, members of the Friends of Ballona Wetlands, were eager, knowledgeable and armed with interpretive literature and maps of the expanse sandwiched between Playa del Rey, Marina del Rey and Playa Vista, two miles north of Los Angeles International Airport.

On a table staffed by two docents, six microscopes were focused on horned snails and single-celled creatures taken from a nearby creek. A viewing platform featured a spotting scope aimed toward the nesting grounds of federally endangered Belding's savannah sparrows. However, few passersby took advantage of the view.

Only a handful of people showed up for the Ballona Wetlands Open House held from 1 to 3 p.m. As the event was winding down, nine visitors were listed on the sign-up sheet.

Nevertheless, the open house went on.

"It's sad," said docent Christian Alvez, 36, who was positioned at a trail stop surrounded by waist-high stands of dune lupine edged with bright blue flowers. Clutching a color photograph of an unusual local reptile — the rarely seen California legless lizard — he said, "Most people don't know this place even exists. But they should."

The area for decades has been a battleground for environmentalists, developers and local authorities.

Before that it was a place where "you name it and people did it," said the group's co-executive director Lisa Fimiani. "They drilled for oil, grazed horses and cattle, grew beans and celery and dumped tons of refuse. For a while it served as a crash zone for Howard Hughes' experimental aircraft."

The group formed in 1978, in response to a developer's plans to build a residential and commercial complex on the wetlands. They sued, and in a settlement, the developer agreed to refrain from building on the wetlands west of Lincoln Boulevard, and to create a nearby freshwater marsh.

Since then, the group has been working to restore the habitat — with only hand tools and muscle. The environmental group also joined with other organizations to develop plans for restoring tidal and freshwater flows, and to launch education and habitat restoration programs.

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In 2003, the Friends of Ballona Wetlands and a coalition of environmental groups persuaded the state and the Trust for Public Land to buy 260 acres of upland habitat for \$140 million, expanding the reserve to 600 acres.

Today, the group is one of the few organizations permitted by the state to escort people onto what remains fragile and degraded land. As part of its effort to increase awareness of the wetlands and its needs, the group in January began sponsoring open house events at least once a month.

They typically draw about 40 visitors. On Saturday, however, there were almost as many docents stationed at stands of deerweed and buckwheat as there were visitors. The plants are magnets for butterflies including Western pigmy blues and gray hairstreaks.

Standing beside the registration table, co-Executive Director Richard Beban smiled and said, "We don't care about numbers."

"This event is our way of saying, 'Come see the living treasure in your own backyard,' " he said. "This was only one of many more open houses to come."

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