



**LAST SALT MARSH** -A covey of needle-nosed willets feeds at the edge of Ballona Wetlands, the Marina del Rey-area site where a conservation battle is brewing.

Times photos by Tony Barnard

## LA BALLONA WETLANDS

# Ecosystem Vs. the Developers

BY MARK JONES

Times Staff Writer

For years Ruth Landsford and her husband enjoyed strolling the beaches near their home in Playa del Rey. Then one day they decided to investigate an area they'd seen from their car but never bothered to explore.

Their choice was a seemingly deserted coastal meadow just south of Marina del Rey which, to the Landsfords and thousands of others driving by, seemed nothing more than a vacant lot. A little large perhaps, but nothing extraordinary.

As it happened, however, the Playa del Rey couple had a delightful walk through the meadow, where paths of greenish-black soil had a salty fragrance and where the knee-high shrubs had a curious texture. Something like rubber, or wet pickles.

And then there were the birds!

There must have been hundreds of big, small, spectacularly colored species of birds convened on the broad mudflats or hovering overhead by the score, issuing their shrill *pip-pip-pip* sounds, Mrs. Landsford recalled the other day.

To say that that stroll one winter afternoon five years ago came to alter the Landsfords' lives is something of an understatement.

When Mrs. Landsford, a mother of two in her 40s, discovered that the area—the surviving fragment of Los Angeles' great, turn-of-the-century La Ballona Estuary, was threatened with man-made extinction, she took action.

And by herself she established a conservation

group now known as Friends of the Ballona Wetlands. Its some 500 members hope to save the salt marsh from destruction.

Saturday, between 9 a.m. and noon, the second in a series of free, guided nature walks on the perimeter of the privately owned salt marsh will be conducted by Mrs. Landsford's conservation group.

The organization's first nature walk last month attracted several hundred persons, among them members of the Audubon Society, the Sierra Club (both of which endorse efforts to save the salt marsh), biologists and ordinary weekenders with backpacks and binoculars.

One afternoon recently Mrs. Landsford conducted a brief tour of the deserted coastal marsh along with Cal State Long Beach biologist



DR. HAROLD TOWNER

"... birds need the marsh to live."

Ken Dial and Friends member Roxanne James.

During the tour Mrs. Landsford explained that the remaining 350 acres of what was once La Ballona Estuary—and currently owned by the late Howard Hughes' Summa Corp.—looms as the centerpiece of an important struggle between conservationists and developers.

"The salt marsh," she said, "is the last of its kind on the Los Angeles coastline. It's the migratory home of more than 200 species of birds—including two on the list of endangered species—and we're trying our hardest to prevent it from disappearing under a layer of asphalt."

Please Turn to Page 18, Col. 1



**SAVING THE WETLANDS.** -Conservationists Ruth Landsford, left, Roxanne James and biologist Ken Dial tour West Los Angeles coastal marsh they want to preserve.



**THE WILD SIDE** -Two youngsters gallop through the county's last coastal salt marsh,

the focus of a forthcoming battle between conservationists and developers.

Times photo by Tony Barnard

# An Ecosystem Vs. the Developers

Continued from First Page

As the small group hiked across the tule-lined paths, Mrs. Landsford said that she established the Friends of the Ballona Wetlands last summer when she heard that Summa had submitted to the county a plan to convert the coastal meadow into an urbanized extension of the Marina.

"My husband and I have come to know the wetlands pretty well since that first time he and I came here," the woman said. "I guess we always knew that Summa would want to do something with the land but we never knew what or when. Of course, we kept hearing rumors but nothing substantial.

"It was like sitting on a time bomb not knowing when it (plans for development) was going to explode."

The wetlands, part of a 19th-century Spanish land grant, consists of 1,000-acre rectangle along Culver Blvd. (both east and west of Lincoln Blvd.) that was purchased by industrialist Howard Hughes in the 1930s.

The plot includes the Hughes Aircraft Co.'s corporate headquarters and airstrip, both of which are scheduled to be vacated in 1981.

Last March, a ranking Summa official, senior vice president James Le Sage, notified the county's regional planning commission that in spite of its endorsement of the salt marsh as a "significant ecological area," Summa would continue evaluating the land for future development.

The Summa official said his Las Vegas-based corporation seriously considered developing a large urban complex just south of the Marina—complete with thousands of housing units and a new shopping center—if and when they received proper authorization from county and state officials in the next few years.

Some of the first Los Angeles Planning Commission hearings are expected to begin sometime early next year (and will be followed by public hearings before the Board of Supervisors).

After 1981, the state's regional coastal commissions will be retired, thus putting permit authority (to develop the Wetlands, in this case) in the hands of local government. Nevertheless, according to a regional coastal commission spokesman, any development plan associated with California Wetlands must eventually secure state approval.

The spokesman speculated, however, that rather than

trying to get permission to develop the salt marsh, that instead Summa might attempt to take its land out of the "protected wetland" category by arguing for a change in

Please Turn to Page 19, Col. 1

# ECOSYSTEM

Continued from 18th Page

the current boundary, which goes as far inland as Lincoln Blvd.

Summa's Le Sage declined last week to make a direct comment on the firm's plans for the wetlands. Instead, a company spokesman issued a statement:

"We are now finalizing concept ideas for a land-use plan for the Playa del Rey property," the spokesman said. "As part of this, we are meeting with the appropriate jurisdictions involved. We hope to be able to release more specific information and details by mid-December."

UCLA zoology professor Thomas Howell, who's led innumerable biological field trips to La Ballona salt marsh from the Westwood campus since the 1950s, said this week he is optimistic the wetlands will be spared.

"It used to be said that nobody loved a salt marsh except a biologist," Howell said, "but I think the conservation climate in this country has changed all that. More and more people here are recognizing that if the salt marsh is removed it will help to kill off a number of birds—two of whose species are already endangered.

"This salt marsh is not expendable," he said. "Some peo-

ple more oriented toward development might think, 'Hey, wouldn't it be nice to dredge out all the mud and put in a lovely new yacht harbor or an extension of the Marina?' Well, let me tell you this. Salt marsh is no wasteland . . . it's a terribly important breeding area for all sorts of birds and animals. It's one of the few we have left on the Southern California coastline."

In recent years the environmental history of the wetlands has, because of the economic and ecological controversy at hand, come under close scrutiny by such agencies as state Fish and Game, the California Coastal Commission and by private firms commissioned by Summa.

On the one hand the Audubon Society, in a letter written to the county this year, advocated the preservation of the salt marsh on the grounds it "presents the richest source of birdlife in the entire metropolitan area."

"Years ago, before Marina del Rey was built," the Audubon spokesman wrote, "the marsh and mudflats (there) supported an enormous population of mammals, waterfowl and shorebirds. The Summa Corp.'s plan to form another marina would wipe out the remnants of this population and destroy an irreplaceable wetland habitat."

Summa's Le Sage disagreed, however, writing to county planning officials that after conducting private environ-

mental studies the company contends that the wetlands has deteriorated in recent years and is "physically and economically incapable of restoration . . . to a significant ecological use."

Aside from Ruth Landsford, one of the persons most closely allied with the save-the-wetlands movement is Howard Towner, an assistant professor of biology at Loyola Marymount University, whose campus is located on a hill overlooking the coastal meadow.

Towner said recently that in the past four years he has observed more than 200 different species of birds at the salt marsh, among them the two which are officially listed among the endangered species, the California least tern and the saltwater-drinking Belding's Savannah sparrow.

The biologist explained that while the largest of the avian population are the more common plovers, willets, sanderslings, curlews and killdeer, that often in winter (when the marsh is used principally by migratory birds) it hosts such species as the great blue heron, the green heron and the large-winged snowy egret. Last year an American bald eagle took up residence near the marsh for a short while.

Towner said scores of bird species depend upon the Los

Angeles County's last salt marsh for survival during migration and through the winter.

Mrs. Landsford, biologist Ken Dial and Mrs. James continued their late afternoon tour of the salt marsh, pausing for a few minutes at the edge of a large, irregular mudflat which, this winter, will again teem with thousands of migratory birds.

"Most people don't understand the ecological value of this area until they actually come out here, sit down and watch," the young biologist said.

"We're all mixed up in this ecosystem," he said. "No, we're not going to die if we let this little piece of land go like so many others, but you have to think of paving over what it is natural in terms of a country-wide process.

"I don't want to sound like a sentimental environmentalist crying over the 'cute birds,'" Dial said, "but when you've got rare and endangered species at stake who decides whether they should live or die? Frankly, I don't think any of us has the right to play God with species that have taken millions of years to develop."

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