

A haven for wildlife

First wildlife preserve on the Central Coast

The Tribune: September 3, 2000

Guadalupe—Call it an island of tranquility in a sea of controversy.

Sandwiched between the Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area and the Guadalupe oil field sits the nation's newest wildlife refuge and the first one on the Central Coast.

The Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes National Wildlife Refuge is 2,553 acres of shifting sand and rolling coastal scrub land. The refuge was born Aug. 1 when The Nature Conservancy donated what has historically been known as the Mobile Coastal Preserve to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The refuge is one of 500 across America.

"It's just a stunning area to explore," said Chris Barr, 33, the refuge's manager. "Every time you come out here, you are going to see something you haven't seen before."

On a recent morning, Barr hiked out to his new domain. As he trudged along the sandy trails of the state's Oso Flaco Lake Natural Area to reach the refuge, the buzz of motorcycles and dune buggies could be heard to the north.

The use of the beach and dunes of the state park by off-road vehicles is a source of much controversy for the Parks Department. Barr won't have that problem—no cars are allowed in the refuge.

To the south, Unocal Corp. is in the beginning phases of cleaning up one of the nation's worst petroleum contamination sites. Barr won't have that problem either—his agency made sure none of the pollution extended into the refuge before it acquired the land.

Instead, the refuge will serve as a haven for scarce coastal plants and animals as well as outdoor enthusiasts who like to get away from trails and campgrounds and experience nature at its most elemental.

On paper, the refuge covers 8,330 acres, but only the former Mobile Coastal Preserve is actually owned and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Other adjacent properties, such as the oil field, are included within the refuge boundary in order to give the service the ability to easily acquire them should their owners want to sell or donate the land.

As Barr reached the ocean, he turned south and splashed across Oso Flaco Creek. Before him stretched the refuge - an expanse of low, tan-colored dunes covered with splotches of hardy shrubs.

Reasons for the preserve were everywhere.

Large flocks of gulls and brown pelicans rested by the mouth of the creek. Farther along the beach, clusters of tiny sanderlings scurried along the surf line, and long-billed curlews took flight, screeching in protest at the uncommon human intrusion.

One of the main purposes of the refuge is to provide habitat for the threatened western snowy plover. Ten nesting pairs of the tiny birds were observed on the refuge this summer, Barr said. Least terns and peregrine falcons also forage on the refuge.

Surf fishing is the most common human activity on the refuge. Hikers, bird watchers, photographers and botanists are also infrequent visitors.

After watching dolphins feed offshore, Barr headed inland. Away from the beach, the sand is hard-packed and sculpted by the wind.

Unlike the OHV areas to the north, vegetation crowns many of the dunes and extends along their slopes. Pockets of wetlands, inhabited by willows and threatened red-legged frogs as well as endangered Gambel's watercress and marsh sandwort, are scattered among the dunes.

Soon, the refuge's main problem becomes evident. Many of the plants that grow in the refuge are imports from Europe and Africa and threaten to overwhelm the native species. (Some of the imports were planted by ranchers for forage for cattle; others grew from seeds that blew from plants brought by homeowners for their gardens).

European beach grass is encroaching into the refuge from the sea, blown inland by prevailing onshore breezes. Veldt grass is spreading from the inland side.

Finding a way to stop and, if possible, reverse this encroachment will be Barr's biggest challenge. This brings the refuge manager to one of his favorite topics - "partnering," or cooperating with other agencies and groups to achieve common goals.

He hopes to work with groups such as the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County to remove invasive weeds without damaging the fragile ecosystems of the refuge. Unocal is another resource.

The company is required to remove all non-native plants from the oil field as part of the cleanup and will be experimenting with innovative ways to accomplish that order. Barr hopes the refuge can benefit from that research.

Barr's first partnering was with The Nature Conservancy. In 1997, the group decided to find an agency that could own and manage its preserve in the dunes. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was a natural choice.

"Chris Barr and the Fish and Wildlife Service will do a much better job protecting the resources out there," said Kara Smith, project manager with The Nature Conservancy.

Barr, a Cal Poly graduate, was working at the Salinas River National Wildlife Refuge at the time and was excited about the prospect of establishing a refuge on the Central Coast. He wanted to be the new manager.

"I'm there," he vowed to himself.

Since becoming manager, Barr has worked with state and county parks departments to share scarce resources.

"I'm a one-man show," he explained.

One of his most important partnerships is with the Dunes Center, a nonprofit environmental and educational organization. Refuge headquarters are next to the center's new offices in downtown Guadalupe.

Karen Wood, Dunes Center executive director, said she is pleased the refuge has been established.

"The refuge brings with it a lot of expertise," she said. "It will help us implement our research library, which will be housed in the refuge's office space."

Farmers whose fields surround the refuge are another group Barr is trying to help. Hikers sometimes trespass on farmland to reach the refuge, and Barr, who works armed and has law-enforcement authority, is warning them to respect private property boundaries.

Barr has also been working with civic and business leaders in Guadalupe. All are hoping the refuge will pump some much-needed tourist dollars into the town's economy.

"This is where we need to go with the community," said Guadalupe Mayor Sam Arca. "We need to move more toward this area of ecotourism."

The refuge should put Guadalupe on ecotourism maps. Some nature enthusiasts try to visit all of the nation's 520 wildlife refuges to get stamps in their Blue Duck Passports, a collector's book so named because the blue silhouette of a duck in flight is one of the main features of the Fish and Wildlife Service logo.

Arca's only concern is that the refuge's beach might be closed to protect nesting plovers, as was done at some public beaches on Vandenberg Air Force Base.

"I really hope they don't close that beach," Arca said. "What good is the nature and beauty if you can't go out and enjoy it?"

That's not likely to happen, Barr said. The remote location of the refuge and the relatively small number of plovers mean the birds can be protected without limiting access.

"It's a very manageable area," Barr said.