

Bird Watcher At Colorado Lagoon Recognized For Years Of Work

By Amy Bentley-Smith
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Richard Sonnenberg's status as the Colorado Lagoon's unofficial bird watcher is now official.

Sonnenberg is one of many community members Third District Councilman and Vice Mayor Frank Colonna recognized during the traveling council meeting at the Daniel Recital Hall on the campus of California State University, Long Beach, Tuesday night. Colonna honored Sonnenberg's efforts to catalog the number and species of birds that frequent the Colorado Lagoon.

"We're just very pleased that there is someone like Richard who is giving us a chronicle of the bird migration and patterns at the Colorado Lagoon," Colonna said prior to the meeting. "It points to the real value of the lagoon and the role it plays not only as a recreational area but as a bird and wildlife habitat."

Sonnenberg said his weekly bird tally began four years ago at the request of the Surfrider Foundation.

"I was taking a walk with my wife when I noticed Surfrider out testing the water and trying to identify the birds. They were struggling," said Sonnenberg, who became an avid bird watcher upon his retirement the previous year. "I started pointing out the different species and they said, 'Wow. That's terrific. Why don't you do it on a regular basis for us.'"

He since has lost touch with his Surfrider contact and sends his updates to Colonna's office once a month instead.

Based on his four years of counting, the lagoon has a wealth of bird life. Typically, there are 22 to 24 species of birds at the lagoon in the winter months, Sonnenberg said. February is the peak month, with 600 birds of varying species visiting the lagoon. Fewer birds frequent the lagoon in the summer months of June, July and August, he added.

Some of the rarer birds, or birds he wouldn't expect to see at the lagoon, include the red-throated loon, the common golden eye and the greater scaup. Sonnenberg's two favorite birds there are the belted kingfisher, a small blue and white bird with a disproportionately large head, and the tiny spotted sandpiper.

Sonnenberg said that in the last couple of years he's noticed a decline in the bird population at the lagoon. For example, at the peak season three years ago he counted 250 American coots, the most common bird at the lagoon. But in the last two years he only counted 150 at peak season.

Despite the decline, Sonnenberg said he thinks the lagoon is improving.

"It's much more of a pleasure to walk around now," Sonnenberg said. "There isn't as much trash."

Sonnenberg won't provide his weekly update this week or next. He left yesterday for a bird watching trip in Cape Horn and the Falkland Islands. In May he's off to south Texas to observe the spring migration.

In addition to Sonnenberg, Colonna recognized regular attendees of his monthly Joint Council meeting. The meeting, started by Colonna's predecessor Doug Drummond, brings together representatives of neighborhood organizations and local business groups in the Third District to discuss issues concerning the district and their specific communities.

Those individuals honored Tuesday night were: Dave Bates, Jennifer Davis, Kay Dermer, Ken Douthit, John Eilers, Wendy Harn, Peter Hoganson, Harry Ivey, Buzz Jandelli, Laurie MacBeth, Jeanie Miller, Mary Nimocks, Jim Ostach, Joanne O'Byrne, Dave Pirazzi, Stan Poe, Judith Olmsted Powell, Carmen Rosa, Helena Segelhorst, Elbert Segelhorst, Bonnie Sharp, Virginia Wright, Bill Yochum and Aldo Zanier. The following people were not present Tuesday but attend the meetings regularly: Ken Buck, Armand De Weese, Jeanette Gavin, Brigida Knauer, Hal Lane, Patti Martin, Randy Martin and Donna Smithson,