

TODAY'S Local news

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Cindy Myers of Project Wildlife held Rae, a 5-year-old Mexican free-tailed bat, so that visitors at the grand opening of the Elfin Forest Interpretive Center could get a close look. The center is open on weekends and needs volunteers. Pat Sherman

Flora, fauna take the stage at new center in Elfin Forest

By Pat Sherman
TODAY'S LOCAL NEWS

More than 200 people braved overcast skies and a light drizzle June 20 for the grand opening of the Elfin Forest Interpretive Center, nestled in the woods between Escondido and San Marcos.

"We're in the water industry," Kimberly Thorner, general manager of Olivenhain Municipal Water District, told the crowd. "Any day that is overcast and sprinklers are off is a beautiful day."

Located in the the Elfin Forest Recreational Reserve, the 1,000-square-foot center will serve as a hub of information about the watershed's flora and fauna. The 750-acre reserve is home to "golden eagles, deer, bobcats and even a family of mountain lions," said Jeff Swenerton, vice-chairman of the Escondido Creek Conservancy.

The center, a joint effort between the water district and the nonprofit conservancy, was funded through more than \$424,000 in grants and donations. The water district



The center is shown as it neared completion in early May. Set in a canyon amid the natural habitat of Elfin Forest, the center will provide educational information. Charlie Neuman | Union-Tribune

manages the park along Harmony Grove Road, four miles southwest of downtown Escondido.

The interpretive center is adjacent to an existing dirt lot at that park's trail head. Families, schoolchildren and other visitors can take free, docent-guided tours of the center to learn about the reserve's history and wildlife.

The center is open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturdays and

Sundays. The water district is seeking volunteers so it can expand the center's days and hours of operation.

"We need docents," said Swenerton, a former captain of the Elfin Forest and Harmony Grove fire department. "We'd like to keep this wonderful center open."

The building was designed by the San Diego architectural

Elfin Forest Interpretive Center

WHERE Harmony Grove Road, southwest of Escondido

HOURS 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

DIRECTIONS
(760) 632-4212
or olivenhain.com
(Click on "Elfin Forest Recreational Reserve" at right, then click on "Directions.")



At the grand opening of the Elfin Forest Interpretive Center, Kellyn Sanderson admires a raven, on display by Project Wildlife. The center will serve as a hub for information about the area's flora and fauna. Pat Sherman

Nature

>From A1

firm of Hubbell and Hubbell.

Artist James Hubbell, who married his wife in Elfin Forest more than 50 years ago, called the area "a magical world that is in many ways as beautiful as the redwoods."

The ceiling art for the center was conceived by Philadelphia muralist Beth Clevenstine. She researched the reserve for a month, hiking its trails with former conservancy executive director Geoffrey Smith and his wife, Camille Armstrong.

Included in the mural is everything from buckwheat and

monkey flowers to lupine.

"Sycamore trees are the directional points," Clevenstine said, pointing to the ceiling. "That's what I connected to most out here. I just thought they were really beautiful."

More than 100 volunteers helped plant native gardens and paint the mural.

"So many people have put their hands to the ceiling and painted," Armstrong said. "Talk about bringing the community together."

The center's environmentally friendly design includes a native garden on the roof, which will help insulate the center and keep it cool in the summer. The plants will give the center "a more natural appearance," Olivenhain Municipal Water District Operations

Manager Tom Kennedy said.

Styrofoam-insulated concrete walls also help keep the center cool. Solar panels originally slated for the roof will be installed at ground level in the next few weeks, Kennedy said.

Though water district officials had originally sought Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, it would have cost an additional \$40,000 to \$50,000 and was deemed too costly, Kennedy said.

"We didn't see how it was going to enhance the experience of visitors by getting a plaque on the wall," Kennedy said. "We're off the grid already. ... It's as green as green gets."

The Elfin Forest Recreational Reserve contains more than 14 miles of trails, including the Way Up Trail, a 1.5-mile ascent that offers breathtaking views of the Olivenhain Dam, Lake Hodges, the San Bernardino Mountains and the ocean.

It is one of the largest open space preserves in the county, attracting an estimated 70,000 hikers, horseback riders and mountain bikers each year.

Before the water district opened the reserve in 1991, the land was a "dying native forest," Swenerton told the crowd. Towering eucalyptus trees robbed native oaks and sycamores of sunlight, he said.

"The creek was choked with non-native arundo (donax, a giant reed), and housing developments were advancing," Swenerton said. "Today the non-native eucalyptus and arundo are gone but the development still threatens. There's a proposal for 17 homes right on that bluff and a bridge behind us."

Darius Paymai, a fifth-grader at Cardiff Elementary School, spoke on behalf of his class, which raised \$200 for the center. The students were inspired to get involved after a visit several years ago to learn about the local habitat, he said.

"If pollution finds its way here, Cardiff-by-the-Sea, where I live, will also be affected," said Darius, 10. "This creek runs directly to the San Elijo Lagoon before it reaches the ocean. If the wetland becomes a wasteland, the beautiful marsh my family and I hike around will become a smelly dump."

"This reserve provides families and friends a place to spend quality time together ... away from TV, computers, Facebook, iPods, video games and the hustle and bustle of everyday life."

For more information on becoming a docent at the center, call (760) 632-4212.

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