

**ENVIRONMENT**

# CANYON PARK GETS A DO-OVER



MARK RIGHTMIRE — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

With Fashion Island in the background, a crew hydroseeds an area of the Big Canyon Nature Park in Newport Beach, located between Jamboree Road and Newport Back Bay, last week.

## **Restoration:** Egrets have already been spotted again at site

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An environmental project to restore a 60-acre park near Newport Beach's Upper Back Bay into an inviting habitat for native plants and animals has reached the halfway point.

Recently, the second of four phases restoring Big Canyon Park was completed and officials say they are already seeing the benefits.

"Egrets are starting to come back," said John Kappeler, the city's senior engineer who is heading up the plan to return the park to its natural state.



Kappeler

The effort, which began about two years ago, removes non-native plants and trees — such

as the pepper tree — that were creating dense vegetation and crowding out native species and, therefore, the animals that rely on them.

The project is also changing the flow of Canyon Creek to prevent more soil erosion. Sharp 90-degree angles along the creek were causing the water to carve out earth, and flooding in some areas was becoming an issue.

The restoration, once completed, is expected to

have cost about \$6 million. So far, much of it has been funded by grants from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Coastal Conservancy and Defend The Bay, a local nonprofit dedicated to the protection of Newport Bay.

As the crew began their work clearing dense vegetation, they discovered another problem. Many of the park's native willow trees

**NEWPORT » PAGE 6**



MARK RIGHTMIRE — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

An egret stands in the shallow water in the Newport Back Bay during low tide not far from the restoration project of the Big Canyon Nature Park in Newport Beach.

## Newport

FROM PAGE 3

were under siege from a highly invasive and almost indestructible beetle known as the polyphagous shot hole borer.

The beetle, which is about a third the size of a small fingernail, drilled holes through hundreds of trees. The tiny beetle lays eggs in the tunnels it creates and also introduces fungus that destroys the food and water-conducting systems of the tree, eventually causing stress and killing the tree.

Killing the voracious beast, however, wasn't easy. It required bringing in two

scientists from UC Riverside for advice.

"It was so bad; we had to cut down the willows, grind them and cover the mulch in thick plastic," Kappeler said. "Then we had to sun bake it on site for months."

Some willows were cut down during the first phase, but most were felled during the recent work in phase two.

With the invasive vegetation gone, crews went to work planting 10,000 new native plants. These include sycamore trees, cottonwoods and some new willows. Native grassland species were also introduced.

Work on the creek, which runs for about a mile from Big Canyon Country Club to Upper Newport Bay, was

also done.

"We stabilized the creek bed and we smoothed out its banks to make it more linear," Kappeler said.

So far, the project has cost about \$3.75 million. The next step includes improving the trails. The park has one main trail that is about 2.5 miles long and loops near the land that is located near the East Bluff neighborhood between Jamboree Road and the Upper Back Bay. There are also three side trails that tie in.

The city also partnered with Newport Bay Conservancy on the project. Conservancy folks are now helping with the maintenance of the new plants.

Final completion depends on funding, Kappeler

said. The city will look for grant funding options when the state releases the next round of applicable programs.

Newport Beach Mayor Brad Avery said preserving the area there is important because so much of Newport Beach is built out.

"We have more to go with the state mandate for housing," he said. "As more of that goes on, the more wilderness places are important to the community."

"Preserving these areas and restoring them from the impact of human pollution is important," he said. "Next, after this, we'll need to do something to restore the wetlands in North Newport. This is a move forward to do what we can."