

Mare Island festival promises flights of fancy

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Bird lovers will be flocking to Mare Island this month for the annual San Francisco Bay Flyway Festival, which enters its 15th year with traditional and new features.

As part of an annual ritual, the three-day event centered on Mare Island celebrates the winter migration of millions of shorebirds, ducks, geese and hawks through the Bay Area.

The festival, to be held Friday through Sunday, will take place in a new location this year -- Building 223 at 500 Connolly St., between Walnut and Railroad avenues on Mare Island.

One of the new location's best features is that it is about one-tenth of a mile from the newly opened Mare Island San Pablo Bay Walking Trail, organizer Myrna Hayes said.

The 2-mile trail takes walkers toward San Pablo Bay, home to numerous shorebirds and other wildlife, such as the California clapper rail and the salt harvest mouse, she said.

Volunteers and experienced bird-watchers will be stationed along the trail with binoculars and other equipment to help beginners spot winged creatures, Hayes said.

Throughout the festival, participants will have a host of outdoor outings or indoor educational and art displays to choose from. Activities include guided nature walks, birding and wild bird demonstrations, art and photography exhibits.

As many as 20 guided outings will be offered on Mare Island, though many others take people into Sonoma, eastern Contra Costa County and other Bay Area spots.

The keynote speaker for Friday's opening night festivities is Scott Artis, founding director of the Brentwood-based Burrowing Owl Conservation Network. His 7 p.m. talk will focus on conserve the habitat of the burrowing owls. He will repeat his talk at 7 p.m. Saturday.

Photographers and painters of all ages and skills also will exhibit their work in Building 223, depicting local wildlife, wetlands, marshes and other environments. An opening reception will be held at 5:30 p.m. Friday, with work on display from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Throughout the weekend, the Mare Island Shoreline Preserve, St. Peter's Chapel and the Mare Island Cemetery will be open for visits and hikes.

At the historic cemetery, at the southern end of Railroad Avenue, volunteer cemetery historian Peggy O'Draim will talk about headstones and also lead visitors to its first burial -- George Dowd, the quartermaster of the USS Massachusetts who died Feb. 11, 1855, and was laid to rest the next day, Hayes said.

IF YOU GO

Entrance to the San Francisco Bay Flyway Festival is free, but some activities carry a cost and require preregistration. For more details, go to www.sfbayflywayfestival.com, or call 707-557-9816.