

# SEBASTOPOL WALKS.org

## Laguna de Santa Rosa Wetlands Exploration

A flat, easy walk on sidewalks, paved trails, and unpaved trails with some uneven surfaces that are wet in winter months.

- 5.0 miles Laguna Exploration (Route as shown, with out-&-backs to Tomodachi Park, Joe Rodota Trail bridge, Laguna Uplands Preserve, and the return to the Plaza)
- Add 2.4 miles to Occidental Road & Kelly Pond Loop (off map)
- .7 miles The Ponds loop only
- 1.1 miles Meadowlark Field loop only
- .4 miles Tomodachi Park out-&-back
- .4 miles Joe Rodota Trail Bridge out-&-back
- .8 miles Laguna Uplands Preserve out-&-back (from the Joe Rodota Trail)

Situated along the east side of Sebastopol, the Laguna de Santa Rosa channel defines what is our very own wild land. Within the city limits we have four parts of a much larger 9000 acre complex of wetlands. The following will guide you to all four, starting with the Laguna de Santa Rosa Wetlands Preserve and the Laguna de Santa Rosa Trail, then the new Tomodachi ("friends" in Japanese) Park, the Joe Rodota Trail, and the Upland Preserve. Any one section can easily be reached from the plaza in 15 or 20 minutes.

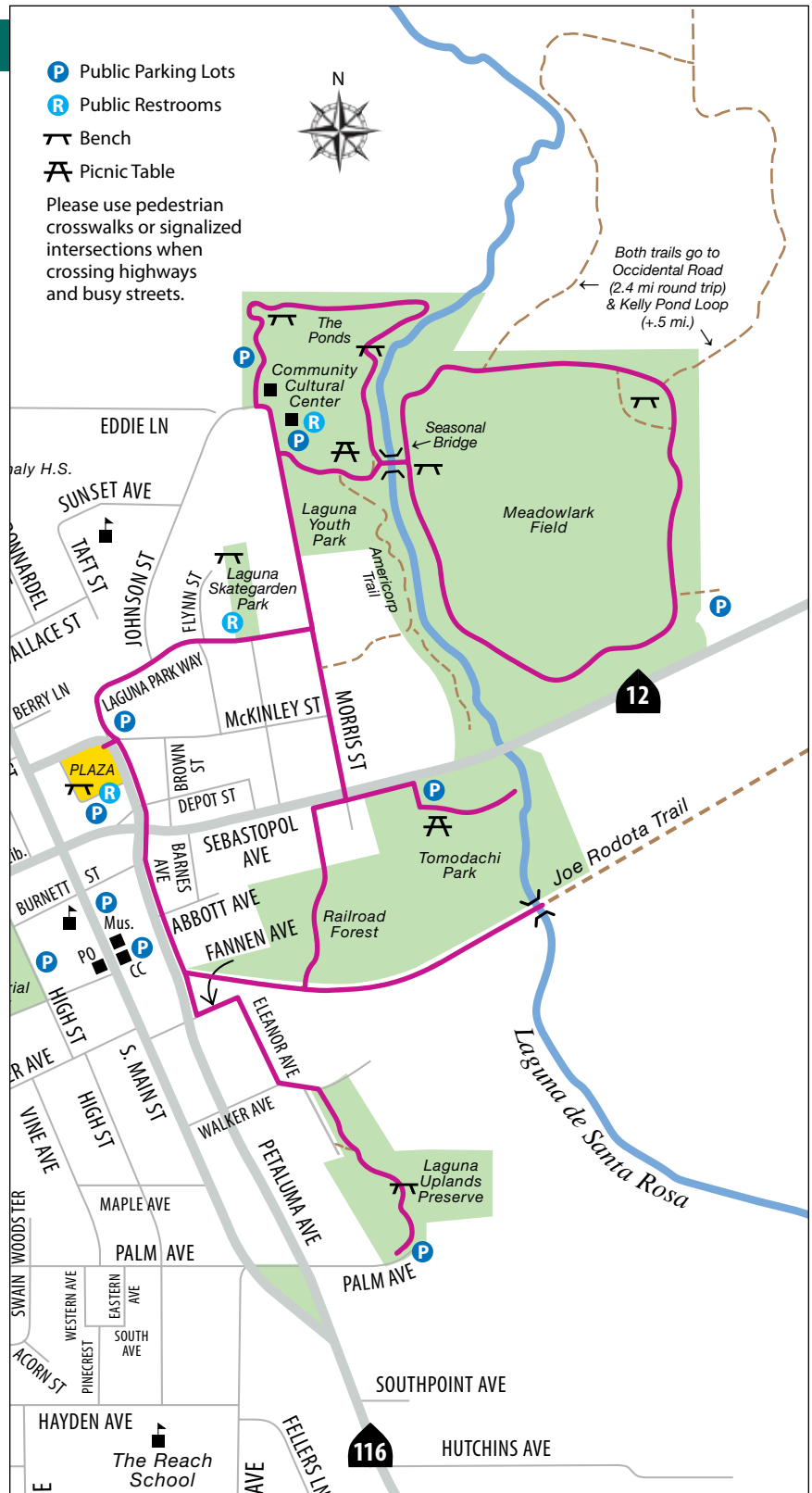
Note: The seasonal bridge to the Preserve is installed in summer only. Winter access is one-quarter mile east on Hwy 12. All trails except the Uplands Preserve are subject to flooding in winter.

Start: Walk to the Laguna Preserve in 10 to 20 minutes from the downtown plaza, taking Laguna Park Way (the police station is on the left, the cinema is on the right), or McKinley Street through The Barlow, then go left on Morris Street to the park.

### The Laguna Preserve

Start at the grape-covered entry arbor on Morris Street where you can sometimes find a trail guide with interpretive material. Follow the trail curving around the ball field and within 100 yards or so come to the Americorps Trail. Optional side trip: In the dry season, take the trail starting behind the south ball field. It drops down an embankment and heads south for under .3 miles through lush riparian vegetation. Return the way you came.

Continue to the seasonal footbridge, located behind the picnic/playground areas. If it is installed, you can cross to extend this walk



an extra mile. On a summer day you will often see pond turtles basking on fallen logs. If you are lucky, you may see a family of river otters. The trail over the bridge circles the old irrigation field, now called Meadowlark Field, which is slowly being restored after years of grazing and irrigation damage to the valley oaks. The dense vegetation and large oaks remaining along the east bank of the Laguna channel suggest that the entire region was once a rich, beautiful oak savannah.



*Seasonal bridge over the Laguna channel*

To add 2.4 miles to this walk take the new trail operated by Sonoma County Regional Parks. You can pick up this multi-use trail at the northeast corner of the Meadowfield loop trail and walk to Occidental Road and back. Add another .5 mile with the loop around Kelly Marsh.

## The Ponds

After re-crossing the bridge, continue right behind the ball fields and make a right at the first fork. The narrow trail follows along the top of the old dike separating one of the former sewer ponds from the main channel. Watch for the herons and other birds inhabiting the riparian vegetation. Shortly, make a right at the next junction and continue around the ponds. The three ponds, once part of the Sebastopol sewer system, are slowly naturalizing. Ducks are attracted to the open water of the largest pond (dry in summer), and redwing blackbirds nest in the cattails.

At the far end of the last pond, take the right fork (with the small amphitheater to the left) west up onto a little knoll created when the city used this area as a landfill. The land here is being restored with vegetation suited for the upland part of the floodplain. Stop at the bench for striking views of the Laguna, with Mount St. Helena and the Mayacama Mountains in the distance. Continue on the path for several hundred feet to leave the park via the northern entry arbor.

## Tomodachi Park

To get to Tomodachi Park from the preserve The Youth Park, walk along Morris Street (or along Americorp Trail) south to the highway and cross at the signal. Make a left and shortly find the park just before the bridge. The small park is full of mature Valley oak trees with the Laguna channel flowing through. For many years the forest was used as a seasonal campground until purchased by the city and the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District.



In 2013 the creation of the park was spearheaded by Sebastopol City Councilman Patrick Slayter, who wanted to have a new name for the park to go along with the restoration of the property. Councilman Slayter acknowledged the rich history between the Japanese Americans and the Sebastopol area, especially during WWII when many friends and neighbors of the greater community rallied to help those of Japanese descent who were incarcerated due to Executive Order 9066. Councilman Slayter made a request to the Japanese American Citizens League to suggest a new name for the park and the JACL board suggested the name “Tomodachi,” a Japanese word that translates to “Friends.”

## Joe Rodota Trail and Laguna Uplands

To get to the Joe Rodota Trail and the Laguna Uplands, walk back along Sebastopol Avenue past Morris Street and turn left onto the Railroad Forest Trail that leads between the buildings. A few minutes’ walk through the Railroad Forest brings you to the Joe Rodota Trail. Make a left and walk another few minutes out to the bridge across the

channel, and beyond. The trail is surrounded by dense riparian forest. You can walk all the way to Santa Rosa if you wish. Just over the bridge to the south (right), observe a forest of small oak trees that sprouted up after ranching ended here 20 years ago.

Returning towards town on the trail, in about 0.3 mile turn left on Petaluma Avenue and in a short block turn left on Fannen Avenue, then right on Eleanor Avenue, and left on Walker Avenue. The area along Fannen and Eleanor was at one time the site of a Pomo village. Watch for the sign at the alleyway starting on Walker marking the 8-acre Uplands Preserve owned by The Laguna Foundation.

You can either walk onto the informal path (muddy in winter) or the alley behind the hospital, both leading to the grassy emergency helicopter landing pad. The expansive view includes a large area of

*Tomodachi Park*

wetland and riparian forest, as well as irrigated land. In the distance Hood Mountain, Bennett Peak, and Taylor Mountain top the eastern ridges. Farther north Mount St. Helena dominates the skyline, rising to over 4000 feet. A bench is located downhill below the pad, a good spot to rest and watch for birds.

This 8-acre parcel was slated for development in the 1980s, first for apartments, and later for a housing subdivision. Laguna lovers worked for preservation for many years, and convincingly held that the uplands part of the Laguna was just as important as the flood plain. During flooding Laguna creatures need dry ground to survive. Environmental activist Juliana Doms and businessman Bill Haigwood teamed up to lead the effort. The community, including local school kids, pitched in to raise \$100,000, and then the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District stepped in with funds to seal the purchase. The Laguna Foundation agreed to manage the property. Over the last several years restoration efforts include removing fencing and non-native blackberry, and planting native plants.



*Laguna de Santa Rosa*

## A History of Saving of the Laguna

Thirty years ago the Laguna de Santa Rosa was a little understood “swamp,” a 13-mile-long waterway, and 9000-acre flood plain, flowing from Cotati to the Russian River along the eastern edge of Sebastopol and the western side of the Santa Rosa plain. For the Pomo Indians it was an abundant resource. Over the course of 200 years of Spanish and American occupation, fill, pollution, draining, and ignorance destroyed much of the habitat. The giant valley oaks in the flood plain fell to the woodcutter as farming and grazing took over and sewage fouled the water. From early white settlement up to modern times Sebastopol residents boated, swam, and fished in the Laguna before pollution made it unwelcoming.

In the early 1980s the City of Sebastopol began to take notice of the Laguna when environmental activists (the author being one of them) questioned the wisdom of road construction and building in the flood plain and placing debris in the old decommissioned sewer ponds. Soon the City agreed to appoint a Laguna Advisory Committee, which produced a report advising the City on the importance of the Laguna wetlands complex. The Laguna is a major flood zone in the Russian River drainage, and without its water-holding capacity, the river flood crest at Guerneville on the lower Russian River would be 14 feet higher, putting many more structures along the river under water. The idea of saving the waterway gained traction. A critical turning point was reached when a first Laguna Conference was held in 1986, followed by the formation of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation.

Finally the City funded a master planning effort for the Laguna lands within the city limits. The plans included creating a natural Laguna park, creating trails, and saving and restoring the remaining lands in City jurisdiction.

Just as the City was struggling with how to fund a Laguna de Santa Rosa Wetland Preserve, Emmett Blincoe donated \$200,000 in honor of his deceased wife to begin construction of trails and amenities for the City’s newest parkland. Now key wetlands parcels have

been saved in the larger Laguna complex. A developing system of trails explores one of the natural treasures of central Sonoma County. A non-profit, The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation (the author was a founding Board member) is a major force in saving and restoring the Laguna. Saving the Laguna makes sense from both an environmental and an economic point of view. As the waterway regains its luster and becomes more accessible, people have one more reason to visit Sebastopol. The Sebastopol portion of the Laguna is just a few blocks from Main Street, making downtown a gateway to the Laguna.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation website says this: “The Laguna is Sonoma County’s richest wildlife area, with more than 200 varieties of birds, and wildlife ranging from bald eagles and mountain lions to river otters and endangered salmon. It is an important stop for birds migrating along the Pacific Flyway.”

Reading: *Field Guide to the Laguna de Santa Rosa* may be purchased online at: [lagunafoundation.org/store.htm](http://lagunafoundation.org/store.htm) or Copperfield’s Books downtown. The Laguna de Santa Rosa Wetlands Preserve Trail Guide is free and is available at the trail head (sometimes) or Sebastopol City Hall.

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