



THE BAYLANDS *of* TOMORROW

What was nearly lost to history now holds
the blueprint for a resilient tomorrow.

Discover the Bay's next chapter.

WHAT MAKES THIS PLACE SO SPECIAL?

Mudflats give shorebirds a place to hunt, breed, and rest, and refuge for plants to set root in brackish soil.

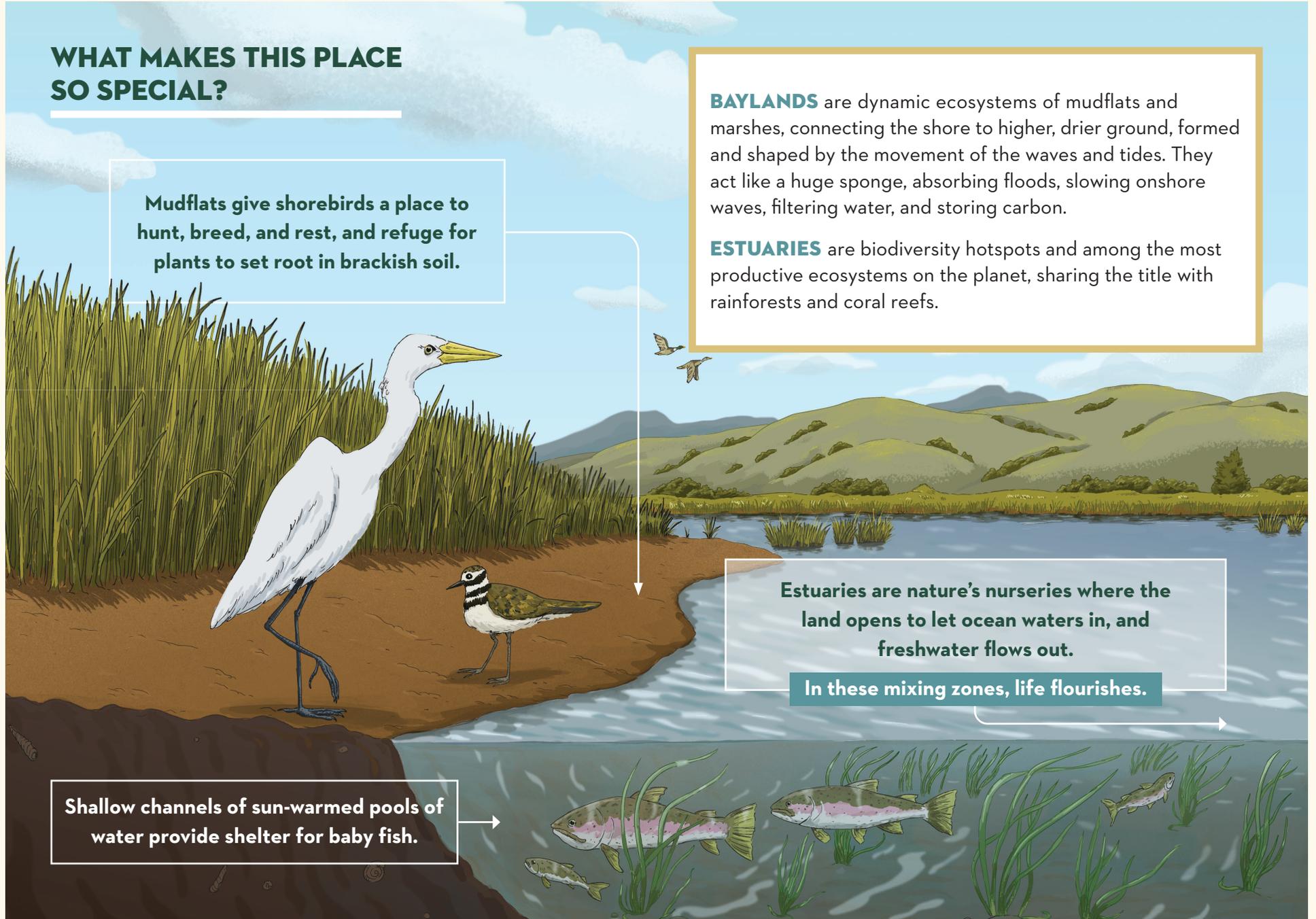
BAYLANDS are dynamic ecosystems of mudflats and marshes, connecting the shore to higher, drier ground, formed and shaped by the movement of the waves and tides. They act like a huge sponge, absorbing floods, slowing onshore waves, filtering water, and storing carbon.

ESTUARIES are biodiversity hotspots and among the most productive ecosystems on the planet, sharing the title with rainforests and coral reefs.

Estuaries are nature's nurseries where the land opens to let ocean waters in, and freshwater flows out.

In these mixing zones, life flourishes.

Shallow channels of sun-warmed pools of water provide shelter for baby fish.



Steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*)



Long-billed curlew (*Numenius americanus*)

MEET THE NEIGHBORS

Brush rabbit (*Sylvilagus bachmani*)



The Bay Area's shores host a rich and diverse wildlife population.

This is largely because of the nutrient-rich ecosystems in and around the water. These specialized species can tolerate brackish water and the changing tides. However, many are now threatened due to the changes brought on by human encroachment.



Red-winged blackbird

(*Agelaius phoeniceus*)



Salt marsh harvest mouse

(*Reithrodontomys raviventris*)



Canvasback (*Aythya valisineria*)



Burrowing owl (*Athene cucularia*)



THE BAYLANDS IS HOME TO 254 BIRD SPECIES



Pickleweed (*Salicornia pacifica*)

Grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*)



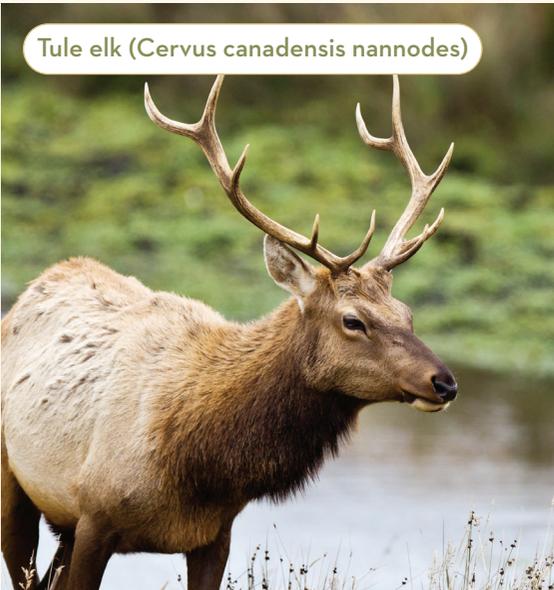
PEERING INTO THE PAST

On a clear day, standing atop Sears Point Ranch looking out across the Bay, it was once impossible to tell exactly where the land ended and the water began, for the shoreline shifted by the hour. Coastal grasses transitioned to inky mudflats and lush salt marsh which gradually sloped down into the shallow waters at the bay's edge.

Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo peoples tended the marshes and streams with fire and harvest, cultivating sedge for basketry and clearing waterways for salmon runs. The rich habitat provided an abundant and reliable food supply and a special gathering place for fishing, hunting, and trade.

Bears roamed, tule elk browsed, and eagles soared as the shoreline shifted by the hour

Tule elk (*Cervus canadensis nannodes*)



Bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)



Black-necked stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*)



LOOKING AT THE PRESENT

From that same spot today, you would be greeted by the warm aroma of hay and grassy fields dotted with grazing cows or an occasional tractor. In the distance, a narrow strip of ancient marsh persists at the edge of the shimmering waters of San Pablo Bay, like a memory from a past life.

It's a pastoral scene, but this drained wetland teeters on the brink of collapse. Hay farming has become ecologically and financially unsustainable. Climate change fuels rising sea levels and harsher storms, making it increasingly costly to maintain pumps every year. 150-year-old levees are eroding, and our roadways are flooding with greater frequency.



Biodiversity loss continues as habitat shrinks for fish, birds, and other species.



“Everything that falls in the ranch ... has to be pumped out ... You’ve got to be on it and start the pumps and get the water off the ranch because you’re about seven feet below sea level.” — a former Baylands farmer

↓ HAY FIELDS HAVE SUBSIDED WHILE THE WATERS HAVE RISEN ↑

HOW AGRICULTURE TRANSFORMED THE WETLANDS

SAN FRANCISCO NEEDED 1,000S OF TONS OF HAY EACH MONTH

TO FUEL ITS HORSE-DRAWN TRANSPORTATION

80%

of San Pablo Bay's
wetlands drained

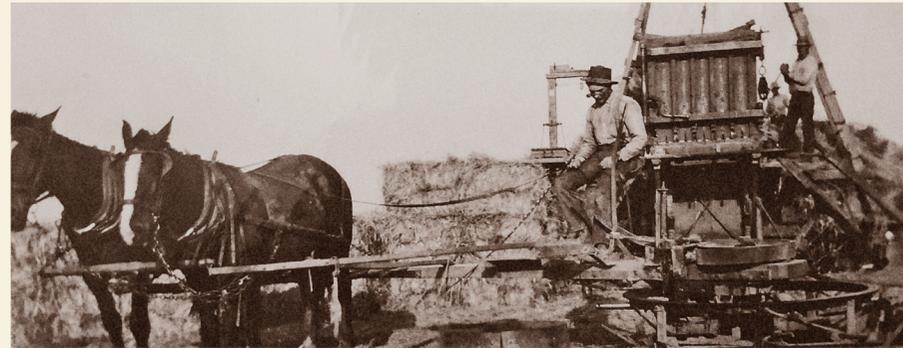
By the 1890s, over 80% of San Pablo Bay's wetlands had been drained under the 1850 Swampland Act, which offered cheap land to those who could cultivate it for agriculture.

Thousands of people from around the world transformed the Baylands by diking and draining marshes, first with hand tools and horses piling clay and debris into seawalls, and later with steam dredges that accelerated the pace and scale of the work, carving miles of levees and draining vast wetlands.

With wealth from the Nevada Comstock Silver Lode, Senator John P. Jones built **six Baylands work camps** with bunkhouses, horses, and equipment for levee construction, dredging, and farming.



Scow schooner unloading in San Francisco.



Camps were created for men and horses to live in and work the hay fields.

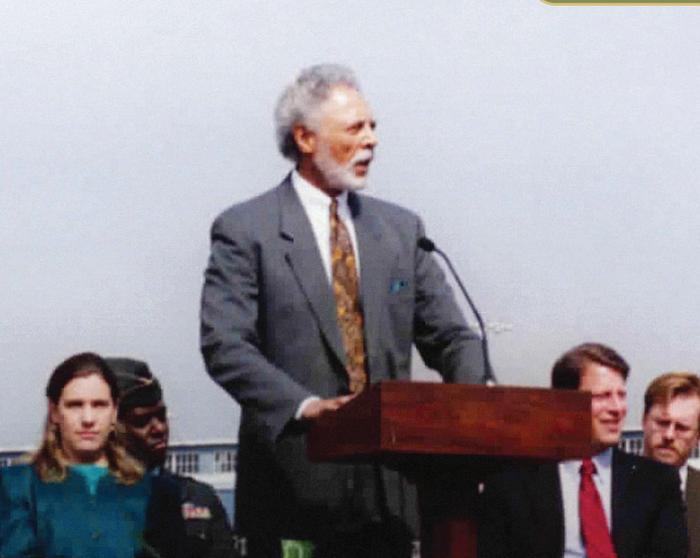
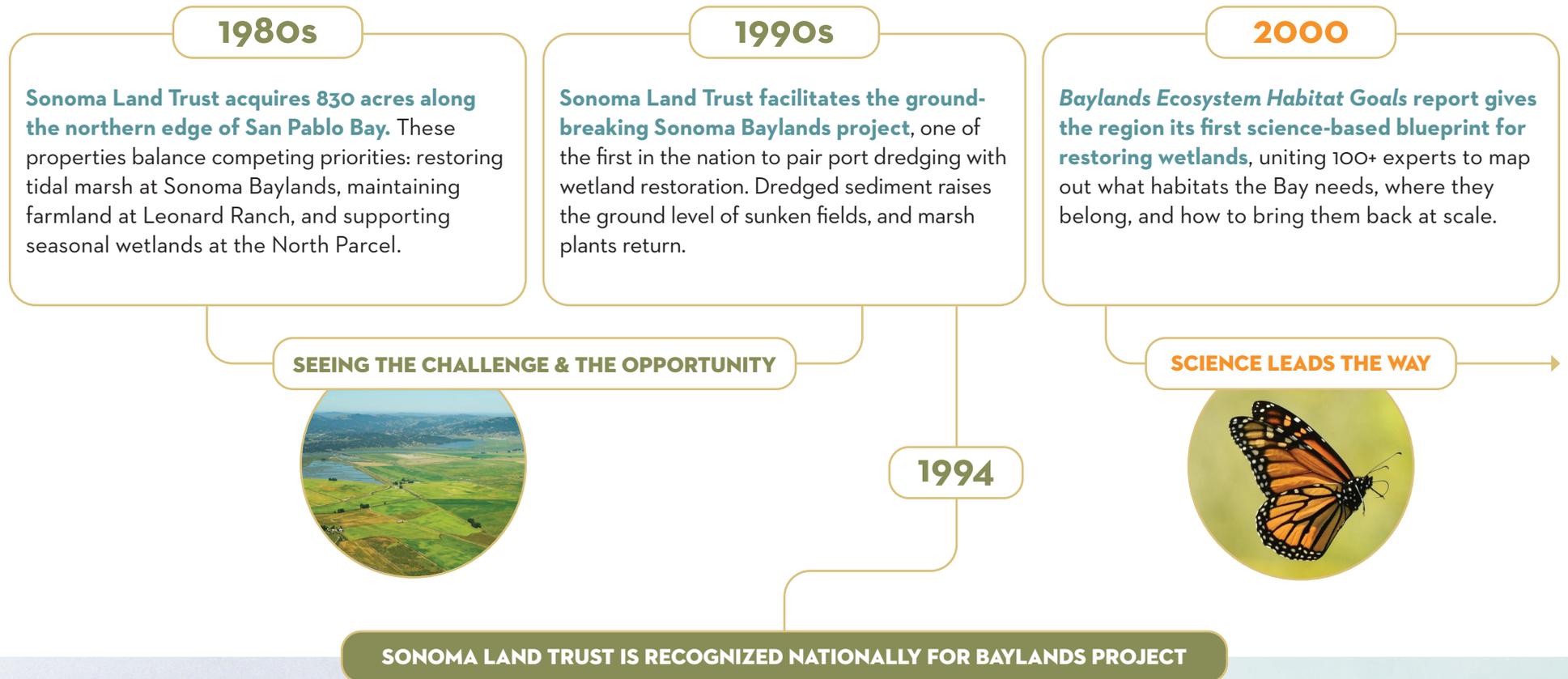
1850 SWAMPLAND ACT OFFERED CHEAP LAND TO THOSE WHO COULD CULTIVATE IT FOR AGRICULTURE

Over the last 150 years, **we've lost approximately 90% of the Bay's historic tidal marshes.**
The greatest potential for restoration is found in the San Pablo Baylands.



Data sources: SFEI EcoAtlas Version 1.5Ob4 1998 & Baylands Habitat Map 2020 v1.2

CHARTING 40 YEARS OF BAYLANDS CONSERVATION & RESTORATION



The Sonoma Baylands Wetland Demonstration Project became a national model for restoration by uniting science, conservation, and infrastructure. What made it remarkable was its ability to bring together unlikely allies—conservationists, farmers, agencies, business groups, and bipartisan leaders—turning conflict into collaboration. This coalition and innovative approach earned national recognition, including honors from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the White House, highlighting the Baylands as proof that restoration can unite diverse interests and deliver lasting conservation wins.

Ron Dellums, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and a U.S. Representative for California's 9th Congressional District, at the Sonoma Baylands Dedication Ceremony.



2003

Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria donates development rights to 1,679 acres at Sears Point, ending a casino proposal. Sonoma Land Trust purchases the neighboring ranch, bringing the conserved area to 2,327 acres. Large-scale tidal wetland and upland restoration is now possible.

2013

Sonoma Land Trust acquires the 1,091-acre Haire Ranch on Skaggs Island and conveys it to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, adding a vital missing piece to integrate with the existing 3,300-acre former Navy property in unified tidal restoration planning.

2015

Sonoma Land Trust breaches a century-old levee, restoring nearly 1,000 acres at Sears Point as part of the Sears Point Tidal Marsh Restoration Project—now a thriving preserve that has been transferred to the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

SECURING LAND ALONG THE BAY

CLIMATE URGENCY ACCELERATES RESTORATION



**HISTORIC
LEVEE
BREACH**

The response was immediate—seals, otters, fish, and thousands of birds returned.

Sonoma Land Trust, Ducks Unlimited, and partners breached a century-old levee at Sears Point, restoring 970 acres of tidal wetlands to San Pablo Bay. Surveys show the habitat shifting over time, first attracting diving ducks like canvasbacks, then shorebirds and dabbling ducks. Cordgrass and pickleweed are taking hold, providing habitat for rare species like the black rail and endangered Ridgway's rail.



AG + OPEN SPACE
SONOMA COUNTY



**not all partners represented here*

2020

Backed by a 2020 Measure AA grant, Sonoma Land Trust unites 150+ landowners, agencies, and planners to create the *Sonoma Creek Baylands Strategy* for a large-scale restoration integrating Highway 37 and SMART rail into a climate-ready vision.

2021

Sonoma Land Trust implements an innovative nature-based approach to address erosion along two miles of newly restored shoreline at Sears Point—anchoring logs, sediment, gravel, and vegetation to buffer waves, rebuild marsh, and support the growth of cordgrass and pickleweed.

2025

With the acquisition of the third Camp property complete, and guided by the Baylands Strategy, Sonoma Land Trust is launching the next phase: restoring 3,000 acres of former farmland into thriving, climate-resilient baylands.

ALIGNING PARTNERS, AGENCIES, & STRATEGY

READY FOR THE NEXT CHAPTER!

**LOOKING TO
THE FUTURE**

FROM ACQUISITION TO ACTION

In 2025, Sonoma Land Trust reached another milestone by completing the acquisition of three key properties, unlocking the next critical phase of the Sonoma Creek Baylands Strategy: **RESTORATION**.

CRITICAL ACQUISITIONS COMPLETE

CAMP 3

Closed: January 2025
Acres: 1,480
Diked agricultural bayland



CAMP 4

Closed: August 2023
Acres: 1,150
Former organic hay farm



CAMP 5

Closed: July 2025
Acres: 290
Former oat hay farm



“People have been talking about this for 25 years, and now, the time is right. So many different things came together, and I think our Sonoma Creek Baylands Strategy really solidified that and gave us the momentum we needed.”

Julian Meisler
Sonoma Land Trust Baylands Program Manager

THE WATER IS COMING EITHER WAY

TO PLAN OR NOT TO PLAN

The SMART rail line runs along vulnerable subsided lands, where unplanned flooding could disrupt transit for thousands of commuters.

Highway 37 is even more at risk, with projections of permanent inundation on sections as early as the 2040s. The cost of inaction is staggering: a recent study estimated that protecting Bay Area communities after a disaster could run \$236 billion, while proactive restoration is far more effective and less expensive.



Highway 37 and SMART rail face increasing flooding, putting millions of commuters at risk.

Plans to elevate Hwy 37 provide an opportunity to restore the Tolley Creek Baylands, which it passes over via the Tolley Creek Bridge. For the first time in over a century, the entire Tolley Creek watershed—from Tolley Lake Regional Park, flowing under Hwy 37 out to San Pablo Bay—will be reconnected.

Lengthening the Tolley Creek Bridge will not only help protect commuters from road flooding but also remove a critical bottleneck, restoring tidal flow and allowing fish, wildlife, and vegetation to move freely once more.



We can choose planned restoration that benefits everyone, or face chaotic and costly cleanup as the problem worsens.

A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

The North Bay offers a rare opportunity to restore vast stretches of diked baylands and reconnect them to uplands—the higher ground of creeks, floodplains, and grasslands that border the Bay.

With minimal development in the region, this landscape can become a thriving buffer that absorbs rising seas and supports resilient habitats.



Water could rise as much as seven feet by 2100.

Western sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*)

Photo: © Adrian Philip Johnson

HOW WILL WE RESTORE THE BAYLANDS?

- Open levees and barriers so tides can flow freely again.
- Raise sunken fields so marsh plants can take root and keep pace with rising seas.
- Rebuild a patchwork of tidal marsh, mudflats, and transition zones for fish and wildlife.
- Redesign bridges and culverts to work with the tides instead of against them.
- Protect key lands to connect restoration areas into one continual landscape.
- Work with Tribal, state, and national partners, landowners, and conservation groups to integrate the numerous efforts in the region to realize our shared vision.

RESTORING THE BAYLANDS IS A BOON TO ALL

- Marsh vegetation filters pollutants before they reach the open water.
- Millions of migrating birds rest and feed in the bay's marshes, their home each year on the Pacific Flyway.
- Wetlands store more carbon per acre than forests.
- Baylands protect against flooding by slowing waves and absorbing water, buffering against rising seas.
- The land along the marsh will provide a place for people to connect with nature on open, accessible trails.
- The farmlands that fueled the Bay Area's development can now aid in its protection against climate change.



EVERY DONATION, NO MATTER THE SIZE, DRIVES PROGRESS IN THE BAYLANDS



WHERE WILL THE BAYLANDS GO NEXT?

Restoring the Baylands is ambitious, expensive, and urgent work. If we want to give the Baylands time to recover in advance of sea level rise, restoration needs to happen now. *We must prepare for tomorrow, today!*

Our Sonoma Creek Baylands Strategy is entering its next phase and the plans are shaping up to be truly extraordinary. The initial stage focused on acquiring strategic parcels of land throughout the Baylands, allowing us to reconnect the watershed on a landscape scale. In collaboration with our partners, we are closer than ever to achieving our goal to restore 10,000 acres by 2030. This may be the hardest and most rewarding phase of the strategy. Integrating the latest science with the best practices we've learned over decades working in the Baylands, we'll restore the dynamic natural systems that are ready to flourish again.

Sonoma Land Trust has a successful track record of uniting partners and securing critical government funding to bring big projects to life. It's private philanthropy, though, that makes this possible. Unlike public funding, which is often rigid, philanthropy is flexible, nimble, and allows us to be bold.



Sonoma Land Trust has a special fund specifically dedicated to land acquisition, restoration and stewardship of the Baylands.

To learn more about how you can help support this important work, please contact:

Shannon Nichols, Director of Philanthropy at shannon@sonomalandtrust.org

AND BRINGS US CLOSER TO A LONG-TERM VISION OF A HEALTHY, THRIVING, CLIMATE-READY REGION.



To build a better world, we must work together to protect and conserve the planet's precious resources. —BAN KI-MOON

Ridgway's rail (*Rallus obsoletus*)

OUR MISSION

Sonoma Land Trust partners with local communities to protect the open, natural, and working lands and waters of Sonoma County to secure healthy and thriving futures for all.

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Learn more at sonomalandtrust.org