Saving The Biggest For Last

Tribune photo by JIM REED

Nancy Norton, left, Brandt Henningson and Tom Ries survey the Rock Pond restoration project from an observation tower on the 2,400-acre site. South of Cockroach Bay, Rock Pond will be the largest environmental restoration project of its kind on Tampa Bay.

By SUSAN M. GREEN

The Tampa Tribune

Published: May 21, 2008

Updated:

Related Links

- Jim Reed Photos
- Audio Slide Show
- Susan M. Green Photos

RUSKIN - At the big pit dubbed Rock Pond, you don't have to see the winged inhabitants to know they're there.

"You can hear the birds," said scientist Tom Ries, as he trudged toward an observation platform overlooking the pit one morning early this month. Sporadic shrill trills of a grackle were answered by alarm calls from other birds in trees above and clusters of mangroves below.

The smell of guano, heavy in the air around the pit's stagnant water, was a not-so-subtle hint at the significance of the former rock mine as a wildlife habitat.

"It's really the second-largest bird colony in Tampa Bay, right after Alafia Banks," said Ann Paul, regional coordinator for Audubon of Florida, in a telephone interview.

Audubon has been counting nesting birds at the site south of Cockroach Bay for at least 15 years. Alafia Banks, a pair of spoil islands near Mosaic Fertilizer in Riverview, has long been considered one of the most productive colonies for coastal nesting birds in the nation.

Herons, egrets, ibis, anhingas and cormorants are among species that raise their families at Rock Pond, Paul said. Even a few reddish egret pairs, considered a rare species, have been spotted nesting in the dense thickets of mangroves that sprang up in the decades after the miners of rock and shell left the area.

"It's very important," Paul said.

Good as it is, the deep pond and a series of irregular-shaped pits nearby could be made better, said Brandt Henningsen, chief environmental scientist with the state's Surface Water Improvement and Management program.

He envisions the pits transformed into shallow ponds and lagoons, with more healthy water circulation that will sustain fish. Ditches that were carved into the earth to drain or irrigate the land could become meandering streams that flush the coastal area with saltwater from Tampa Bay's tides.

He and Ries are in the planning stages for what likely will be the last big coastal habitat restoration project on Tampa Bay's shoreline. They hope to retool 1,000 acres of the 2,400-acre tract acquired by state and county preservation programs in 2003. The site includes a former shell mine on the south side of Cockroach Bay Road.

About 400 acres will encompass restored or enhanced brackish and freshwater wetlands. The remaining acreage will undergo eradication of nuisance plant species, such as Brazilian pepper, Australian pine and guinea grass.

Re-creating freshwater ponds near the rookery will help nesting birds that often must fly 15 or 20 miles to find the kind of food required for their young offspring, Henningsen said.

Rock Pond also holds about 360 acres of a dwindling Tampa Bay habitat known as salt barrens. The salt-rich soil, which occurs in patches throughout the site, creates a specialized habitat for certain types of animals and plants.

Last Of Its Kind

Henningsen said few, if any, large pieces of undeveloped land along Tampa Bay's shoreline remain available for public acquisition. When completed, the Rock Pond Ecosystem Restoration Project on the north side of the Hillsborough-Manatee county line will be the largest of its kind for the SWIM program in Tampa Bay. The tract encompasses 4 square miles and could become larger if officials succeed in acquiring an adjacent 400-acre tract that's advertised for sale, Henningsen said.

The new site is flanked by Terra Ceia, a 700-acre SWIM restoration project nearing completion in Manatee County to the south, and Cockroach Bay, a 500-acre makeover that is in its final stages to the north. A little farther north is the 600-acre coastal restoration project known as Wolf Branch.

SWIM scientists and engineers are exploring the Rock Pond site, mapping its existing features and brainstorming about ways to improve the habitat and stormwater cleansing functions of the land.

Using handheld Global Positioning System units, they are recording the precise location of needlerush, nickerbean vines, palm trees and other plants that give scientists clues about what habitat would best fit on different parts of the site.

They will scour mid-20th century aerial maps and glean information from a series of piezometers, or measuring devices sunk in the ground to measure groundwater levels and salinity. A geologist will study the area, and an archaeologist has been hired to survey the area for relics that should be preserved.

Officials also will have to seek grants and other funding for the project, anticipated to cost $7 million or more. Construction is not expected to begin for at least two years.

Besides mining, the Rock Pond site was altered to accommodate row crops, and some of it is still under cultivation as a sod farm. Henningsen said SWIM is talking with officials of the Florida Marine Hatchery program, currently located just south at Port Manatee, about occupying part of the Rock Pond parcel.

In the southwest corner of the tract, former owner Tampa Electric Co. had once contemplated building a power plant. But those plans were abandoned in the early 1990s, and the power company staged an environmental stewardship program on a portion of the site, removing much of the nuisance vegetation.

TECO sold the land to the Southwest Florida Water Management District and Hillsborough County's Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program in 2003.

Reporter Susan M. Green can be reached at (813) 865-1566 or sgreen@tampatrib.com.