

NEWS

Off the Richmond shoreline, an ‘island in time.’



By **KATHERINE TAM** | Bay Area News Group

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Dave Zuckermann gazes across San Francisco Bay from Brooks Island's sandy north shore at the sprawling vista before him.

"That's Point Isabel over there. There's Grizzly Peak, Vollmer Peak, Wildcat Peak," he said, tracing the coastline from east to west. "There's the Ford Building, Ferry Point, the Kaiser shipyards."

It is quiet here away from the bustle of the city, except for the sound of lapping water and red-winged blackbirds chirping.

"You're surrounded by the metropolis, the freeway, the busy life," Zuckermann said. "For me, you come here and it's an island in time. It's still very much the way it was."

It's the quiet that is part of the island's appeal, perched just a mile or so from

Brooks Island is a 373-acre wildlife preserve that boasts a rich history, a thriving bird population and a 159-foot peak with arresting, panoramic views of the bay. It's largely undeveloped, with unpaved dirt trails. The island's wildlife includes one mammal, three amphibians and more than 100 species of birds.

"It's real quiet, real calm," said Matthew Allen, the island's caretaker. "You get a 360-degree view of the bay. At night, every bit of the bay is lit up. It's gorgeous."

Not a lot of people venture to Brooks Island, even though it's plainly visible from the Richmond shoreline. Some don't know it exists, others don't know how to get there. But those who figure it out discover a place like no other.

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Only 25 visitors are allowed on the island at a time, a limit set by the East Bay Regional Park District, which owns it, said Zuckermann, a supervising naturalist with the district.

So why is this chunk of land so restricted? Brooks Island is about striking a balance between letting residents explore this lush piece of public property and protecting the island's cultural history. Native American shell mounds still

“The trick is, how do you protect them and facilitate people’s enjoyment of the island?” Zuckermann said.

Visitors are allowed by reservation only through one of a dozen tours offered each year. They come by boat or kayak and are led by naturalists along a trail that encircles the perimeter. The sand spit and other areas where birds flock and nest are blocked off.

No one knows exactly how Brooks Island got its name. Historical documents show it previously sported the titles of Isla de Carmen in 1775, Rocky Island and Sheep Island, Zuckermann said. A U.S. Navy survey chart dated 1849 shows the first reference to Brooks Island.

Thousands of Ohlone Indians lived on the island up to 3,000 years ago, he said. European settlers arrived in the late 1700s, grazing sheep and cattle on the land and farming oysters. From the 1890s to the 1940s, the island was used as a rock quarry where workers harvested graywacke sandstone, some of which was used to build the Bay Bridge Toll Plaza and the Berkeley Aquatic Park.

In 1960, archeologist George Coles excavated shell mounds. Researchers are continuing to study the artifacts he found to learn more about Ohlone life.

Entertainer Bing Crosby, restaurateur Victor Bergeron and other members of the Sheep Island Gun Club introduced pheasants in 1962 and used the island as a private hunting spot. Six years later, the park district bought the island from a family trust for \$625,000, the bulk of which was funded with federal dollars, and leased it to the gun club for two decades.

It wasn’t until 1988 that the island opened to the public. Zuckermann initiated interpretive tours in 1991.

Proposals to turn the scenic spot into a freight terminal or airport or to level it altogether to make way for a Navy base have been broached but never came to pass.

Today, the island remains largely undeveloped, save for a solar-powered house for the caretaker and a storage building. Even the loop trail that takes visitors around the island is unpaved.

Remnants of the past remain: rusting quarry equipment, ponds created by quarry operations, old pilings, shotgun shells. About 65 recorded plant species, including the less common seaside woolly sunflower and a species of buckwheat, thrive here. Plants and wildflowers provide a lush landscape. Birds fly overhead. Canada geese waddle along the trail. Harbor seals bask in the waters nearby.

Richmond resident Rudi Raab has eyed Brooks Island on his many shoreline walks and took a tour to satisfy his curiosity. Among the highlights, he and his wife, Julie Freestone, remember seeing a nest of freshly hatched robin-blue goose eggs, terns diving for anchovies, and ducks and geese trailing them as they walked along the path.

“When you’re on the island, you feel like you’re on a place nobody has been since Bing Crosby hunted there,” Raab said. “You’re in the middle of the bay. The wind is blowing around your nose. You see almost undisturbed nature or nature that has healed itself.”

There are also the occasional unpermitted visitors, usually curious windsurfers and boaters who sail by and wonder what’s ashore. Allen keeps them at bay to protect the island’s cultural history and bird sanctuary.

Allen also maintains the island. He collects plastics and other litter that wash up.

“We get a ton of tennis balls,” Allen said. “I don’t know why.”

Allen can hear the motors of tugs at the Port of Richmond and the sound of metal clanging at the industrial firms that do business across the way. But it’s mostly quiet, and on most days it’s just Allen and the wildlife here.

“The gulls and the geese are pretty boisterous in the mornings,” he said. “You can hear them when they’re trotting on the roof, doing their laps.”

Brooks Island Regional Preserve

Size: 373 acres consisting of 45 acres of land and 328 acres of surrounding subtidal lands and sandspit

Peak: 159 feet

Location: About 1 mile off Richmond's coast

What's there: The Ohlone Indians lived on the island about 3,000 years ago, and shell mounds remain. The island is rich in plants and wildlife, with more than 100 known species of birds. At least 18 of these species nest on the island, including the Caspian tern and the redwinged blackbird.

Getting there: Access is available by reservation only. Visitors can book a naturalist-led group tour and arrive either by boat or kayak. To reserve a tour, call 888-EBPARKS or go online to ebparks.org.

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