

Travel: Leonora Curtin Wetland Preserve is alive with tours, insects and some flora, despite persistent drought

By Margaret Wilson | For The New Mexican

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Photo by: Courtesy photo Just south of Santa Fe, an unusual natural preserve hides behind a gate off the I-25 frontage road near La Cienega. The preserve offers a rare wetland environment maintained by the Santa Fe Botanical Garden Society. It was left in the society's trust by Leonora Curtin, a pioneering ethnobiologist.

The 35-acre Leonora Curtin Wetland Preserve is open to the public most Saturdays and Sundays, May through October. By chance, I decided to check it out on a day offering a tour led by "bug lady" Linda Wiener, a local entomologist.

About a dozen people — some docents-in-training, but many, like me, simply nature-lovers in search of respite from the city — joined the walking tour.

It began at picnic tables under the shade of a large Russian olive tree — an invasive species, we learned, but also a special attraction for nesting hummingbirds.

A few steps down the trail, we were treated to the sight of a tiny, basket-shaped nest just as a parent hummingbird flew out. The bird hovered high in the olive tree's branches, presumably leaving the babies safe in their home. Hummingbird nests are built from spider webs that expand to house a growing brood.

In this dry climate, any wetland is precious — for wildlife as well as for humans. Despite this year's drought, the preserve's natural pond was filled with water and alive with activity — from colorful dragonflies to croaking bullfrogs. Robins, red-winged blackbirds and waterfowl added to the marsh's diverse fauna. So did a curious muskrat, as it briefly surfaced from the pond.

The pond's life-sustaining water originates in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. It takes about 600 years for the run-off to travel underground from the mountains to the pond — a distance estimated at less than 50 miles.

Stopping often under huge, ages-old cottonwoods, Wiener showed us white, cocoon-like balls on chamisa bushes. She explained that these are home to the larvae of a small fly. An adult specimen of this fly, captured in a vial, wasn't much bigger than a gnat but sported red wings.

These little flies mimic the appearance and behavior of a jumping spider, as a method of self-protection from predators.

A mound of pebbles proved to be a colony of harvester ants. Wiener pointed out that the colony consisted of a single queen and many sterile female ants that collect seeds and bring them back to the queen.

Another guide identified some of the varied flora in the preserve's three distinct plant zones: Riparian/wetland, transitional and dry uplands. Given the lack of rain, wildflowers were few.

In early summer, these typically include Mexican hat, New Mexico checkermallow and scarlet guará. Along the paths, we spotted small white Yerba Mansa blooms, resembling strawberry blossoms but with cone-shaped centers. Also known as "lizard's tail," this native plant has been used historically as an herbal medicine.

Walking back to the trail, a breeze swayed the grasses, ruffled the leaves and reminded us that the air almost always seems cooler away from the city. Our environmental knowledge and appreciation expanded, we all felt lucky to have experienced the wonders of nature in this surprising high-desert oasis.

IF YOU GO

From Santa Fe, take I-25 south to exit 271. Turn right on the west frontage road. Go about 1.5 miles back north. Look for the sign on the gate for the Leonora Curtin Wetland Preserve.

For schedule and events, call the Santa Fe Botanical Garden Society at 505-471-9103 or visit www.santafebotanicalgarden.org. Usual hours are 9 a.m. to noon Saturdays, with guided tours beginning at 10 a.m., and 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Sundays. Entry and tours are free.

A small donation is requested.