



NEWS RELEASE

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
San Diego National Wildlife Refuge Complex**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: October 1, 2019

CONTACT:

Lisa_Cox@fws.gov (760) 420-3175

Additional high-res photos available upon request

B-ROLL PACKAGE:

<https://we.tl/t-IXIuUo8iWV>

Credit: Mike Aguilera/Sea World

Historic release of endangered birds by the people who fought for them almost 50 years ago

At the end of the McCoy Trail on Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge today, seven endangered light-footed Ridgway's rails (LFRR) were released by partners in conservation, including Mike and Patricia McCoy.

"I remember in 1971 the first time we went to bat to save this place," said Mike McCoy, now president of the Southwest Wetlands Interpretive Association. "It took a decade of fighting until the refuge was established, but we knew the birds needed us. And we knew the community would need it for their future."

Heralded as the people who helped save what is now the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve, today the McCoy's joined their conservation colleagues in the captive breeding program for the rails to witness the historic release, which will help bolster population on the refuge which has recently declined.

"The whole story comes together here," said Mike. "First you have to be able to save the land, then you need to do the research in order to breed them in captivity, and then you have to make sure they're being released into a habitat they are *protected* in. This all ties together, you cannot have one without the other."

The hen-sized secretive marsh bird was once abundant in Southern California wetlands, but rapidly declined due to the loss of over 90 percent of its salt marsh habitat. The rail was listed as

endangered under the 1969 Endangered Species Conservation Act, which preceded the 1973 passage of the Endangered Species Act.

Since 2016, the population of LFRRs across Southern California has dropped, due to both direct and indirect effects of El Nino. At Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge, additional negative effects resulted from hypoxic conditions created during the temporary closure of the Tijuana River mouth in 2018 which caused a die-off of the rail's prey, and exposure to avian predators during the high water levels.

These birds rely entirely on healthy marsh habitats for their survival, and the refuge still represents some of the best remaining habitat in Southern California for their recovery. Rails also often represent an indicator of the environmental health of our coastal wetlands. The McCoys represent how far we have come in appreciating wetlands in our coastal cities like Imperial Beach.

“We are indebted to the McCoys and we thank them, among others, for fighting to protect the rail's habitat here at the estuary,” said refuge manager Brian Collins. “This endangered species recovery work could never happen without the contributions of all of our partners, who show the same kind of optimism, resilience, dedication and commitment to the public good that the McCoys showed back in the day.”

Since 1998, conservation partners from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, San Diego Zoo Global, SeaWorld San Diego, Living Coast Discovery Center, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Huntington Beach Wetlands Conservancy and others worked together in a captive breeding effort, leading to the release of more than 530 rails into the wild.

After the first rails were taken out of the wild in 1998, the first successful young were produced at the Chula Vista Nature Center in 2001 (now the Living Coast Discovery Center). Rails continue to be bred at the Living Coast Discovery Center, San Diego Zoo Safari Park, and Sea World San Diego.

During the 2018 population census, an estimated 713 rails were detected throughout 23 surveyed salt marshes in Southern California. At Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge, there were approximately 124.

###