

Walnut Creek Open Space Foundation



Spring 2012

Restoration at Deer Lake in Shell Ridge

One of the scarcest resources in our open space areas is water. Deer Lake o has the advantage of being a large area that was already fenced. And Ranger Dan Bylin had mentioned that he thought Deer Lake was a good place to try to establish vegetation that would be more welcoming to birds, particularly migrating songbirds. After the Foundation started work on Bayberry Pond under Lesley Hunt's fine leadership, I knew I couldn't tap into Lesley's dedicated Tuesday Group, and wasn't sure how to approach it. I decided I needed a plan to guide our restoration efforts, but perhaps a little history is appropriate first.

A Little Deer Lake History

Deer Lake is located in the northern part of Shell Ridge. It was originally built as a stock impoundment by a local rancher named Ames, and is still called Ames Pond by some local residents. The dam is located at the north end of Deer Lake, which has a south arm and an east arm. Four drainages flow into Deer Lake, from the northwest, southwest, southeast and east south east. The drainages are mostly outside the fenced area.

In 1976, the City of Walnut Creek obtained an LWCF (Land and Water Conservation Fund) grant to purchase the Ames property. Sometime after its acquisition by the City, Ranger Ron White planted a sycamore tree on a knoll above the lake on the south side and put some old tires into the lake as bass habitat. As of 2010, the sycamore is still there, but the tires were removed in 2009. In 1986, after the dam was damaged by flooding early in the year, the City spent nearly \$300,000 to repair it.

Restoration Activities at Deer Lake

The Foundation first planted trees at Deer Lake in 2000-2002 as part of the oak habitat project. As of 2010, there are three 15' oak trees growing inside the fenced area, and several smaller oak trees (up to 6') that are probably also from these planting efforts. In 2008 and 2009, in order to improve the habitat in the drainages leading into Deer Lake and at the suggestion of Ranger Bylin, the Foundation installed 23 cattle enclosures in the SE and SW drainages and planted acorns in them. There was very limited success from this planting effort.

In 2010, the Foundation planted both acorns and buckeyes principally on the hill between the south and east arms, but also planted some acorns on the east and north sides of Deer Lake. There was a very good success rate for the buckeyes, but a much lower rate of success for the acorns. This was only the second time the Foundation had planted buckeyes, so the success rate was really good news. Later that year, we removed a small patch of Italian thistle from the south arm. We planted 125 native grasses in this area in January 2011, but the weather turned cold and dry for 5 weeks, so only about 20 survived.



Mayor Bob Simmons describes Deer Lake tasks to Community Service Day volunteers. (David Ogden photo)

In the spring of 2011, we moved some fencing that had been at Acalanes Open Space Area and placed it around an elderberry that needed protection from cattle grazing. The elderberry looked really happy afterward. (See accompanying photo.) For Walnut Creek's first ever Community Service Day in October 2011, a group of volunteers removed most of the Italian thistle from a large area near the kiosk (David Ogden and Brad Heckman removed the rest later) and removed grasses from around the existing plantings and from around the sites to be planted in the winter. The volunteers also removed about 6" of soil from a portion of the small depression within the fenced area in order to provide some water later in the year to improve the habitat for growing willows in this area. (cont. on page 3, Restoration)



Oak Habitat Update

In the fall of 2011 we gathered a large supply of acorns, but this winter has been so dry that it was decided to wait until there would be enough moisture to give the seedlings a chance of survival.

Instead of planting new trees we have been doing maintenance on past plantings. Out in North Lime Ridge Open Space, where cattle had grazed, we had to build small fences around our plantings to protect them. After several years we found that in some areas of Lime Ridge the little trees did not survive so we have been removing the fencing.

We expect to continue to do maintenance work around the trees that we have planted over the past 20 years. Work days are scheduled in Shell Ridge on Saturdays, April 14 at Sutherland and April 28 at Marshall starting at 9:00.

Cleaned Up and Removed—Volunteers organized by Dick Daniel have cleaned up scores of oak planting sites like this one overgrown with weeds in Lime

--Dick Daniel



Western Bluebird

WCOSF Spring Bird Walk

Sunday, April 15th from 8:00am – Noon
Meet at Valley Vista staging area for Lime Ridge Open Space
(across from Boundary Oak Golf Course)

Leader: Maury Stern

Elevation gain: 700 feet • Length: 4 miles.
Bring: water, sunglasses, binoculars and sunblock.
Hiking boots suggested • Everyone welcome
• Moderate rain cancels

Questions? Contact Harvey Ceaser, 925-937-1406
(Cell 925-457-5433 on 4/15 only)
or Bob Brittain, 925-938-5831 (Cell 925-899-3563)

New Public Services Manager

Mike Vickers has been promoted from park supervisor to Public Services Manager for parks and open space; Dan Cather's old job. He majored in turf in college which led to a job constructing golf courses. That nomadic life came to an end when his son reached school age. His most recent job before joining the City a couple of years ago was at Boundary Oak Golf Course, where he began the process of certifying it as an Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary, which it recently achieved. He continued his interest in green methods with the City parks. He is new to Open Space management, but he's willing to take on new things, he learns fast, and we look forward to working with him.

Volunteers for Heritage Day

It's early to be recruiting volunteers for Heritage Day at Borges Ranch on June 16, but our next newsletter won't come out until later in the summer. It's always fun to see all the activities while helping the kids with crafts (training provided), giving directions, selling or taking tickets, or whatever suits your fancy. It's a 2.5-3 hour shift and there are sitting down jobs. This year we also need a couple of volunteers to staff the WCOSF table in the public information area. If you're interested in helping out, please email us at contact@wcosf.org or call 937-6791 and we'll get back to you when we have all the details.

The Evolution of Our Restoration Projects

The Foundation's restoration efforts began in 1990 when Dick Daniel noticed that there were no young oaks in the Open Space, although there were plenty in his back yard. After some experimentation he, Ralph Kraetsch, and Dan Cather concluded the problem was cattle grazing. Cattle were excluded from part of Shell Ridge and the following year the Oak Habitat Restoration Project began under Ralph's leadership. Twenty years later, 700 oaks survive from the 2500 sites we planted and there are many more volunteer seedlings. By any measure, this is a success.

After a couple of years Ralph began to experiment with planting native grass at several sites in Shell Ridge. In 2003 Bill Hunt began planting grass in the Heather Farm Nature Area and a couple of years later, Lesley Hunt started another grass project at Sutherland. All these projects grew to be quite large but ultimately they failed to hold their own against the weeds. The most likely reasons are inadequate site preparation and follow up weeding.

In 1996 Ralph turned his attention to mowing invasive weeds with varied success. One major factor was the nature of the seed banks at each site.

About that time, Bob Wisecarver began a project at Borges Ranch to provide increased cover and food for the quail. This was a resounding success – the quail increased tenfold. However, efforts to replicate that success elsewhere haven't gone as well. We're still learning.

The thing that all these projects have in common is that they focused on a single habitat element. (Heather Farm actually included all the elements but the effort on grass overshadowed everything else.)

In 2008 Bob Simmons proposed deepening Bayberry Pond and restoring the area around it. This led to our first “all inclusive” project where we worked on all the major elements equally and at the same time (trees, chaparral, grass, and riparian). It has been successful. After his election to the City Council that fall, Bob moved over to Deer Lake and employed the same approach there in a low-key way (See his article elsewhere in this newsletter.). Sean Micallef is now doing the same at Indian Valley Pond.

We have also started two new limited-focus projects building in part on what we learned from the earlier ones. Phil Johnson has led an effort to remove yellow star thistle from the spine of Shell Ridge by doing very thorough weeding. It is labor intensive but successful. He, David Ogden, and Brad Heckman also started a mustard eradication project at Sutherland employing mowing and weeding. We have just started to plant grass there using methods Lesley Hunt worked out at Bayberry.

The next stage in the evolution of our projects will probably be to scale them up.

– Lesley Hunt

(Cont. from page 1. ...Restoration) In the spring of 2011, we moved some fencing that had been at Acalanes Open Space Area and placed it around an elderberry that needed protection from cattle grazing. The elderberry looked really happy afterward. (See accompanying photo.) For Walnut Creek's first ever Community Service Day in October 2011, a group of volunteers removed most of the Italian thistle from a large area near the kiosk (David Ogden and Brad Heckman removed the rest later) and removed grasses from around the existing plantings and from around the sites to be planted in the winter. The volunteers also removed about 6" of soil from a portion of the small depression within the fenced area in order to provide some water later in the year to improve the habitat for growing willows in this area.

In early 2012, we planted more native grasses, filled the unsuccessful planting sites with either buckeyes or acorns, and planted an elderberry that had been grown from Deer Lake seed. It is too early to tell the success of this effort. We wanted to plant some willows, but it has been too dry.

What does the future hold?

In addition to the planting of some willows in Deer Lake, and the planting of more California sage, toyon, and coyote brush in appropriate areas around the lake, the habitat restoration efforts should be expanded to include the planting of native wildflowers. In addition, the installation of some native bee blocks and bluebird boxes would add value and interest to the area.

There are a few other things that need attention, including a very unsightly bright blue drum filled with concrete at the entrance, some creosoted telephone poles that are in the narrow south arm of the lake, both of which need to be removed, and a rusty culvert in the east arm. There is already a kiosk which could be a useful way to teach people about Deer Lake and the restoration activity going on there.

Planting seeds of trees and small bushes requires a lot of patience and a willingness to try again if unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the things that have been done at Deer Lake are a really good start. I am hopeful that, in about 20 years when the oaks and the buckeyes have grown to young adult size, and the toyon, sage and coyote brush have grown, that people will want to come to Deer Lake to enjoy visiting and spending time at the site.

– Bob Simmons

(When he first started work at Deer Lake, Mayor Bob Simmons was neither council member nor mayor. Bob is a long-time member of the Walnut Creek Open Space Foundation and former president of the group.)

Walnut Creek Open Space Foundation
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Yes, I want to help protect and preserve Walnut Creek's Open Space

We invite all who share this goal to join the Walnut Creek Open Space Foundation. Memberships and contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowable by law. There are numerous areas where you can help. If you are interested, please drop us a note or email, or visit our website at www.wcosf.org.

I would like to join the Walnut Creek Open Space Foundation

Name _____
Address _____ City _____ Zip _____
Phone _____ Email (*we never share*) _____
Skills I am willing to share _____

I would like to volunteer!

_____ Oak Restoration Project
_____ Native Grasses
_____ Quail Habitat
_____ School program

MEMBERSHIPS

Patron.....\$500
Benefactor.....\$250
Sustaining.....\$100
Sponsor.....\$50
Family.....\$40
Individual.....\$25
Senior.....\$15

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