

SPRING 2019



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... to protect the land forever



Trail cameras on Bear Canyon Wildlands have confirmed a wide variety of wildlife utilizing the natural habitat — from cougars and coyotes to bobcats and deer.

WILD FOREVER—LAND TRUST RECEIVES GIFT OF NEW PRESERVE

BY HEATHER AH SAN

It's rare that Sonoma Land Trust gets the opportunity to protect land that is truly wild. But at the close of 2018, we received such an unexpected gift: 250 acres of rugged, largely untouched wild land in the foothills of the Mayacamas northeast of Healdsburg, donated by Dick and Gretchen Grant. The project, which closed escrow in December, became our 18th preserve and is named "Bear Canyon Wildlands."

"We are delighted and honored that the Grants chose Sonoma Land Trust to steward this gem of a property," says Wendy Eliot,

Sonoma Land Trust conservation director. "The high quality of the habitat and natural resources on this land make it a natural fit for protection. We are very grateful for this contribution to conservation in Sonoma County."

This rugged landscape is special not only because it boasts undeveloped natural resources, but it also forms an important link between the Land Trust's Bear Canyon Conservation Easement to the west and a complex of 12,000 acres of protected land to the east — including Ag + Open Space's McCord

(Continued on page 3)



A NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

PUT US DOWN AS LAND LOVERS

Grosbeaks are back — Nature's cycle of spring returns these hefty songbirds to our home near Occidental each year. I love to watch them at our feeder as they rifle through sunflower seeds, pulling out nuts and spitting out hulls faster than a pro ball player could ever dream of. Their beak is perfectly designed for the job.

As you drive along Highway 37 through the San Pablo Baylands, you'll notice during high tides and wet weather that its design isn't so great. Decades ago, it was sort of just plopped down in the marsh, unintentionally destined for an extreme makeover. The time for that makeover has come and, fortunately, scientists, transportation planners and conservation groups agree that, in the face of climate change, we can and must

come up with a better design — a transportation design that restores ecological function to the marsh and safely moves us to where we need to go.

Julie Packard, executive director of the Monterey Bay Aquarium and a director of their family foundation, recently spoke on the future of conservation to about 280 land trust professionals attending a conference at Asilomar. A few of us from SLT attended. She said the two conservation priorities going forward are land stewardship for adapting to a changing climate and broadening our base of support to match the demographics of California. Good advice for enhancing organizational design.

Charles Darwin said, "It's not the

strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change." The time for adaptation confronts us and time will tell how well we do.

Everything we love about Sonoma County is tied to land. This love of the land calls us to action, to adapt by designing new solutions to meet new challenges. We act today so that the land of Sonoma County can be protected forever.

DAVE KOEHLER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Ranch Conservation Easement and Audubon Canyon Ranch's Modini Mayacamas Preserve. Joining individual properties into larger protected landscapes has important ecological benefits. Landscape scale conservation allows wildlife to move more freely and helps ecosystems remain resilient as the climate changes. Protecting large, scenic landscapes also helps to preserve the natural beauty and character of Sonoma County.

The Grants donated the property in memory of the late Mary Hafner of Healdsburg, a much-cherished former Land Trust board member and longtime supporter. "Mary was a tireless advocate for Sonoma Land Trust and the work they do to protect land," says Gretchen. "Our family felt that the best tribute we could make in her honor would be to preserve forever this largely untouched wild land that our family has loved for decades."

Though our stewardship department is still in the process of assessing the property's natural resources, the Land Trust was thrilled to find such diverse, intact and healthy native grassland, chaparral, oak woodland and mixed

conifer forest habitats. Soils on the property are rich with organic material and host large swaths of native bunch grasses. Two branches of Bear Canyon Creek flow across the property, for a total of a half mile of perennial stream and one mile of intermittent stream in the Sausal Creek watershed.

Signs of the Geysers Fire, which burned the property 12 years ago, indicate that the healthy native habitat on this property

responded positively to fire. The response of this landscape can help us understand how habitat that recently burned on our other preserves may respond over time as well.

While the threat of encroaching development may exist, protecting this land isn't just about the challenges to its natural resources — it's also about looking forward and saving what may be common now, but rare in the future. To preserve the wild and undeveloped nature of Bear Canyon Wildlands, our stewardship of the property focuses on maintaining its excellent natural habitat with a light human footprint and limited management and recreational use.

"This is a really different way of looking at the land and has inspired a new concept for us — the concept of 'wild lands' management," says Bob Neale, Sonoma Land Trust stewardship director. "It's a beautiful example of resilient Sonoma County, wild forever."

Heather Ah San is Sonoma Land Trust's communications coordinator.

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Protecting this land isn't just about the challenges to its natural resources — it's also about looking forward and saving what may be common now, but rare in the future.



Land as wild and untouched as the newly protected Bear Canyon Wildlands property is unusual to still find in Sonoma County. Photos by Corby Hines.

OUR ONGOING LOVE AFFAIR WITH TOLAY AND SEARS POINT

BY SHERI CARDO

The ink was still wet after our executive director Dave Koehler signed the paperwork deeding our Tolay Creek Ranch to Regional Parks in 2016 when he dusted off his hands and said, “It’s all yours,” to parks director Bert Whitaker — followed by, “We’ll see you around the ranch.” That’s because our stewardship staff is still working to restore Tolay Creek, just like they’re still very involved at Sears Point Ranch, even though we transferred the bayside portion to the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge in 2015.

That’s the nature of stewarding land. It is a long-term affair and, sometimes, it just makes more sense for a nonprofit land trust, which can move quickly, to continue doing some of the essential on-the-ground work.

GREENING TOLAY CREEK

For example, from the moment we acquired 1,665-acre Tolay Creek Ranch in 2007, we’ve pursued three goals:

- 1) Protect its open space and natural resource values
- 2) Transfer the ranch to the adjacent park
- 3) Restore the creek

We’ve accomplished the first two, but creek restoration is a longer process and our stewardship team wants to see it through. Over the past decade, we’ve installed seven miles of fencing along both sides of the creek to manage the cows and planted *lots* of trees along the banks: 3,000 to be exact.

Thanks to Sonoma Land Trust’s longtime partnership with STRAW (Students and Teachers Restoring A Watershed), “Virtually all of the plants and trees were planted by young people,” exclaims stewardship director Bob Neale. “They return to the ranch year after year and feel a lot of ownership of ‘their’ growing trees.”

Unfortunately, the planting started at the same time as the five-year drought, so a substantial percentage of vegetation



Tolay Creek Ranch is adorned each spring with an array of rare serpentine wildflowers.

planted in the early years didn’t survive and had to be reinstalled.

“It seems like planting a tree is a really easy thing to do, but planting 3,000 along three miles of streams during an unforeseen drought makes it more complicated,” says Bob. “We learned a lot and made a lot of adjustments.”

What we learned was that the plants needed to be irrigated for the first couple years and have cages placed around them because animals, like deer and rodents, like to eat irrigation and young trees. And it couldn’t be just any kind of cage — the crew had to change the cage types three times to find the right one, and then hang burlap on the cages to provide the plants with shade.

But tenacity ruled the day! The willows have now taken hold, the oak trees are

finally growing, birds are nesting in the new plants and some native plants are coming back on their own. All of the plants and trees are in and they’re off irrigation for the first time. This past wet winter helped a lot.

“It’s working,” says Bob. “The formerly bare creek banks are now covered with vegetation and we’re seeing a lot more birds and animals, like coyotes, deer, golden eagles and great horned owls. The creek is a wonderful place for wildlife now.”

And the ranch, now part of Tolay Lake Regional Park, is a wonderful place for people, too, providing excellent opportunities for persons of normal mobility to get out in nature. “We’re really proud of having added our beautiful property to the existing Tolay Lake park for recreation,” says Bob. “Now it’s



(left) One of the first to hike as far as our former Tolay Creek Ranch when the park opened to the public last October. Photo by Lance Kuehne Photography.
(right) The Sears Point tidal marsh restoration provides for healthy fun.



possible to do a pretty easy long hike and enjoy serpentine wildflower fields and stunning vistas of the Petaluma River and Mt. Tam. It's very special."

SUCCESSES AT SEARS POINT

Who could forget the dramatic moment in 2015 when the levee was breached at Sears Point and bay water rushed into the 1,000-acre restoration site for the first time in over 100 years? From tidal marsh to land to tidal marsh once again. That is the plan, and it's well underway.

This innovative wetland restoration design used techniques that hadn't been used before. Happily, most of them are working. Lots of sediment is flowing in from the bay due to the deep channel that was constructed out to the sediment-rich Petaluma River Estuary; and thanks to the 500 marsh mounds that were constructed within the site, the dirt is staying there rather than flowing back out with the tides.

"Basically," says Baylands program manager Julian Meisler, "we want water to come in muddy and leave clean. When that happens, we've set the stage for dirt to accumulate so the marsh can grow."

And there are birds — hundreds and thousands of birds! Our citizen scientist bird monitors have completed more than 20 bird surveys along the levee to help us understand how waterfowl, shorebirds and raptors are using the site as it progresses from farm field to open water lagoon to tidal marsh. San Francisco Bay is a vital overwintering area for waterfowl and we've learned that Sears Point is now clearly acting in that capacity. As the site continues to fill with sediment over the coming years and decades, the habitat will change and so, too, will the birds and other wildlife.

"We've seen bat rays swimming under water, and seals and otter and osprey and thousands of ducks and shorebirds," says Julian. "It's a big change out there!"

About the only issue giving us pause right now is the fact that the new levee is eroding due to too much wave energy. While there's no danger of the levee failing, it was built to be a "habitat" levee, with gentle slopes to assist wildlife, and those slopes are washing away. We're bringing in scientists to address the situation and hope to have a plan in place by mid-summer. One solution being

considered is to place logs strategically along the levee to create a sheltered environment to protect the levee and allow vegetation to grow.

"From every project, we continue to learn and practice adaptive management," says Julian. "Most of the major indicators say we're on the right path and that's what counts."

One of the things that is unique about a restoration of this scale is that it necessitated a lot of permits requiring long-term monitoring. "We have an obligation to monitor Sears Point until 2030," states Julian. So your land trust will continue to survey the birds, vegetate the levee and marsh mounds, lead hikes, coordinate with the agencies and solve any problems that arise, all with the intent of creating a fully functional tidal marsh over the next few decades that will serve future generations well. We're in the business of forever, after all.

Sheri Cardo is SLT's director of communications.

WE HAVE A DEAL!

STATE AND COUNTY AGREE ON PATH FORWARD FOR SDC

After nearly four years of negotiations over the future of the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC), local lawmakers have delivered on their promise to craft a deal with the State of California for protection of the property's 700+ acres of exceptional open space and wildlife corridor lands, while also funding a reuse plan for the 200-acre developed campus. The agreement — which was approved by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors on April 5 — accomplishes two main goals with an estimated cost of nearly \$40 million:

- The State will fund a \$3.5 million effort to create a specific plan for SDC pursuant to the Sonoma County general plan; and
- The State will continue to take financial responsibility for the basic upkeep and maintenance of the property for three years while the specific plan is developed.

"This agreement is good for SDC and the entire Sonoma Valley," says John McCaull, Sonoma Land Trust's land acquisition

program manager for the Sonoma Valley, adding that the State has "been true to their word and the funding for the planning effort — and their commitment to continue stewarding the property over the next few years — gives our community the resources and the breathing room to get the job done right."

This planning framework is exactly what Sonoma Land Trust has been advocating for since the closure of SDC was announced in May, 2015. The breakthrough agreement addresses one of the State's biggest concerns that the future of the property be planned in its entirety. Although there is consensus between all parties that SDC's open space should be permanently protected as parkland, the State has not been willing to discuss transferring property to park agencies unless the County uses their land use and zoning powers to authorize a new mix of uses for the now-shuttered campus.

While the County initiates the specific planning process under the general plan,

there will be a parallel effort to work with state and county park agencies to prepare for expanding Jack London State Historic Park and Sonoma Valley Regional Park to include SDC's open space lands. "It is very gratifying that the State acknowledges the importance of SDC for the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor," says Tony Nelson, Sonoma Valley program manager for Sonoma Land Trust. "The State's support provides a nice boost for the efforts of many individuals and organizations working to protect this corridor for wildlife species as well as humans on into the future."

Sonoma Land Trust thanks our highly dedicated and talented team of elected officials and Sonoma County staff who were able to propel us to this milestone. For more information and to stay up to date, please visit the Transform SDC blog site at www.transformsdc.com.



*SDC sits directly in the middle of the wildlife corridor "pinchpoint," making the protection of the 700 acres of open space lands essential.
Photo by Scott Hess Photography.*

MERRILL VARGO AND DOUG MARTIN

GIVING TO THE LAND CONNECTS PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

"We've always been outdoorsy kinds of people," says Merrill Vargo. For a time, she and her husband, Doug Martin, lived on a cattle ranch in the eastern Sierras, north of Death Valley and an hour from their nearest neighbor. "It was pretty out there," admits Doug wistfully. Clearly, Doug and Merrill are at home in wild places.

Yet, after Doug accepted a faculty position at Sonoma State University in the mid-1980s, they moved to Sonoma County. The difference here from prior places they'd lived was palpable. On the east side of the Sierra, the sheer remoteness of the land protected it. In the East Bay, where Doug lived for a spell, land had already been developed. In Sonoma County, they describe the land as being much more delicate because there still exists both the need and the opportunity to protect it.

"I don't think I feel a huge conservation thing outside the ordinary. I guess I wanted to do what I could," Doug reflects with typical humility. "It's just clear that as hard as you try, you can't save the environment by personal initiative alone," adds Merrill with swift practicality. That's why they joined Sonoma Land Trust in 1991 and why they've continued their support over the years. (That's also why they joined the Legacy League, our planned giving circle, last year!)

Merrill went on to a career in nonprofit leadership as Doug continued at SSU. After they both retired, they began volunteering with the Land Trust. They lent a hand on stewardship workdays, working with others to undertake hours-long chores, like pulling invasive scotch broom. Three years on, they continue to volunteer, spearheading an annual fundraising analysis for the development



Doug Martin and Merrill Vargo give to the land in many ways. Photo by Corby Hines.

department and serving as conservation easement monitors, annually documenting the conditions of two properties. They take their duties seriously, volunteering more than 120 hours in the past year alone!

This hard work brings its own rewards. They love that volunteering allows them to connect with lands like they used to own. On a recent monitoring trip at historic Live Oaks Ranch in Knights Valley, they had just sat down for lunch when, lo and behold, they saw "an actual cowboy" running cattle down a nearby hill. It took them back to all those years ago when they worked cattle in the White

Mountains. "It was so nostalgic. The past came to visit us," says Merrill.

For Merrill and Doug, that's what giving back to the land is all about. In the myriad ways they give, they also receive: a sense of purpose, of timelessness, of transcendence, of community. Merrill reflects, "It's our connection with future generations."

Thank you, Merrill and Doug, for the many ways you support Sonoma County's wild and working lands, and for sharing your story with our readers.

Interested in becoming a volunteer or joining the Legacy League? Call Shannon Nichols at (707) 526-6930 ext. 140.



It's our connection with future generations. — Merrill Vargo



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TOLAY SPARKLED AT MARCH 30 DEDICATION

It was a picture-perfect day of celebration, gratitude, festivities, nature, and people (and dogs!) big and small— all 600 attendees of the dedication of 3,400-acre Tolay Lake Regional Park seemed to thoroughly enjoy themselves at Sonoma County's newest and largest park. Hosted by Sonoma County Regional

Parks, Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, Sonoma Land Trust, Sonoma County Ag + Open Space and Sonoma County Regional Parks Foundation, this special day featured speakers, guided hikes, cultural demonstrations, children's activities, food and music. The park currently offers more than 11 miles of multi-use trails crossing grasslands and ridges with views of the Petaluma River, San Pablo Bay, Mt. Tam, San Francisco and beyond. Sonoma Land Trust is delighted that our former Tolay Creek Ranch is now open to the public as the southern half of this stunning park.



Tolay park dedication attendees hiked, picnicked, watched demonstrations, listened to speakers, enjoyed delicious food and music, and more!

OUR MISSION

Sonoma Land Trust protects the scenic, natural, agricultural and open landscapes of Sonoma County for the benefit of the community and future generations by:

- DEVELOPING LONG-TERM LAND PROTECTION STRATEGIES;
- PROMOTING PRIVATE AND PUBLIC FUNDING FOR LAND AND CONSERVATION;
- ACQUIRING LAND AND CONSERVATION EASEMENTS;
- PRACTICING STEWARDSHIP, INCLUDING THE RESTORATION OF CONSERVATION PROPERTIES; AND
- PROMOTING A SENSE OF PLACE AND A LAND ETHIC THROUGH ACTIVITIES, EDUCATION AND OUTREACH.