

Walnut Creek Open Space Foundation



Fall 2011

Oaks at a Crossroads

Ralph Kraetsch and Dick Daniel announced last spring that after 20 years, they would be stepping down as leaders of the Oak Habitat Restoration Project at the end of the season. That moment has arrived. Following is a mini edition of the *Oak News*, which Ralph has always published for the oak volunteers:

I haven't heard of anyone stepping forward to take on the Oak Project, so, assuming no one does, here are some suggestions:

We will need to remove the unsuccessful sites in LRN. We will have a fairly large number of T-posts, rebar posts, fencing pieces and screen cylinders. All this will come in 2012 after the rains have wet the soil deeply enough to pull the posts. Any thoughts on how to use this material would be welcome. A number of volunteers have done planting on their own and may want the posts and possibly the screen cylinders.

I would suggest some folks apply Roundup to the weeds inside the successful fenced sites in late Feb or early March. Dick Daniel has collected a modest supply of acorns in case anyone wants to do some planting. They are stored in the refrigerator at Howe Homestead. Some will be needed to replant sites killed by the Shell Ridge fire. We have one more watering session scheduled in LRN, Oct 15. We had a nice turnout on Sept 17 with Jerry Christopherson, Dick Daniel, Lesley Hunt, Ralph Kraetsch, Brian Murphy, Tim Ory, Gene Schulting & Sandy Sprowl.



Images from the September 17 oak watering at Lime Ridge - clockwise from upper left: (a) Ralph and Dick wait for the watering crew to arrive; (b) Ralph, Dick, Tim, Jerry, Gene and Brian chat before the work begins; (c) Jerry perfects his watering technique; (d) Tim walks to his next site. The yellow ribbon indicates a live tree, but the fencing is down; (e) Ralph waits for everyone to finish up and the watering crew to return; (f) No one is in a hurry, time to chat at the end of the work day. (Lesley, Thank you for the wonderful photos!)

Yellow Star-Thistle

The earliest specimens were collected in Oakland in 1869. It is believed to have been imported in alfalfa seed from Chile. It is fatal to horses. Cattle ranchers hate it. And it's no fun for humans and dogs who walk through it. It is present in all of our Walnut Creek Open Spaces and it is spreading. More than 10 million acres in California are infested with it. Botanists call it *Centaurea solstitialis*. We know it as yellow star-thistle, YST for short.



YST and bud weevil

Foundation volunteers and Open Space staff have battled YST for years, usually through mowing. Timing is important for mowing, and figuring out just the right time to mow is tricky. For the past two years, WCOSF volunteer Phil Johnson and a small band of friends (including the late Bob Suzuki, a WCOSF Board member) have been fighting infestations one-on-one, with weed whackers and hand tools like sharpened small floral shovels.

Johnson found a spot last year on Shell Ridge, about six acres in size, that was infested with YST. He was determined to eradicate it. "Whatever area we decide to attack," he says, "it must be done 100%; take no prisoners. Pick a battle that can be won and follow up for at least three years. Pick a geographical space that has defensible borders. In the six acres we worked on last year, we found approximately 140 plants and eliminated those. It is possible to get rid of YST."

Open Space staff and Foundation volunteers will continue to work on eradicating YST from our precious land. You can help by donating a couple of hours a week, or more. If you want to join in, send us an email and we'll put you to work: contact@wcosf.org.

- David Ogden

Acalanes Grazing

Following two or three incidents in which people were seriously injured by cattle, staff decided to remove grazing from Sugarloaf and Acalanes. The Foundation supported this action and the PROS Commission ratified it at their October 2009 meeting. Because of contract considerations, the effective date was October 31, 2010.

For various reasons the cattle were on the land at Acalanes longer than usual in 2010, resulting in considerably less grass than usual at the end of the season. We then had a very wet winter and the grass grew very tall and lush. The homeowners on the ridge above Acalanes, perhaps spooked by the contrast, became concerned about fire and pressed the City to bring back cattle grazing.

As a matter of policy, the City had already disked a 40-foot fuel break, which exceeded the fire department's 30-foot requirement. Mowing along the service roads had provided the internal fuel breaks the fire department requires. After considerable discussion with the neighbors, the City agreed to hire goats to eat vegetation on another seven acres directly below the houses, creating a fire break 80-90 feet wide. The neighbors still insisted on the return of cattle grazing and the issue went to the PROS Commission in July.

Many good points were made at the meeting. Staff noted that grazing was not an effective fire prevention measure because it left enough grass to fuel a fire; fuel breaks are better because they remove fuel. The neighbors pointed out the huge value of the property at risk of fire and noted various shortcomings of the mowing. The rancher testified that grazing maintains wildflowers and that his cattle were gentle. Some people liked seeing cows grazing and agreed they were gentle; others had bad experiences with them. The Foundation agreed with staff's position.

In the end, it came down to this: Fire is unpredictable; you take strong precautions, but there are no guarantees. However, you can eliminate potential liability from cattle-caused injuries by removing the cattle. The Commission voted 4-0 to continue the current policies.

- Lesley Hunt

Cavity Nesting Native Bees

In light of the problems European honey bees are experiencing with still unexplained hive collapse, it becomes important to pay attention to our native bees. Since bees are responsible for every third bite of food we take, the small things in our lives really do matter.

On an Open Space Foundation field trip to California Audubon's Bobcat Ranch, it was brought to my attention that we ought to do something for native bees. They sent photos of bee blocks for cavity nesting native bees and a list of native plants to provide nectar for them. Most of the plants on the list grow naturally in our open space so it became an opportunity to see what species of cavity nesting native bees live here by installing bee blocks and



Austin Woods and helpers installing native bee blocks.

seeing which size holes get used.

Our native bees are solitary bees; they do not make honey or nest in hives. A third of the species are cavity nesting; the remainder are ground nesting. They come in a large variety of sizes which enables them to pollinate all flowering plants. Since native bees tend to be shy and discreet, they do a great job of avoiding being seen with the exception of bumble bees and large black carpenter/mason bees.

The native bee block experiment in our open space was done by Eagle Scouts, drilling holes of various sizes in wood blocks and installing them in habitat enclosures to see which species of native bees use them for laying eggs. This was done to start to understand abundance of cavity nesting native bees as well as which species live in our open space. So far we have only found use of smaller holes, which suggests we have *Protosmia* and *Hylaeus* bees. There were not many holes occupied with nests in the blocks; we have some work to do in figuring out exactly who our occupants are.

The greatest thing you can do to benefit native bees is plant flowering plants that bloom at different times of the year to provide nectar for them. Should you begin to pay attention to the very small creatures, you'll notice how much more you see and enjoy in our open space!

-Brian Murphy

In Brief...

Looking for an Accountant

The Foundation is looking for a CPA to review its books biennially in November. We keep our records in QuickBooks and our volume of transactions is small. If you would like to volunteer or know of someone who might be willing, please email us at contact@wcosf.org. We thank member Doreen Yates, who has done the review since 2003, and wish her well in her retirement.

Acalanes Donor List

The list of our major donors to the Acalanes Ridge purchase is now on the website in a new article on Land Acquisition. Check it out by clicking that item in the menu on the home page.

More Honors

Ralph and Dick received the first-ever Peg Kovar Poppy Award at the Action for Beauty Council luncheon on October 14 for their leadership of the oak project. It is appropriate that the award should go to WCOSF members because Peg was a leader in the creation of the Open Space.

Winter Volunteer Opportunities

The winter volunteering schedule will be posted on the website in early November. After rethinking our grass-planting methods last year, we will be back to a full program for all our projects.

Protecting Your House from Fire

What: Fire Defensible Spaces in a Grassland Neighborhood

When: Saturday, January 7, 1:00 - 2:30 pm

Where: Borges Ranch Carriage Barn

Each year the Open Space Division spends over \$25,000 to create firebreaks around the Open Space sites to help protect our neighbors from grassland fires. Staff will discuss the Open Space Division's actions and share ideas on what adjacent homeowners can do to help protect their property. Reservations are required. For more information and to register for the program contact Supervising Ranger Nancy Dollard at (925) 943-5899 x2135.

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

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