

FALL-WINTER 2017

## President's Message



A few weeks ago, present and past Oak Habitat Restoration Project volunteers gathered

to celebrate Ralph Kraetsch's contribution in founding and leading the project. We shared our experience with the project and what it meant to us, as noted in the article in these pages. I also wanted to share my own feelings about what the project and Ralph's leadership meant to me. In the fall of 1991, Ralph invited local residents to a meeting to announce the project and ask for volunteers. My wife Lesley attended that meeting and we both started working in the project that fall. We've stayed with it ever since.

Lesley was already involved in Walnut Creek's civic life but the Oak Habitat project got me connected to my community. I joined the WC Open Space Foundation board a few years later and then served on the Walnut Creek Park, Recreation and Open Space Commission for six years. I have been on a number of local committees and task forces over the years.

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## Voracious Voles Cause Extensive Damage

Voles – also called meadow mice – caused extensive damage in our open spaces this year. With voracious appetites and a breeding cycle that produces many offspring in a short time span, the little rodents stripped leaves and bark off oak seedlings; girdled oak saplings, killing many of them; and damaged or killed many other plants.

A paper, Pest Notes, from the University of California Integrated Pest Management Program, published in 2010, describes voles thusly:

*Voles are intriguing, small mammals, because some populations regularly go through cycles of low to high numbers with occasional, sudden increases that can send numbers soaring up to several thousand per acre...Once vole numbers begin to increase rapidly, the damage they do...to plants and trees can be quite severe.*

Normally, voles are nearly invisible, using hidden runways through grass and moving so fast they are difficult to see. But this year, their numbers were substantially above what we see in a normal year. On a 45-minute

hike in Shell Ridge in the spring, your correspondent spotted 14 voles. Another observer, long-time Foundation volunteer (and former Board member) Dick Daniel, recounted massive damage to volunteer blue oaks along Indian Creek Trail in Shell Ridge (see photo). The good news is that many of the seedlings which were stripped of leaves and bark appear to be regenerating because their root systems are intact and undamaged.

Vole predators, in addition to humans, include raptors, snakes, bobcats, and

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Vole munches on thistle, undeterred by thistle's thorns.  
 Photo: David Ogden



Ralph Kraetsch in his iconic white Ford pickup truck, which he used exclusively for the Oak Habitat Restoration Project. Photo: David Ogden

## Ralph Kraetsch 1925 - 2017

Ralph Kraetsch, a founding member of the Walnut Creek Open Space Foundation and co-founder of our Oak Habitat Restoration Project, died last May.

A petroleum geologist for Chevron Corporation, Ralph spent his retirement in service to his community. In addition to his volunteer work with the Open Space Foundation, he served on the boards of the Walnut Creek Arts Commission, and Contra Costa Musical Theater.

With his friend Dick Daniel, Ralph co-founded the Foundation's Oak Habitat Restoration Project which, for twenty years, enlisted hundreds of local residents, young and old, in planting acorns in our open spaces. Of the approximately 2500 sites planted, about 800 remain today as viable young oak trees – valley oaks, blue oaks, and coast live oaks, all native to this area. A one-third success rate for these plantings is considered high.

Ralph is survived by his wife of 67 years, Carolyn; his children, Ed, Katherine, John, and Ellen; eight grandchildren, and two great grandchildren. Ralph's open space friends gathered recently near Fossil Hill at the Sutherland gate to remember him and celebrate his contributions.

## WCOSF Student Grant Award Program

The Walnut Creek Open Space Foundation (WCOSF) has announced a grant program for eligible college-level students to receive up to \$2,000 to those applicants selected. Qualified applicants can apply for grants for research studies that take place within the Walnut Creek Open Space system and whose projects will provide a benefit to the Walnut Creek open spaces.

These projects should be consistent with the mission of the WCOSF, which is to preserve and enhance Walnut Creek's 2,700 acres of open space and to educate area residents so that they can enjoy this wonderful resource. The Walnut Creek Open Space, which is home to several unusual species and contains significant stands of oak woodland, grassland, chaparral and other habitats, is primarily within the City of Walnut Creek, with small sections overlapping into Concord and Lafayette. Please see our website for more information: <http://www.wcosf.org/grantprogram.html>.

Have a specific question? Contact Sean Micallef at [seanm@wcosf.org](mailto:seanm@wcosf.org).

## Helping Our Bluebirds



Western Bluebird.  
Photo: Bob Brittain

Newborn  
Bluebird Chicks.  
Photo: Brad Rose

Since Rossmoor resident Don Yoder founded the statewide Bluebird Recovery Program in 1990s, Walnut Creek residents have monitored cavity nest boxes during nesting season from March to July each year. Here's this year's report from team leader Bob Brittain.

The nest boxes supplement natural tree cavity nest sites needed because of reduced natural habitat and intrusion of non-native species. The boxes are usually mounted on oak trees facing meadows so that the parents have good hunting to feed the hatched chicks. Volunteers visit nest boxes every week to ten days and check for the presence of nests, eggs and baby birds. While bluebirds are the target species, several other birds take advantage of this help from humans.

We also provide protection from predators where possible and keep the nest boxes in good operating condition. This year, our group of twelve volunteers visited the 144 nest boxes on ten Bluebird Trails (seven in Walnut Creek Open Space areas). We fledged a record number of 441 chicks, including 278 western bluebirds, 97 house wrens, 36 ash-throated flycatchers and 20 oak titmice. At the end of each season we turn in data to the state organization.

—Bob Brittain

### Voracious Voles Cause Extensive Damage

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coyotes, all present in our open spaces. But even the predators were overwhelmed by the vole population this year.

But voles have been here longer than we have, and oaks and other plants have survived and prospered while living alongside them.



Blue oak sapling, decimated by voles, re-sprouts in November. Because roots are not damaged, plants can recover. Photographed on Bramhall Trail in Shell Ridge. Photo: David Ogden

### President's Message

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Ralph, Dick Daniel and Dan Cather together conceived the project and led it so well that I and others stayed involved for years. I learned about leading volunteers from seeing how Ralph and Dick kept us working productively in the project and happy to keep coming back. Ralph was a good friend to Lesley and to me and he and his wife Caroline made us feel a part of their family.

My life has been richer for my experience working in the Oak Habitat project with Ralph, Dick and many volunteers. Doing something positive for your community and for the natural environment feels good and you get to meet fine friends. If you have the time and interest, consider joining us for one of our restoration events or one of our walks. Our Open Space is a treasure to be appreciated and preserved. Come celebrate it with us.

—Bill Hunt

### Going Green: Electronic Newsletter Available

You can view our newsletter on your favorite mobile device or computer. We post it on our website ([wcosf.org](http://wcosf.org)), and we'll be happy to send you a pdf version as well. For the pdf, just send an email to [newsletter@wcosf.org](mailto:newsletter@wcosf.org).





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### **Yes, I want to help protect and preserve Walnut Creek's Open Spaces.**

We invite you 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. Interested? Drop us an email at [volunteer@wcsof.org](mailto:volunteer@wcsof.org), visit our website at [www.wcsof.org](http://www.wcsof.org), or fill out the form below and mail it to WCOSF, Box 309, Walnut Creek, CA 94597-0309.

#### **I would like to join the Walnut Creek Open Space Foundation**

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ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_

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EMAIL (WE NEVER SHARE) \_\_\_\_\_

PATRON-\$500    BENEFACTOR-\$250    SUSTAINING-\$100    SPONSOR-\$50    FAMILY-\$40    INDIVIDUAL-\$25

**I WOULD LIKE TO VOLUNTEER TO:**    MAINTAIN OAKS    PLANT NATIVES    CREATE WILDLIFE CORRIDORS    HELP WITH OUTREACH

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