



The Watch

Newsletter of the Watsonville Wetlands Watch
Fall 2005

Disappearing Plant Species on the Watsonville Wetlands & Uplands

Recently I visited Harkin's Slough to collect some seed from a single specimen of *Heracleum lanatum* (Cow Parsnip) that I had noticed earlier in the season. The robust *Heracleum* is named after the mythological hero Heracles, it has large leaves and white flower clusters. It is an important source of nectar for insects and browse for animals. Anise swallowtail butterflies can use this plant as a host for its larvae instead of the invasive plant *Foeniculum vulgare* (Fennel). Unfortunately the *Heracleum* that I wanted to collect from had been killed by roadside vegetation control. Although this plant can be common in some areas I have been unable to locate another specimen in or near the Watsonville slough system. Perhaps yet another species must be added to the long list of those missing from the sloughs.

There was no scientific survey of the species of the five sloughs (Watsonville, Struve, Hanson, Harkin, Gallagher) before agriculture was introduced to the Pajaro Valley, and no detailed survey has been done recently, so we don't have a clear idea of what has been lost and what still remains. Ida Hayward's wetland survey of 1931 lists 62 native plants in the "northwest slough region" including *Heracleum lanatum*. Some of these wetland plant species are no longer to be found there, but many still remain, though they may be restricted to small areas and in danger of extirpation (loss of local population).

Early paintings (1800s) show rolling grasslands around the town of Watsonville. Upland plants were not included in Hayward's survey, but today it is generally agreed that the land once

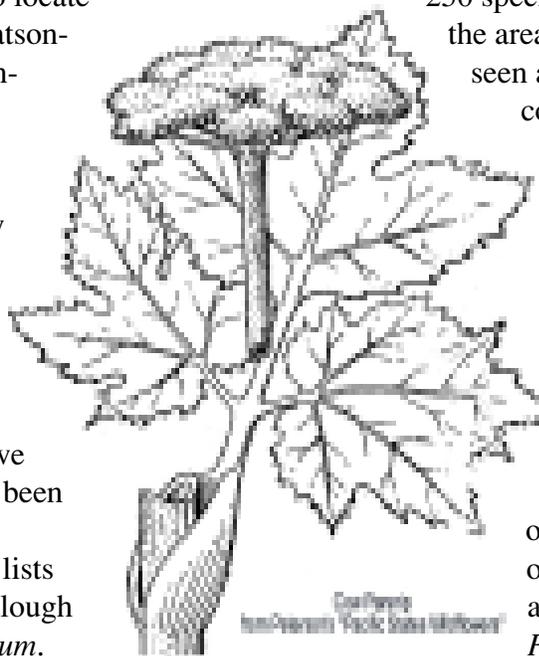
contained large areas of Coastal Terrace Prairie, a type of plant community that tends to have a high diversity of species including many beautiful annual wildflowers such as *Centaureum muhlenbergii* (Monterey Centaury) and *Lotus salsuginosus* (Coastal Lotus). Even before Ida's time most of the prairies around the sloughs had been converted to agriculture. Some small patches of prairie remain today but many are threatened with destruction, and these patches are much less diverse than they must have been historically. In some areas of Santa Cruz County

prairie habitats support as many as 250 species of native wildflowers, the areas of prairie that I have seen around Watsonville only contain about 20 native species. Introducing soil disturbance to these areas may allow wildflowers that have long been absent to reappear from dormant seeds.

Without proper land management native plants such as *Baccharis pilularis* (Coyote Brush) can be as much of a threat to coastal prairie as exotic species such as *Phalaris aquatica* (Harding Grass). *Baccharis*, named

after Bacchus the god of wine, is an important native plant but sometimes it can threaten to overwhelm prairies. *Phalaris* destroys prairies and is spreading like wildfire throughout the Pajaro Valley.

The uplands of Gallagher slough include some beautiful wooded areas of *Quercus agrifolia*



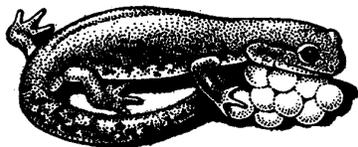
PLANT LOSS continued

(Coast Live Oak) mixed with *Salix lasiolepis* (Arroyo Willow) and *Salix lucida ssp. lasiandra* (Yellow Willow). Much of the soil in this area is kept moist through the summer by seeps and springs. Here can be found a diverse understory of plants such as *Pholistoma auritum* (Fiesta Flower) and *Heuchera micrantha* (Alum Root).

It is difficult to conduct plant surveys in this area because much of it is an impenetrable jungle. This is what Long-toed Salamanders call paradise. A large area that sustained this type of habitat is now beneath the Buena Vista landfill. The creeping death of *Delairea odorata* (Cape Ivy) has invaded and is a serious threat to these woodlands.

With an ecosystem as large and diverse as the Watsonville slough system it is as difficult to define health as it is to monitor it. But one sure measure of health is the number of native plant species in the watershed, with a focus on rarities. It is also important to understand how even commonly found native species such as *Baccharis* and *Heracleum* have local populations that contain unique genotypes (collection of genes) that have evolved through the millennia to survive in this area. Conserving these local genotypes is an important element of conservation and restoration plans. Despite heroic efforts to save the sloughs biodiversity continues to be lost at both the species and the genetic levels. Because of a lack of resources to do detailed monitoring these losses often go unnoticed. But much remains to be loved and defended.

– John Pritchard



General Meeting for All Members and Friends of Watsonville Wetlands Watch

September 12, 6:00-8:00 pm
All Saint's Episcopal Church,
437 Rogers St. Watsonville

The Speaker: Chris Johnson- Lyons

The Subject: Restoration plans for the Environmentally Sensitive Lands Near Pajaro Valley High School

Did you know that Watsonville Wetlands Watch is responsible for managing the Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas adjacent to the Pajaro Valley High School.? Did you know that Chris Johnson-Lyons, our speaker for the evening, will bring us up to date on our restoration plans for it? She will show us on maps where these lands are located and tell us in detail about the plans we have to restore and maintain them as native habitat. There will be opportunities for us to ask her questions and to learn how we can become actively involved in the restoration work. You may not want to wield a pick and shovel, but you surly will want to know about this important WWW project. Refreshments will be provided and there will be fellow WWW folk to visit with. Come join in a rare gathering of the whole bunch of us, and learn something new in the process.

Mow thanks!

We would like to thank **C&N Tractors** for their generous donation of a tractor mower for 2 days of heavy mowing. The Kubota tractor that they lent us was tough and dependable. Mowing reduces the seed produced by invasive plants. It removes thatch and creates a disturbance that encourages native wildflowers to germinate and thrive. It also changes the structure of vegetation to be very low, a situation that favors predators such as hawks and owls as well as the majestic California ground squirrel.

A WERC in Progress

A lot has happened since the May groundbreaking of the Wetlands Educational Resource Center. Our building is now over 40 percent complete, and should be done well before the end of the year.



The WERC got off to a good start in July...

Here's a brief recap of the building process thus far. In early summer, the building's footprint took shape. The contractors dug the foundation and poured the cement in May and June. In July the framing began, and is nearing completion. You can stroll through the rooms of the WERC and envision how this fantastic epicenter of environmental learning will look once complete!

Not only is the building coming together, but committees are coming together to plan the inner workings of the WERC. The Visitor Center committee came up with a design and display plan for the WERC's reception area, which they are now transforming from concept into reality. The Restoration Committee is moving forward on the greenhouse, having selected a builder and site. We are also making progress on the landscape plan, outdoor classroom, and the implementation of a new WERC program advisory committee.

Thanks to a **Coastal Commission** grant, we have been able to put together a list of equipment and supplies for the WERC classroom. Many kind friends of the WERC have purchased books for the resource library. To thank our contributors, everyone will receive a custom bookplate for each \$25 they donate to the resource library.

Carol Whitehill has worked tirelessly to acquire furniture for the WERC. She has arranged a refurbishing "party" to revive 20 chairs donated to the WERC by Cabrillo College. This event will

take place September 24th from 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m., and all are welcome to attend. (See following information.)

The Watsonville Wetlands Watch would also like to thank the **Pajaro Dunes Homeowners' Association** for generously contributing over \$6000 for computers and a printer in the WERC classroom. This amazing gift is a huge help!

Thanks again to all for your long hours working to make the WERC prosper. We look forward to seeing all of you at our opening celebration in a few months!

If you would like to donate books or money toward the WERC resource library, or would like to attend the furniture refurbishing event, please contact Rachel at the WERC office at 831-728-1156.



...and progresses rapidly.

The WERC's mission is "To inspire research, education and conservation of the wetlands and watersheds of the Pajaro Valley."

Helpers needed.

We have 40 surplus chairs donated to us from Cabrillo for use in the WERC classroom, courtesy of Rob Edwards. They are sturdy and comfortable chairs of metal and bent wood. They need cleaning up and some may need a new coat of varnish. We also have 8 tables for the classroom from UC surplus that need a good cleaning.

We need people to help with this refurbishing project from 9-12 AM on Sat. Sept 24 at the City of Watsonville's public works department. City of Watsonville bldg. on Harvest drive.

Call Carol at 728-5667 for details.

Late Summer Members' Picnic

It's always fair weather when good friends get together, just like the old song says.

On Sunday, August 14th we good friends of Watsonville Wetlands Watch got together for a potluck picnic at Ramsay Park. Not only was the weather almost perfect, but the food we all shared was spectacular.

Speeches were made about very deserving and devoted volunteers. We shared some laughs and fellowship and reminded ourselves that this band of merry folk is doing



some terrific work. We talked about the splendid progress we have made over this last year and outlined the somewhat overwhelming agenda we face in the near future. Can you believe it? We are building the Patrick J. Fitz Wetlands Educational Resource Center! We will probably be occupying it in December! It is the

work of dedicated volunteers that is making it happen! Thank You, everyone!

BIRDERS! Save these dates: November 4-6, 2005,

... for the inaugural MONTEREY BAY BIRDING WEEKEND, headquartered in Watsonville, in the beautiful Pajaro Valley and the heart of the Monterey Bay's birding activity. Join Central Coast and Bay Area birders for a full weekend of guided outings to such noted areas as the Watsonville Wetlands, Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve, Pajaro Dunes and the Pajaro River, and Moss Landing State Beach. With registration and welcome activities set for Friday, November 4, outings with knowledgeable regional leaders will occur on Saturday and Sunday. Witness this fall gathering of feathered locals and visitors including snowy plovers, black-crowned night herons, osprey, kestrel, and falcons. Workshops and presentations on birding photography, bird identification, and habitat restoration, as well as selected products and services, will also be available. Children and family outings along Watsonville's expanding network of wetlands trails will be offered both days from the City of Watsonville's new Ramsey Park Nature Center. Special offers on area accommodations and dining are available to participants. For full details on planned events, registration costs, accommodation opportunities and related information, log on to www.montereybaybirding.org or call 831-429-7281 x112.

The Monterey Bay Birding Weekend is co-sponsored by the City of Watsonville, Watsonville Wetlands Watch, the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce and the Santa Cruz County Visitors and Convention Bureau.

Join Watsonville Wetlands Watch

and help protect our wetlands! Membership of \$25 a year/\$15 student or senior, supports efforts to preserve and protect slough systems in the Watsonville area. You will also receive *The Watch*, our quarterly newsletter.

Name _____
Address _____
City/State/Zip _____

Send your check to Watsonville Wetlands Watch
Post Office Box 1239
Freedom, CA 95019-1239

Calendar

September 12,:General Meeting 6:00-8:00 pm. All Saint's Episcopal Church,437 Rogers St. Watsonville. Chris Johnson- Lyons wi;; present Restoration plans for the Environmentally Sensitive Lands Near Pajaro Valley High School

Sept 17: Coastal cleanup. Meet at 9 am @ Nature Center, Ramsey Park off Harkins Slough Rd. Bob Lyons leads the hardy in cleaning trash from our beautiful wetlands.email Robert_Lyons@PVUSD.net for further information.

Sept 24: Work party:9 to noon at the City's ublic Works Dept on Harvest Dr.to refurbish chairs for the WERC. Call Carol at 728-5667 for details.

Restoration days: Sept. 10 & 24, 9 to noon. The 2nd & 4th Saturdays of each month, join in restoring and tending the native habitats.

Meet: At the corner of Harkins Slough Road and Lee Road across from the new Pajaro Valley High School. **Bring:** Water, layered work clothes, sturdy shoes and a sun hat. We provide tools, gloves and inspiration.

Contact: John at 831-728-4106 for details.

November 4-6, 2005: The inaugural **MONTEREY BAY BIRDING WEEKEND**, Join Central Coast and Bay Area birders for a full weekend of guided outings to premier local hotspots. Witness the fall gathering of such noted locals and visitors as snowy plovers, black-crowned night herons, osprey, kestrel, and falcons. Workshops and presentations on birding photography, bird identification, and habitat restoration, as well as selected products and services, will also be available. Children and family outings along Watsonville's expanding network of wetlands trails will be offered both days from the City of Watsonville's new Ramsey Park Nature Center.

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