



The Watch

Newsletter of the Watsonville Wetlands Watch
Spring/Summer 2003

Niche: Under an Owl Moon

It is unfortunate that most glimpses of the great horned owl come by day, when the bird is always annoyed, surprised in hiding, flushed from a roost or mobbed by crows. Only after sunset when shadows rule does the “cat” owl transform into a perfect mechanism of death, wise of mind and penetrating of awareness, its prey stopped with a gaze, its call the voice of prophecy.

After dusk, you’ll often find the great horned owl perched prominently on a high limb at the edge of a meadow or woodland, face rotating like a radar dish to pinpoint the location of minute mouse rustlings or squeaks; watching with cylindrical, rod-packed eyes for the grey shape of a rabbit’s ear in the grass. Broad wings carry four pounds of muscle and sinew buoyantly aloft, comb-like leading edges fracturing air turbulence to near silence, feet spread with opposing toes into a shotgun pattern of daggers, closing on a mammal’s body, strong, scissor-like bill issuing a swift coup-de-grace.

At 40-60 million years of age, owls are older than the Pajaro Valley itself, an alluvial basin laid down beneath the ocean a mere 2-5 million years ago. For tens of thousands of years, a great variety of macro predators, including lions, saber-tooth cats, civets, wolves, bears and many eagle and owl species patrolled the moist valley floor as the wetlands turned from fresh to salt and back again. Following the Pleistocene extinctions and the advent of hominids, the larger predators of Watsonville Slough were reduced to wolves, cougars, bears, coyotes and badgers. Even these are mostly gone now. Coyotes pay only sporadic visits; foxes are as apt to raid a bird’s nest as to nab an opossum. The great horned owl alone, adaptable and persistent, expanding after Euro-

pean settlement, remains to pursue the bird banes: skunk, 'possum, 'coon and cat.

The one-square-mile core of the slough system is large enough to support one great horned owl pair, half of which is encountered at a day roost above mid-Hansen Slough. Perhaps 40-60 percent the diet of this bird is comprised of the brush cottontails that mow lawns along the terrace edges of West Struve slough; the rest is a smor-



gasbord of mezzo-predators, snakes, voles, mice and insects. Great horned owls occasionally will even wade, raccoon-like, after crawdads, frogs or fish.

During late winter, the resident pair in the

see NICHE p.2

EARTHDAY CELEBRATION

WWW joined many other local groups in the combined celebration of Earth Day and El Dia de los Niños on April 27 at Ramsey Park in Watsonville. Laura Kummerer devised a display of wetland plants and animals, including a tree frog hidden amongst marsh plants, which fascinated adults and children alike. She also showed children how Native Americans used cattails and had an active group of little girls braiding and weaving. Bob Lyons filled an enormous jug with slough water so that observers could see the many tiny animals that live in our sloughs. Other helpers included Laura's mother, Carol, and Ellie Van Houten.

An estimated 3,000 people came out to enjoy a beautiful sunny day and to learn more about how to protect our earth. Children danced and sang Mexican music to the applause of the large crowds. The City of Watsonville provided free drinks and hotdogs.

We were pleased with the interest that many people showed as they learned new things about the sloughs in their backyards.

- Ellie Van Houten



NICHE...

sloughs woos each other with loud hoots, then rekindles the thrall of affection with bowing and bill-touching. Crows' nests are a favorite rearing site; the owls build no nests of their own, but will also use hawks' and herons' nests (sometimes evicting the occupants), rock shelves and crevasses, tree cavities, even barn attics and office cornices. One pair was discovered raising a family in an active eagle's nest! The birds' catholic tastes in architecture contributes to the species' success.

Certain tribes of Native Americans believed that if a warrior lived well and courageously, he would reincarnate as a great horned owl. Others knew that, when you heard the owl call your name, your days in this life were numbered. Remember this as you walk the terrace shadows and sniff the slough decay, watching under an owl moon ...

- Jerry Busch

Be a wetlands watcher...

With many things changing around the Watsonville Sloughs, your support and involvement is as crucial as ever. If you haven't renewed for this year, please take the time to do so now. If you aren't yet a member, consider how your commitment can help protect these unique resources.

... Join Watsonville Wetlands Watch

and help protect our wetlands! Membership of \$15 a year 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

A Whale of a Tale

Two hundred and forty wonderfully enthusiastic and enthralled students at Amesti School have been introduced to the ecology of the Watsonville slough system. The first half of the Whale Tail grant awarded to the Watsonville Wetlands Watch by the California Coastal Commission is underway. The grant provides funding the project which is designed to engage elementary students in the restoration of our sloughs.

These 3rd and 5th graders took their task of planting young rushes, aster seeds and wild rose seedlings very seriously. First they lined up to receive a yellow tube, then pressed fine dirt into the tube, and carefully planted the seeds and seedlings. Smiling and eager they each placed the planted tubes in the flats.

Fifteen hundred plants will be nursed along by the students and planted in the Fall of 2003 for restoration of sensitive areas along the West Branch of Struve Slough. By engaging students in the propagation and transplanting of plants local to the Watsonville sloughs, Laura and her helper Celine teach the value of local native plants.

A greenhouse was constructed at Amesti school with the help of the Youth Build program (A Watsonville program to train at risk youth in construction skills while supporting them in getting their GED) and with generous donations from Greenhouse Systems USA and Granite Rock.



Amesti School students carefully transplant native grasses.



Laura shows the tiny seeds to the students.

Slide presentations about the Watsonville Wetlands were given to each of the fifth grade classes at Amesti school. The presentations by Laura taught about the functions of wetlands and focused on the many unique features of the 6-fingered Watsonville wetland system. It also focused on what the students can do to protect the wetlands and prepared them for their field trip.

With the enthusiasm and care of a handful of committed docents, the fifth grade students were taken on a field trip out to the Fish and Game Ecological Reserve on the West Branch of Struve Slough to experience the magic of the wetland for themselves. Two field trips took place this season. The days opened with a song by Patrick Orozco showing the students how sacred this land was to the Ohlone. The students then visited four different stations led by volunteers: Roger Wolfe and Caroline Rodgers introduced the students to the wetland ducks and birds (the students loved seeing the pied-billed grebe babies), Sam Lyons and Ellie Van Houten engaged the students in pastel painting of the wetlands, Carol Kummerer and Celina led a water quality station, while Laura led the students in a restoration project (weeding around the newly planted natives on the site).

There will be 6 more field trips next year. We could use enthusiastic volunteers to be docents from 9-1 for one of these field trips. You don't need a lot of experience just a desire to share the beauty of the wetlands with others. If you want to participate, call Watsonville Wetlands Watch at 728-4106.

Also, if anyone has spare binoculars to donate we could ensure each student has a pair.

- Laura Kummerer

SUMMER HABITAT RESTORATION EVENTS IN THE WATSONVILLE SLOUGHS

Come join Watsonville Wetlands Watch in restoring the often forgotten yet rich habitats of the Watsonville Sloughs. (The slough is still magical at this time of year. The wild roses are in lush bloom and the California aster is turning the hillsides purple)

JUNE: 14, SATURDAY-Weed and water the newly planted natives on the North peninsula of West Struve Slough.

JUNE 28, SATURDAY- Help us with our summer management of Harding grass.

JULY 12, SATURDAY -Weed and water the newly planted natives on the North peninsula of West Struve Slough.

AUGUST: **AUGUST 23, SATURDAY**-Weed out fennel on the West branch of Struve Slough

DETAILS:

When: We have volunteer restoration days the second and fourth Saturday of every month (except in the summer: see details above). We meet at 9am and work until 12:30 and then stop for lunch and bird watching until 1pm.

Where: Meet in front of Erik's Deli Café in the Orchard Supply Parking Lot on the corner of Green Valley Rd. and Main St. in Watsonville. (Carpooling from Santa Cruz or Monterey is available)

What to Bring: Layered clothes, water, and strong boots (we will be working in the uplands for the spring season). We will provide tools, gloves and a lunch.

Contact: Laura Kummerer of Watsonville Wetlands Watch for more info @ 831-728-4106

*** WWW's annual meeting will be held in July - details to be announced. ***



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