

Outdoors

"The mountains are calling and I must go."
—John Muir

PRESERVING NATURE

Stockton Creek Preserve is jewel right in Mariposa

Editor's note: This is the second in an eight-part series featuring the Sierra Foothills Conservancy. The series will appear monthly through the end of the year.

By GREG LITTLE
Editor

It's hard not to appreciate two professional women unloading a Polaris all-terrain vehicle to show off one of their most prized accomplishments.

Bridget Fithian, executive director of the Sierra Foothills Conservancy, and Nancy Fluharty, development program manager for the group, may spend a lot of time in front of a computer or schmoozing potential donors, but they also know how to handle a Polaris.

They did just that in preparation for a recent tour of the Stockton Creek Preserve, a tract of land adjacent to the town of Mariposa that is probably one of the most hidden gems in the region.

"This is a place visitors can come that really represents the foothills well," said Fithian.

Both made it clear that riding a Polaris in the preserve is reserved for just a few people, mainly those with the conservancy and officials from Mariposa Public

Utility District, which actually owns the land and also operates the large water body on the property. That water can be used to supply Mariposa in extreme conditions.

Though MPUD owns the land, the conservancy has a conservation easement on the property, meaning development is strictly limited to trails, signs and even a sculpted turtle or two. (More on that in a bit.)

The Stockton Creek Preserve encompasses 410 acres and serves various purposes. One of the main purposes is to provide recreation, namely in the form of hiking trails.

This year marks 10 years since the preserve was established, and Fluharty and Fithian are quite proud of the place.

As they should be.

The preserve surrounds the Stockton Creek Reservoir, which is fed by Stockton Creek. The reservoir is mainly used as a backup for the Mariposa water supply, which most of the time utilizes a series of wells to provide water for the town.

Ah, the trails

But the main attraction at the preserve is its trails. Also unique is the fact the preserve can be accessed right from Mariposa. One entrance is behind the high school while the most popular is at the pull off area just east of Mariposa on Highway 140.

Fithian said there were many reasons the concept of the preserve came to be, including the fact MPUD wanted to be an active partner in the project.

She said a grant was written to the Sierra-Nevada Conservancy with the hope of getting the largest prize — \$1 million. Their focus in the grant was to ensure clean water, a good habitat, fire risk reduction and recreation, to name just a few.

That first grant, for which they received full funding, resulted in obtaining 410 acres. The second grand, in 2019, allowed SFC to obtain another 312 acres of preserved land.

An interesting twist that came after the land was preserved, said Fithian, was a partnership with Yosemite National Park. The park service was looking to reestablish the Western Pond Turtle in the park. It just so happens the Stockton Creek Preserve is the perfect place for

the critters, who thrive in that environment.

Fithian said the roots of the project actually came from a woman who worked in the park but also used the preserve to hike the trails where she became friends with Fluharty, an avid trail person.

It even evolved so far as to have "turtle classes" at the preserve, and Fluharty said those had "good participation."

The end result was the Stockton Creek Preserve became sort of an incubator for the endangered turtles and became the central place from where the species would eventually be reintroduced into the park. Those turtles are now doing well in Yosemite, thanks to a great partnership. And they are still at the preserve doing well.

"Building relationships," said Fluharty about how this project and so many others become reality as time passes and more people are brought into the fold about the work of the conservancy.

For Fluharty, the Stockton Creek Preserve is a special place.

She's a trail runner/hiker.

"This is my favorite project," said Fluharty. "I can't think of any other comparable place to recreate."

That's saying a lot from someone who has hiked and ran trails all across the country, including along

the East Coast where there are extensive trail systems.

Fluharty points out there is no charge for anyone to use the preserve and "you can walk from town."

She points out the preserve has water, hills, wildlife and "the best" wildflowers in the spring. It's also a place visitors can utilize when they are not going to Yosemite or are just looking for some alternatives.

"That was the goal," said Fluharty.

Along with that goal, said Fithian, was the goal to provide recreational opportunities for local residents, which the preserve does quite adequately.

"It helps to implement some of the things we need as a community," said Fithian. "It makes this a desirable place for people to live."

She also pointed out there is an "economic factor" involved, saying it can keep some visitors in Mariposa when they might have otherwise went elsewhere.

A new addition

One of the newest additions to the preserve is the Canyon Creek Trail.

Fithian said the California Conservation Corps was instrumental in building the trail, which features switchbacks, some steep climbing or coming downhill, depending on which way you go, and a lot of nature.

"Pick your poison," said Fithian.

The trail is marked with signs made by the welding class students at Mariposa County High School. The group has also been working with the Mariposa County Arts Council, which has commissioned several turtle sculptures that are placed strategically along the trail. Walkers are urged to look closely for the turtles, some of which are obvious while others are a little hidden and take a little sleuth work to find.

Another unexpected impact of the new trail, said Fithian, is how much it, and all the other trails, have been used during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"People are utilizing it more," said Fithian.

During the pandemic, she said besides the obvious factors of exercise and natural beauty, the preserve provided "mental health" assistance for those who used it to unwind.

In fact, when the pandemic first became a major issue, Fithian said she contacted Mariposa County Health Officer Dr. Eric Sergienko to ask if they should close the preserve. Sergienko said to leave it open as it was a way for people who were being asked to isolate themselves to at least have a place to go to and

Photo by Greg Little
Nancy Fluharty, right, and Bridget Fithian point out one of the information signs along a trail at the Stockton Creek Preserve.



still be fairly isolated.

The preserve never closed during the pandemic.

For Fithian, that went right to the heart of why the place was developed in the first place.

She said the vision was to have more accessibility, make it more user friendly and to just have a place where people can relax. They have added more signage to the preserve, including trail markers as well as interpretive signs which give history, geology and other information about the area.

"So many people are using it now," said Fithian.

That was evidenced during the tour of the preserve given to this newspaper on a Wednesday morning. Several people were walking along the trail, two of them school district employees who were enjoying their lunch hour. They could walk from their office to the preserve — quickly.

Fithian said she believes development of the preserve gives people a "sense of stewardship. It is our collective responsibility to take care of the planet."

Fithian also believes the preserve is a shining example of "partnership building." She said MPUD did not have to become involved in the project, but added they wanted that to happen for the good of the community.

Another bonus, said Fluharty, is the fact the Stockton Creek Preserve is a classroom-in-waiting for local school students.

"I think it is a great classroom," said Fluharty, who added she would "like to see more" students come to the preserve to learn.

"I can't imagine a better education for

science," said Fluharty.

Fithian said SFC officials have been working with officials from the school district in an effort to find a way to have more classroom time in the preserve.

Fluharty said there are so many subjects that can be taught which are directly related to the preserve, including landscapes, wildlife, climate change and more.

She also believes a project like the Stockton Creek Preserve can be an example for how various groups can work together, and it showed her how even SFC can learn.

"We do continue to evolve and change," said Fithian. "That is the nimbleness of being a nonprofit."

You might even say a simple thing like a Polaris is an example of how they can change. Fithian said they applied for and received a grant for the vehicle. One of the main reasons is they regularly take donors and potential donors on tours of the various properties at which they have conservation easements.

Some of the properties are massive and walking could not do justice in showing off the work they are doing.

Thus, the Polaris.

After the tour of the preserve, the two then were preparing to load up the Polaris onto a trailer and take it back before another tour was ready to go in the next week or so.

As they sat in the Polaris, Fluharty in the back seat munching on a snack, and Fithian in her usual driver's seat, it was jokingly suggested they were "chicks on a Polaris."

"That will be our new podcast," Fluharty fired back with a laugh.

Stay tuned.

This map shows the trail system at the preserve, which is located adjacent to Mariposa.



Photo by Nicole W. Little
This is one of the turtle sculptures along the Canyon Creek Trail. The turtles are placed in various locations and visitors are urged to try to find as many as possible.

