



THE Foothill Advocate



APRIL 2021 VOL. 20 NO.2



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Spring has sprung! It is a tremendous delight to see the return of our vibrant foothill wildflowers! They serve as a living metaphor of perseverance: breaking through hard soils after fire, drought, and flood in a triumphant return to joy, inspiration, and exuberance. So too are we as human communities ready to burst forth from this long pandemic induced winter to celebrate and smile with the sun shining upon our vibrant faces. We look forward to seeing your shining faces soon out on the land to celebrate SFC's 25th Anniversary. Please enjoy this newsletter which showcases a few highlights from 25 years of conservation.



BRIDGET FITHIAN
Executive Director



SFC Acquires New Conservation Easement On Nearly 4,600 Acres, Including Historic Quick Ranch

MARIPOSA, CALIFORNIA



View of the historic Quick Ranch from Ben Hur Road, tucked within a rolling grassland and mixed oak landscape. In winter months, the snow-capped Sierra Nevada mountains can be seen in the distance.

Sierra Foothill Conservancy (SFC) is excited to announce our newest and second largest conservation easement acquisition: 4,598 acres of working rangeland in Mariposa County, including the historic Quick “Ben Hur” Ranch, Silver Bar Ranch, and Striped Creek Ranch. With this important acquisition that closed in the final days of 2020, SFC has conserved over 50,000 acres, with more than 11,000 acres of land conserved just in the last year!

This conservation easement was made possible through the generous donation of partnering landowners Drs. Jim Larrick and Jun Chen, who purchased the properties with the intention to reassemble the historic ranches after decades of land division. “Combination of these properties would be the basis for preservation of both historic Mariposa County and

the natural beauty of this part of the world,” Dr. Larrick wrote in a letter to SFC. Through a voluntary conservation easement over the entire property, both the natural and anthropogenic values that make this land special will continue to be protected in perpetuity by SFC and the landowners.

BOTH THE NATURAL AND ANTHROPOGENIC VALUES THAT MAKE THIS LAND SPECIAL WILL CONTINUE TO BE PROTECTED...

Located between the towns of Mariposa and Raymond, this 4,598-acre working landscape exemplifies the Sierra Nevada foothills, featuring annual grasslands, chaparral, mixed oak woodland, blue oak savannah, granitic rock outcrops, and extensive riparian resources that include perennial and seasonal streams, swales, and wetlands. With several habitats, a mosaic of 13 different soil types, and



A portion of the longest rock fence in the Sierra Nevada, built by Chinese workers on the Quick Ranch in 1862.

elevations ranging from 1,500 ft. to 2,250 ft. above sea level, this landscape provides important ecosystem processes and services. The diverse, high-quality habitats on the property are suitable for numerous species of plants and animals, including many

special-status and native species such as the California tiger salamander, western pond turtle, American badger, valley elderberry longhorn beetle, golden eagle, burrowing owl, and Swainson’s hawk. SFC staff have also observed red-tailed hawks, bald eagle, osprey, great blue herons, American kestrel, mourning doves, western kingbirds, Lewis’s woodpecker, western bluebirds, California quail, California ground squirrel, black-tailed deer, and coyotes on site.

Historical and cultural artifacts abound on the property and serve as mementos of the past, telling stories of the land’s rich heritage. Bedrock mortars etched in exposed granite slabs throughout the property were historically used by the Southern Sierra Miwok people; ample acorns, creeks and springs, abundant wildlife, and native plants such as redbud trees were valuable resources for the local people. Eventually, at least 160 years ago, land usage shifted primarily to cattle grazing, which continues today. The historic Quick “Ben Hur” Ranch, part of Drs. Larrick and Chen’s now-conserved lands, was owned and passed down through several generations of the Quick family from 1859 to 2019. Family patriarch Morgan Quick is featured in an exhibit at the Mariposa Museum and History Center. This property has several architectural structures reflecting the Ranch’s history, cultural importance, and its contribution to the region’s agricultural economy. The Quick Ranch contains the Mother Lode region’s longest rock fence; the four-mile-long fence was built by Chinese workers in 1862 and encloses 640 acres of rolling hills. The Ben Hur Post Office operated



STEWARDSHIP

Tending Healthy Forests to Decrease Wildfire Risks

on the property for nearly 40 years in the early 1900s and is still standing, as well as a wooden corral and barn that are over 150 years old.

For Dr. Larrick, who grew up on a 400-acre farm in Colorado, this conservation achievement was personal. Rural areas and open spaces are facing increasing pressures of land-use conversion, fragmentation, and development. “[Our] family farm had been turned into a Denver suburban housing development,” he wrote. “I decided then and there that I would personally try to find a way to make a nature preserve of this land; but how?” Drs. Larrick and Chen



The property's several streams, creeks, and ponds provide important water resources for both livestock and wildlife.

contacted SFC early in 2019 to discuss conservation options for their property. Now, through their conservation easement, this property's historic heritage, cultural resources, and agricultural, scenic, open space, and ecosystem values will be forever protected. “This donation feels like I've traveled full circle from my agricultural roots many years ago,” concluded Dr. Larrick.

The addition of this property to SFC's portfolio of conserved lands directly enhances the growing conservation corridor in this key area of our Sierra Nevada foothill region. We look forward to an in-person celebration of this momentous conservation easement closing with Drs. Larrick and Chen in the future!



Forest Health Restoration Photo by Gary Miltimore

SFC's Stewardship Program has the privilege and challenge of managing and monitoring an expanding portfolio of nine nature preserves and 39,518 acres of conservation easements across four counties. Our stewardship efforts are guided by ecological objectives identified to enhance the quality of each unique habitat through monitoring, data collection, and best management practices.

Adaptive land management

practices have become increasingly critical in the face of a changing climate. Across our region, SFC properties have experienced significant impact due to devastating fire, beetle infestation, and flood-induced erosion. **SFC has placed a special emphasis on increasing community resilience by working with conservation easement landowners and other partners to implement forest health projects on properties located strategically between federally owned lands and home developments.** Healthy forests establish a buffer between the wildlands which are often densely populated with heavy fuel loads and home developments that are threatened by fire conditions. In the last year, SFC implemented approximately \$750,000 in grant funded projects to improve forest and watershed health through funding from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy's Proposition 1 grant program. One of these projects focused on selectively thinning 350 acres of overstocked forest that were severely impacted by multiple drought years and pest infestation resulting in high tree mortality and extreme wildfire threat. SFC also implemented a native plant restoration project in partnership with Caltrans and the Sierra Resource Conservation District funded at \$228,782 and is collaborating with CalFire and the Sierra-Sequoia Burn Cooperative to plan prescribed fire treatments on SFC preserves. **This will not only benefit preserve ecology and ecosystem functions but will also help train landowners and Tribal partners to implement safe, effective prescribed fires on their own lands through a program known as Prescribed Fire Training Exchange.** Our land stewardship work is central to ensuring that SFC lands, as well as our adjacent communities, are protected, healthy, and resilient. We are excited to be on the cutting edge of land management and are ready for the challenges ahead.



25 Years of Newts on the McKenzie

BY JULIE VANCE



Amplexing Pair

In 1997, I was a graduate student at CSU Fresno in the Biology Department, and it was time to pick my thesis topic. Ideally, I wanted to work on salamanders, because well, they are cool. One of my instructors at the time was involved with a newly formed local non-profit organization, the Sierra Foothill Conservancy (SFC). Introductions were made, and I soon found myself at SFC's beautiful McKenzie Preserve, located only about a half hour's drive from Fresno. The intermittent stream that runs through the McKenzie Preserve supported a robust breeding population of the Sierra newt (*Taricha sierrae*). It was especially exciting to be able to study this species, because all the published studies on newts within this genus are on different species occurring in the Coast Range or closer to the Bay Area, and in habitats that are different from that found in our local foothills. During the winter of 1998-1999, I spent many cold and rainy days studying the instream ecology of the Sierra newt, specifically their habitat preferences and instream movements during the breeding season. During this

study, I learned that individual newts typically stay in the same place within the stream, but can move significant distances, especially after storm events. Newts were also more numerous in deeper parts of the stream, especially pools. However, unlike other California newt species, the Sierra newt will lay eggs in areas outside of pools as well, specifically under large cobbles in riffles.

Between 2004 and 2010, we evaluated the upland habitat use of the newts (where they spend their time outside of the breeding season). We also marked 633 newts with Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tags. We learned that the newts use a lot of upland habitat from the stream; on both sides of the stream, and we captured



Eggs Pool

adults and juvenile newts up to 400 m. upslope of the stream on each side. We also surveyed the stream during the breeding season to evaluate which marked individuals were present. Each winter and early spring since 2011, I have visited the McKenzie Preserve to see which of our marked newts show up to breed. Incredibly, I continue to capture newts that we marked during 2004-2010. That means that the marked newts have been breeding for at least 10 years, longer for those marked at the beginning of the study.



Ovipositing

It is thought that newts likely don't breed until they are around 5 years of age, meaning that the marked newts now being captured at McKenzie are at least 15 years of age! It was interesting to conduct a long-term study over very different water year types, including a prolonged period of drought. Based on the data collected since 2004, precipitation during December-February seems most critical for good Sierra newt breeding conditions, whereas late precipitation (Mar-April) has little benefit for their breeding conditions. This is concerning since climate change models generally predict a shift in precipitation to later in the winter/early spring. I also learned that Sierra newts can skip breeding during dry years (including consecutive dry years) and return to breed in comparable numbers when breeding conditions improve. Some newts went 10-12 years between detections in the stream, whereas other individuals seemed to show up every year. The biggest breeding years were 2010 and 2016, and very few newts were observed during 2012-2015 and 2018. The good news is that many newts showed up to breed in 2016 following 4 years of drought, meaning they can survive dry conditions in the upland environment and take advantage of good stream conditions when they



EDUCATION & OUTREACH

Remembering Early Hikes with SFC

occur. This is an adaptation that works well for longer lived species like newts but would be more problematic for aquatic species (like some frogs) with only 2-3 year lifespans.



Juvenile Newt

THIS IS WHY SFC'S ROLE IN CONSERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP OF NATURAL LANDS IS SO IMPORTANT.

We cannot take for granted that our beautiful foothills will remain in their natural state; during the past 25 years, development has marched further and further into the foothills. Each spring that I travel to the McKenzie Preserve, I see more and more of a human footprint encroaching on what used to be natural areas; ranches and rural settings are slowly being replaced with housing developments. This is why SFC's role in conservation and stewardship of natural lands is so important. Since my first introduction to SFC, the organization has significantly grown in terms of staff, membership, and acres conserved. My career as a biologist ultimately landed me at the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), where I now enjoy working with SFC as an important conservation partner. SFC has a thoughtful vision for conservation in our local foothill areas, which closely aligns with our conservation goals.



Craig is a retired Geology Instructor from Fresno City College. He is one of the founding board members for SFC and is currently back on the board. He enjoys hiking, backpacking, fishing and "reading" rocks.

SFC's Hikes and Classes program has been helping connect people to the land since our beginning. It is through this program that we reach a broad cross section of the communities we serve. Our goal is to engage our communities with SFC's conservation work through outdoor education and by providing

meaningful, land-based experiences on protected lands. All events are led by experienced local docents who are experts in their field and trained to provide a fascinating and safe outdoor experience. Thank you to all of our volunteer docents—the heart of our community engagement program. Craig Poole reflects on the beginnings of the SFC Hikes and Classes Program:

"We had a small group of volunteers and would brainstorm classes, look at the calendar and then put together the class and hike calendar. These were fundraising opportunities that also raised some money for SFC. I remember doing several 'Sights, Sounds, and Supper' events on the McKenzie Preserve with Rodney Olsen. I would put in an order for food at Sam's Deli and pick it up on the afternoon of our hike. I think on our first one we hiked to the top of Table Mountain with some student volunteers helping carry ice chests with sandwiches, salads, and drinks to the top. We had dinner and the coyotes started howling and the tree frogs were chirping, and we watched the sunset and moon rise while overlooking the McKenzie Preserve. While hiking down in the dark with our headlamps, we saw a glow worm which was something new for almost everyone there. Then we had coffee or hot cocoa and dessert before heading home. One year Mary Biskup, our board president, offered to bring her llamas out and pack the dinner to the Tabletop. I think fun was had by all and seeing the preserve at night and all the lights of developed areas nearby reemphasized the importance of conserving these spaces."

— CRAIG POOLE, SFC BOARD MEMBER



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2020-2021

Impact Report

- 3,602 acres** McKinney Ranch Conservation Easement
- 186 acres** Tesoro Viejo Conservation Easement
- 476 acres** Manzanita Conservation Easements
- 6,972 acres** Hornitos Ranch Conservation Easement
- 357 acres** Mariposa Creek Parkway
- 4,598 acres** Larrick Ranch Conservation Easement

50,180 TOTAL ACRES PROTECTED



8,972 acres conserved



2,400 Students in Youth Education Programs in 2019



36 miles of stream protected



3,600 native plants planted



2,700 members, the largest membership base in our history



5,000 people enjoyed SFC programs in 2019

Habitat for 10 special status species saved.

- ◆ Spadefoot toads
- ◆ Bald and Golden eagles
- ◆ Western pond turtles
- ◆ Three bat species
- ◆ California Tiger Salamander
- ◆ Vernal Pool Fairy Shrimp
- ◆ Valley Elderberry Longhorn Beetle



Together we can protect 4,500 additional acres in the coming year.

SAVING NATURAL LANDS
NOW AND FOREVER

SFC

May 14-16, 2021

SFC'S ANNUAL FUNDRAISING EVENT

JOIN SIERRA FOOTHILL
CONSERVANCY IN CELEBRATING

25
YEARS OF
CONSERVATION

This three-day event will be a hybrid of virtual and on the ground exploration of SFC's conserved lands. The virtual party on May 14th will feature guest speakers and fascinating footage showcasing SFC's 25 years of regional conservation work. Guests will have the opportunity to sign up for a series of guided small group hikes on various SFC properties in limited access events on the following two days. Don't miss out!

SIERRAFOOTHILL.ORG/2021-ANNUAL-FUNDRAISING-EVENT

Ticket Price \$50
For inquiries call (209) 742 5556
or email nancy@sierrafoothill.org