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PETALUMA WETLANDS ALLIANCE

(A COMMITTEE OF MADRONE AUDUBON)
P.O. Box 973, Petaluma CA 94953-0973

Chairman: Gerald Moore glmemoore@comcast.net Tours: Bob Dyer nrdyer@comcast.net
Newsletter Editor: Jane Merryman jane@sonic.net Secretary: Mary Edith Moore

Providing Education in and Stewardship of Petaluma's Public Wetlands

Fall 2009

Ellis Creek Trails Open

by Bob Dyer

At the end of July, Petaluma opened the new Ellis Creek trail system to the public. With a link from Shollenberger Park, one can now walk between seven and eight miles of nature trails starting from the Sheraton Hotel at the Petaluma Marina. The new trail can also be accessed at the end of Cypress Drive or from Kaiser Permanente Medical Offices. The Ellis Creek Water Recycling Facility will take care of Petaluma's wastewater needs for decades. Among other benefits, it will eventually have the capacity to deliver 650,000,000 gallons of high-quality (tertiary) recycled water a year to 55 locations in town, including our parks, athletic fields, and schoolyards, according to Engineering Manager, **Margaret Orr**. The trail circles four ponds, called "polishing wetlands," covering some 30 acres. These densely vegetated ponds with stretches of open water provide additional nutrient and metals removal. Another trail heads toward the river and is closed during the Clapper Rail nesting season (January 15 to August 31). Both the Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse and Clapper Rail are federally endangered and have been observed on the property by biologists. By the way, the ponds do not smell and the water is chlorinated because of near-by public trails. Station markers installed along the trails explain how the new Ellis Creek Water Recycling Plant works and also show the various birds and animals that can be seen there. I expect the best bird watching will start soon as migratory waterfowl find these new ponds. As of the end of October, docents had already observed more than 70 species. On the last Saturday of the month, October thru June, we offer free docent-led tours, starting at the Cypress Drive entrance. No reservations required.

PWA New-docent Training Course

by Mary Edith Moore

The training course for new docents will start on **January 7, 2010**, and run for eight consecutive Thursday mornings. If you are interested or know someone who might be interested in becoming a wetlands docent, please contact us at **763-2934** or **789-0282** for more details. Join the fun by becoming part of this great group of people. Information is also available on our website: www.petalumawetlands.org.

What's Happening at Shollenberger

by Gerald Moore

Sonoma County Summer Ecology Corps

This summer PWA was pleased to share a work crew of the Summer Ecology Corps with **John Shribbs** of the CASA Native Plant Nursery. The crew was one of a dozen or so in the county that were part of a larger state program funded by the Obama stimulus package. Members of the crew were at-risk teenagers who worked with us two to three days a week removing invasive weeds from Alman Marsh and Shollenberger Park. We also spent one day removing star thistles from the Ellis Creek polishing wetlands. Tremendous amounts of weeds, particularly star thistle, were removed in this effort. Some of our docents came out to help and interact with the kids, which further stimulated their productivity. The crew also did a lot of work in the native plant nursery, which indirectly helped the restoration efforts of PWA. It would be great to repeat the program next summer.

Restoring the Freshwater Marsh at Shollenberger Park

Regular park users have undoubtedly noticed that the freshwater marsh (channel) at Shollenberger has dried up by July for the past two summers and the cattails have multiplied like crazy. This had not happened in prior years. As reported in the Spring 2009 newsletter, we have analyzed the problem and had the issues confirmed by Ducks Unlimited (DU) biologists and engineers. We were included as a small part of a large NAWCA grant proposal written by DU to repair the Viansa wetlands. This grant was recently approved and the \$52K portion going to the City of Petaluma will be used to replace the defunct water gates with new ones that drain the excess dredge pond water through the marsh to the river and hopefully move the water gates to the south levee. Additional efforts are in progress to get funding to remove the majority of the cattails from the marsh, restore the original marsh channel, and plant more tules in place of the cattails. Tules provide the same habitat value as cattails but are much less invasive. The National Wildlife Refuges in California made this species switch years ago to reduce maintenance costs.

DUTRA—They Are Back for One Final Attempt to Pollute Shollenberger

The Dutra Corporation has revised their asphalt plant project to improve their chances of getting it past the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors. The changes eliminate the on-site recycling of old road pavement and cut their asphalt production by 25 percent per batch. These cuts will somewhat reduce their noise pollution and increase by about 30 percent the mean time required to potentially poison the wildlife and human users of the park with the volatile organic chemical emissions from the manufacturing process. This is not acceptable to rational, caring individuals and we encourage you to come to the Board of Supervisors meeting in Santa Rosa on December 8, at 2:00 PM, and support an effort to kill this project at this sensitive site.

Shollenberger Gets an Unfortunate Crew Cut

An engineer in the city water department ordered a contractor to mow down the plants at Shollenberger Park during the second week of July. Some birds were still nesting and the standing, but dry, plant habitats were still offering cover and food sources for wildlife. The mowing also eliminated hundreds of native plants we had planted and reduced others from small shrubs or trees to shredded, four-inch stubs clinging to life. There was a public outcry to the city council and to the press about this unfortunate event, which resulted in apologies from the Petaluma Water Department and the promise to meet with PWA on a regular basis to coordinate activities of both groups in the future. These meetings have started and promise to be fruitful in protecting the biological resources, minimizing the waste of precious resources, and keeping the public aware of what is happening in their wetlands, while at the same time

not compromising the engineering functions carried out in the wetlands. There was also a promise by the city to hydroseed two areas with native plant seed, but that has not yet happened.

Docent Enrichment Field Trip

by Mary Edith Moore

On October 30 about 20 PWA docents and spouses toured the **Casa Grande High School Fish Hatchery**, located on the high school campus. The United Anglers, students who work at the hatchery under the direction of Tom Furrer, led small groups of us through the state-of-the-art hatchery. These students dedicate their time and effort to help protect the native Chinook salmon/steelhead trout and their habitat in Adobe Creek. Countless hours, they tell us, are spent in searching and caring for these animals, maintaining the facility, and fundraising.

PWA's School Program

by Helen Heal

During October and November, PWA educational services to schools in the Petaluma River Watershed moved into full swing for the fall season. With strong support from seasoned and new docents, we served 263 children in 11 classes from 6 schools in the watershed. Class sizes have increased and 6 of those classes contained 25 or 30 children. We had anticipated this over the summer and had revised our classroom program accordingly. A total of 23 docents worked hard to get this done. We are so fortunate to have the participation of a new group of docents who were trained during January and February. They join a strong team who have been docents for 2, 3, 4, or 5 years of tireless contribution to the children of the watershed. Until we go back in the schools in March, we will review and replenish our materials, as well as prepare for and deliver training of new docents in January and February. Always busy behind the scenes, we keep in touch with teachers and community groups, review and refine materials and activities, and take care of the ever-present paperwork of reports and correspondence. Thanks to all, and especially to **Kris Brooks**, who has managed the scheduling of docents as well as overseeing the materials (and many other things), and to **Karen Johnson**, who took on the big job of scheduling teachers and staying in touch with them. The three of us have been working as a team and enjoy the mutual support and brainstorming. Please feel free to get in touch with any one of us if you have questions or ideas as we move forward.

Christmas Bird Count for Kids

by Mary Edith Moore

Be there—Tuesday, December 29, 9:00 AM to 2:00 PM, rain or shine, for the first-ever Petaluma Christmas Bird Count for Kids, a half-day of bird-watching and related activities designed for kids ages 9 to 15. The holiday event is cosponsored by the Petaluma Wetlands Alliance, a committee of Madrone Audubon, and the City of Petaluma Parks and Recreation Department. Check-in is at Kenilworth Recreation Center, 175 Fairgrounds Drive, Petaluma. (Parents are responsible for transport of kids to and from sites and are welcome on the walk to observe the young birders from a distance.) The morning begins with binocular boot camp and then teams of six kids each, accompanied by an experienced adult birder, will look for birds. At noon everyone will meet at the recreation center for a brown-bag lunch (drinks provided), a tabulation celebration, and a guest presentation by Bird Rescue with some of their live raptors. To register (\$5 per child, collected at check-in) or more information, call Al Hesla, 765-9411 or Mary Edith Moore, 763-3577.

Fifth Year of Shollenberger Bird Surveys Completed

by Bob Dyer and Len Nelson

On September 13, 2009, bird survey teams completed the fifth year of counts of birds observed from the two-mile trail at Shollenberger Park in Petaluma. Surveys were conducted monthly. This year 34,469 birds of 130 different species were identified. The study's goals are to establish species present, in what numbers, and during which seasons. Every bird observed is recorded, whether in the park, flying overhead, or even outside the park, as long as the observation takes place from the trail system. During the first year of the survey, weekly counts were done. Subsequently, monthly surveys have been the rule. Since September 2004, more than 197,000 birds have been recorded. Data collected is being provided to the Point Reyes Bird Observatory for their expert analysis and to **ebird**, a Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon project. It is also used for updates of the *Birds of Shollenberger Park and the Petaluma Wetlands* bird list. Team leaders this year were **Andy LaCasse, Peter Leveque, Robert Speckles, Ken Wilson, Peter Colasanti, Richard Merriss, Ron Storey, and Ruth Rudesill. Len Nelson** coordinated the effort and compiled the statistics. An Excel document with the 2008-2009 observations can be obtained from him by email. Contact him at lennelsn@comcast.net.

A Summer Adventure

by Kathleen Garvey

We've put in many native plants at Shollenberger in the past few years. Some of them need a little help to make it through the dry season in the first two years. Although there is a water spigot at the entrance to Shollenberger, there are no other outlets in the park. If you want to water plants elsewhere, you have to take the water with you. **John Shribbs** put together a small trailer with a 500-gallon water tank and six lengths of hose connected to make one long hose. Since I have a truck that often sits idle, I volunteered to help with the watering this summer. John took me through the routine in June: First, you need a gigantic battery. It helps if you charge it before you get out to the park. The battery runs the water pump. The water pump puts out four to five gallons of water per minute from the big plastic tank. That's an important thing to know, as it's the easiest way to measure how much to water. Small plants and bushes get 30 seconds of water, trees get one minute.

By July, the hot weather had come to stay, so I started watering almost every weekend. My partner in watering was **Robert John Dubois** and I also drafted my sister a few times. Initially not that interested, she was soon better than I was at rescuing forgotten mugworts hidden in the weeds. We took turns unwinding and pulling the hose and yanking out the weeds growing close to the plants. We always looked down the tubes to check the oak seedlings and one day I was surprised to see a yellow jacket flying up out of a tube. There were quite a few inside, building a nest. I knocked it out, but the insects came back and rebuilt. I gave in. We had a few mishaps. I ran over the battery because I forgot to put it back on the truck before driving to the next stop. One morning Robert and I started so early it was still dark. I neglected to turn off the truck lights as we got to work and ... well, it was nice of my sister to come out and give us a jump.

All in all, it was a great summer. **The Moores, John, and Valerie Franklin** also watered. Knowing how much effort had gone into collecting the seeds, growing the seedlings, and planting at the park, it was great to see most of the plants grow and thrive. I notice more and more native plants seeding and

spreading at Shollenberger. Seeing the progress made week after week has been inspiring. If we can give them a chance, they'll do the rest themselves.

Shollenberger's Heron/Egret Colony, 2009

by Bob Dyer

The 2009 nesting season was the seventh for the heron/egret colony across the Petaluma River from Shollenberger. Seventy-four healthy chicks were produced— 63 Great Egrets, 8 Great Blue Herons, and 3 Snowy Egrets. Docents **Len Nelson, Gary Compari**, and I monitored the colony this year and periodic reports on the site's progress were made to the Cypress Grove Research Center, Audubon Canyon Ranch. The colony has produced more than 400 chicks since its inception in 2003. Challenges lie ahead for the colony's future because of the proposed Dutra Asphalt Plant and the construction of a South Petaluma Boulevard off-ramp by CalTrans, but we are attempting to deal with these issues, with the intent of minimizing impact.