

Southern Oregon Land Conservancy seeks more land to protect

BY CRAIG HARPER

When my wife, Theresa, and I moved to Sterling Creek in 2009, we knew we were moving to an interesting and attractive area. But we didn't realize just how amazing the Applegate is. We live near the Sterling Mine Ditch Trail and are fortunate to be able to walk from our house and hike an invigorating and scenic five-mile loop, thanks in part to the hard work of the Siskiyou Upland Trails Association in clearing and opening up new trails. If we want to drive a short distance, we can hike several other world-class trails, swim, fish and canoe in beautiful lakes and streams, taste wine at topnotch wineries, and the list goes on. We Applegaters are lucky folks—we live in the kind of place tourists pay big money to visit!

We moved to southern Oregon in 1999 when I began working at the Rogue Valley Council of Governments in Central Point. In 2013 I began a new career with the Southern Oregon Land Conservancy (SOLC) as the conservation project manager. The Land Conservancy protects almost 10,000 acres of land throughout southern Oregon, primarily in the Rogue River Basin. Through our Vision 20/20 Initiative, we established a goal to conserve 20,000 acres by 2020. My job is to work with landowners to identify new lands for conservation and help them establish permanent protections for their land.

The SOLC is focusing its efforts in areas of the Rogue River Basin that will yield the greatest conservation results. We have recently chosen to give added attention to the Applegate River Valley primarily for two reasons:

1. Because of the extraordinary ecological values in the Applegate Valley. The Applegate is one of the Oregon Plan's Core Salmon Areas and is home to several at-risk animal and plant species including coho salmon, Siskiyou Mountains salamander, Gentner's fritillary, Pacific fisher, and the blue-gray gnatcatcher. The Applegate also contains numerous key diminishing habitats including late successional forests, oak savannahs, pine-oak woodlands, wetlands, and cool-water streams.

2. Because of the effective partnerships we have established with local landowners and other conservation organizations in the Applegate. SOLC works with the Applegate Partnership and Watershed Council to identify priority areas and to reach out to landowners. SOLC also works with the Freshwater Trust to connect with streamside landowners and with many private landowners throughout the valley.

Currently SOLC works with five private landowners in the Applegate to protect their properties through conservation easements and with other Applegate landowners to establish

additional conservation easements. We also own a magnificent property on Williams Creek (see photos), thanks to the help of the Williams Creek Watershed Council.

SOLC's work is entirely voluntary.

If landowners wish to protect their land from future mismanagement, we can help them. Some landowners are reluctant to restrict any future activities on their land, and we respect their choice, but other landowners view us as helpful allies in protecting the lands they have nurtured. Landowners tell us, "We never want our farm to be converted to houses or a Big Box Mart," or, "We devoted the last 40 years to caring for our forest. We hope it will never be clear-cut." Permanent

conservation can ensure that those things never happen and that landowners' precious lands are protected forever.

In future articles in the *Applegater*, I will provide more details about SOLC's land conservation methods. Until then, to find out more about SOLC, visit our website at www.landconserve.org.



Top photo: Williams Creek with healthy milkweed plant, a hatchery for Monarch butterflies.



Bottom photo: Williams Creek Preserve—note the healthy shade and instream wood. Fish like wood!
Photos: Kristi Mergenthaler.

If you are interested in learning more about conservation of your land, you can reach me at 541-482-3069 or craig@landconserve.org.

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Sterling Mine Ditch Trail now an official Oregon Scenic Trail

BY DIANA COOGLE

The Siskiyou Uplands Trails Association (SUTA) always knew how beautiful the Sterling Mine Ditch Trail was. That's why they worked so hard to pull out what SUTA member Hope Robertson calls "old-growth poison oak" and other obstructions on the trail that made it not quite unusable but certainly difficult to navigate for decades.

Now 20 miles of trail are accessible to hikers, mountain bikers, and horseback riders, and all of Oregon knows that the Sterling Mine Ditch Trail is an especially scenic one. This fall the Oregon Parks Commission named it an Oregon Scenic Trail, the first in southern Oregon!

To qualify for this designation, the trail had to pass judgment by the Oregon Trails Advisory Council for design, condition, and setting. Certainly the council was impressed by the scenic quality of this outstanding trail: gorgeous views of the Siskiyou Mountains; passages through tall pines, red-trunked madrones, and lovely oak savannahs; hillsides of wildflowers.

Because the trail lies alongside the Sterling Mine Ditch, dug in the late 19th century mostly by Chinese laborers, today's users might pass remnants of flumes or beautiful stone retaining walls. At one point, the trail skirts a tunnel once used to bring water through the mountain instead of around it. The ditch carried water for gold mining from the Little Applegate River to the Sterling Mine during the time the mine was prosperous and the town of Buncom a thriving community. Now the



gold is in the oak leaves, the water is in the river, and the walking is for pleasure.

The trail has several access points, either off Sterling Creek Road or off the upper end of Little Applegate Road. See www.sutaoregon.org for more specific directions.

It is a feather in the cap of southern Oregon to have this Oregon Scenic Trail in our backyard. But the Applegate is full of beautiful trails. The window for making application closed in November, but hikers should keep in mind the possibility as they hike the trails this summer so they can send in applications (http://www.oregon.gov/oprd/Trail_Programs_Services/Pages/Trails-Designation-Programs.aspx) next year for their favorites.

There is also a Scenic Bikeways designation for cycling routes over low-traffic roads or bike paths. Somewhere a scenic bikeway in southern Oregon is waiting for someone to send in an application to be a parallel "first" to the Sterling Mine Ditch Trail.

If you know where it is, be a parallel with SUTA to bring it to state attention.

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BLM finishes Bolt Mountain Trail near Grants Pass

Easy accessibility, year-round use, and terrific panoramic views—these are the winning characteristics for the new multi-use Bolt Mountain Trail that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) opened recently with Josephine County.

Located just outside of the Grants Pass city limits, the day-use trail starts at Fish Hatchery Park and winds 3.2 miles to the top, at 2,200 feet.

"The sparsely vegetated mountain provides many great views of the valley and Applegate River," said Todd Calvert, a Rogue River park ranger for the BLM who worked on establishing the trail.

"You can just see an awful lot from the trail," Calvert said. "That's the neat thing about this mountain location. It's kind of a gum drop, very centrally located in the valley."

The climb from the base averages about a 10- or 12-percent grade, spiraling up the mountain through diverse microclimates. The sensitive serpentine soil provides habitat for unique plant and animal species.



For more information, contact the Grants Pass Interagency Office at 541-471-6500.

To augment trail construction work begun by volunteers several years ago, BLM secured funds to continue the work via assistance agreements that paid workers from the Job Council and Northwest Youth Corps.

Motorized vehicles are not allowed on the trail, but it is open for hikers, mountain bikers and horseback riders.

"I think once people know about the trail, it's going to get a lot of use," Calvert said.

For more information about the trail, visit the BLM recreation site at http://www.blm.gov/or/resources/recreation/site_info.php?siteid=406.

Details and instructions:

- Hike difficulty: moderate to difficult
- Stay on the trail; avoid shortcuts
- Limit speeds in poor visibility areas
- Practice "Leave No Trace" principles
- Follow seasonal fire restrictions
- Safety concerns: ticks, poison oak, and rattlesnakes
- County parking fee for day use is \$4
- Free annual passes available for county volunteer work

How to get there:

- From the Applegate Valley, travel north toward Grants Pass on Williams Highway 238
- Turn left on New Hope Road just past the fire station and drive approximately 3.2 miles
- Turn right on Fish Hatchery Road and drive about two miles
- Turn right on Weatherbee Drive just before the Fish Hatchery Bridge, and continue up the road about a half mile to the large gravel parking lot at the entrance to Fish Hatchery Park.