

SOLC’s focus on the Applegate River watershed

BY CRAIG HARPER

As I described in the winter *Applegater*, the Southern Oregon Land Conservancy (SOLC) focuses most of its land protection efforts on the Rogue River Basin, specifically Jackson and Josephine counties. SOLC currently protects 63 properties for a total of 9,761 acres—more than any regional land trust in Oregon.

We work to protect both working lands (farms, ranches and forests) and natural areas with high ecological value. The Applegate River watershed is one of SOLC’s primary focus areas because of its exceptional character—from its unique mountains and pristine forests, to the exquisite Applegate River and valley, with its wineries, farms, and ranches.

We help landowners care for their properties through legal agreements called “conservation easements.” Landowners who grant conservation easements to land trusts voluntarily choose to limit commercial and residential development and intensive industrial or extraction-based land uses on their properties—they want to keep working lands working and to save places where wildlife and the natural environment can thrive. Many of these landowners have worked for decades to restore and protect their lands and they don’t want their efforts

to be for naught when they pass on their lands. While conservation easements limit some land uses, others, like rural residences and sustainable farming, ranching, and forestry are allowed.

Another way land trusts protect valuable ecological properties is through ownership. We own one property in the Applegate, a beautiful stretch of Williams Creek (see photo). In September 2003, SOLC acquired the title to this property with funds provided, in part, by an Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board grant to the Williams Creek Watershed Council. The 31 acres contain over a half mile of stream and an active, thriving floodplain that provides important habitat for Chinook and coho salmon, steelhead, Pacific lampreys, western pond turtles, monarch butterflies, beavers, bears, and many other birds, wildlife, and plants.

SOLC holds conservation easements for five different landowners in the Applegate, ranging from upland forested lands on Cheney Creek and Rocky Creek, to farm and woodland properties like White Oak Farm and Good Oak Farm in the Williams Creek watershed. Recently, SOLC worked with a landowner in the China Gulch drainage north of Ruch to protect a valuable 82-

acre woodland property called Gray Fox Tree Farm. This property is under active forest management guided by a detailed plan by forester Marty Main to reduce fire risk, enhance wildlife habitat, and restore forest health and resiliency. Marty helps many landowners in southwest Oregon plan and implement sustainable forestry on their lands. In 2014, SOLC recognized Marty as “Conservationist of the Year” for his sage and generous advice and leadership with small woodland owners. As Marty says, “The basic laws of ecology are (1) everything matters, and (2) we’re all in this together.”

Surrounded by BLM land on three and a half sides, Gray Fox Tree Farm contains a mix of evergreen forest, oak woodland, meadow, and chaparral, and provides habitat for a wide variety of wildlife and rare plants. The previous owner, Pat Gordon, lived there for 24 years and nurtured her land so well that she was acknowledged as the Jackson County Tree Farmer of the Year in 1996-97, and recognized as a Watershed Friendly Steward. In 2014 she decided to retire and sell her property. She said, “It’s time for younger stewards with energy and resources to continue the management of values here. I’m trying to do what I can to perpetuate stewardship.”



Ecologist Rich Nawa counting fish in 2011 (“snorkel survey”) in pool behind beaver dam on Williams Creek. Photo: SOLC staff.

To meet Pat’s goals for permanent protection of the land, she donated a conservation easement to SOLC. Pat wanted to ensure that future landowners continue to support a healthy forest ecosystem, reduce wildfire threats while restoring a natural fire regime if possible, and protect wildlife habitat and biodiversity.

While it’s true that placing a conservation easement on a property can reduce the number of potential buyers, in the remaining pool are buyers who will cherish and protect the conservation values the seller wants to safeguard. In Pat’s case, she sold her property to a local couple who had just completed the OSU Extension Land Steward program and were looking for a property just like hers.

Contact me if you’re interested in learning more about land conservation.

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Got riparian?

BY BARBARA MUMBLO

Riparian areas just don’t get the respect they deserve. Many of you know what a riparian area is, but for those of you who don’t know, this is the zone between a stream and drier vegetation. Some may know this as “riverfront property” or “a river runs through it.”

Riparian areas are the lifelines of a valley (watershed). They provide habitat, a corridor for wildlife, and riparian vegetation that cools the water. They help keep our water clean (less sediment). A healthy riparian area has older trees (conifers and/or hardwoods such as Oregon ash, cottonwood, alder, big leaf maple), shrubs (snowberry, mock orange, willows, red-flowering currant, vine maple), ferns, and herbaceous species.

Riparian areas provide habitat for a diversity of lichens, mosses, and fungi as well—all important for wildlife species. Healthy riparian areas also help hold the stream bank during floods.

Blackberries (considered a noxious weed in Oregon) are increasing in riparian areas. I like blackberries as do many birds and other critters, but too many blackberries along the riparian areas are not good for streams. Not much grows under blackberries, and erosion can easily occur underneath. While it’s good to get rid of blackberries, you need to take care with how you do so. It’s important to replant native shrubs and trees as needed to replace the blackberries. As I drive through the Applegate, I see some places where



Native mock orange shrub in riparian area.

people have gotten rid of their blackberries but have turned the area into a park-like setting with grass and trees. While this may look pleasing to some, it’s not a healthy system along the river.

We have many wonderful

native species in the riparian areas of the Applegate. Not only do they provide a healthy ecosystem, but they also look beautiful. Some nurseries in the area that grow native species are Forestfarm at Pacifica in Williams, Plant Oregon in Talent, and Silver Springs in Ruch.

Not only is riparian vegetation good for the ecosystem, but there are now rules in Jackson and Josephine counties about taking care of your riparian areas. Contact your county or the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife for information. The Applegate Partnership & Watershed Council and The Freshwater Trust are doing riparian restoration in the valley and can help with ideas.

If you have questions, give me a call.
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