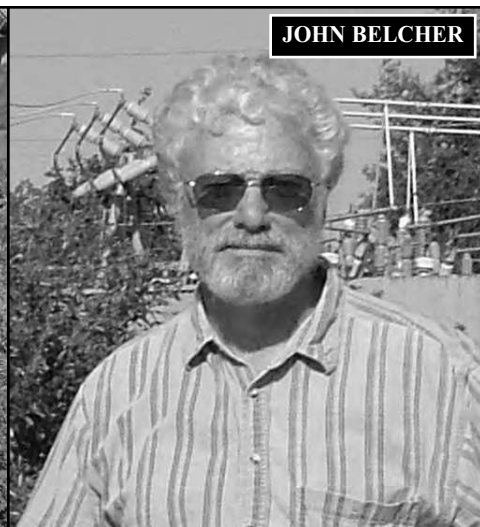




VAL ROGERS



TOM PRINGLE



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GINNY ALFRIEND AND JOHN MORIARTY

Restoration

Eugeneans labor to save special places.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KERA ABRAHAM

For Val Rogers, few sights are sweeter than a plant thriving in its native environment. As she surveys the South Meadow of the Howard Buford Recreation Area near Mount Pisgah, Rogers — a smooth-faced woman with short brown hair and wire-rimmed glasses — squats to admire a pretty purple-flowered legume. “Wow. The lupin here is looking great,” she gushes. “This is going to be glorious in a month or so!”

Rogers, the volunteer coordinator for Friends of Buford Park and Mt. Pisgah (FBP), turns to a cottonwood sapling growing in a restored river channel. She handles it like a mother examining her baby’s fingers, cooing over the tree’s perfect little spade-shaped leaves, stroking their cottony undersides. “Finally lookin’ good!” she says gleefully.

The proliferation of plants like lupin and cottonwood, native to the Willamette Valley, is a sign that restoration efforts are making headway. “But we’ve got to be vigilant,” adds Rogers, noticing a jagged leaf poking up beside the lupin. “Look what else is trying to get a foothold.” The offending plant is blackberry, one of the area’s most persistent invasive species.

There are dozens of nonprofit groups working to restore natural areas in and around Eugene. In other parts of the city, groups such as Friends of Hendricks Park, Miracle on 33rd Street, the Jefferson-Amazon Greenway Committee, the Walama Restoration Project, and the Eugene Stream Team take on the task of restoration. From the West Eugene wetlands to Mount Pisgah Park in the east, volunteers and paid crew members are pulling up invasive species, planting native shrubs and trees, and reshaping banks to create more natural waterways. And though the direction often comes from paid staff members, volunteers provide most of the elbow grease.

BUFORD AND PISGAH

Friends of Buford Park and Mt. Pisgah works to improve the ecological integrity of the Mount Pisgah area by carrying out prescribed burns, floodplain restoration, invasive species removal, and the propagation of native species. The group’s most dramatic restoration project is in the South Meadow of the Howard Buford Recreation Area, a 200-acre floodplain cut by the Willamette River Coast Fork. The meadow historically contained oak-pine savanna, maple-ash riparian

forest and vernal pools, but it had been used for decades to grow row crops and graze livestock.

That changed in 2001, when FBP and Lane County Parks division — in cooperation with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Bonneville Power Administration Wildlife Mitigation Program — drafted the South Meadow Management Plan, which banned grazing.

To help nudge the meadow back toward its native state, FBP crew members and volunteers planted about 10,000 native riparian and upland plants, removed invasive weeds, laid out erosion control mats, and excavated an historic side channel to connect it with the Coast Fork Willamette River.

Some staff weren’t sure it would work, but the proof was in the flooding. In December 2003, just a month after FBP finished restoring the channel, heavy rains caused the Coast Fork to swell into the meadow: precisely the desired result, allowing riparian trees like cottonwood to germinate.

There is also a nursery, which acts as a seed bank for local native plants that developed in the wild. Through a program called Adopt-a-Plot, individual volunteers can accept responsibility for the propagation of a

single species from seed to adult. “Volunteers can really get to know their plant’s life cycle,” says Rogers. “They’ll get in right at the source level of all the restoration that is done here.”

Although it has plenty of plans, FBP is limited by funding. Lane County Parks, as landowner of the Howard Buford Recreation Area, must approve FBP’s proposals — but it has no budget for ecological restoration. “We need the money to pay the experts — or at least to pay me, to round up the volunteers,” says Rogers. But she doesn’t blame the county for its lack of funds; voters rejected the most recent ballot measure to fund Lane County Department of Parks and Open Spaces. “People don’t seem to make the connection between the taxes and the benefits, like this,” says Rogers, spreading her arms to encompass the restored landscape of the South Meadow.

So FBP seeks funds elsewhere: from the Bonneville Power Administration, whose power lines through the area make it responsible for wildlife mitigation; from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, which provides technical support for habitat restoration; from nonprofits like the Oregon Country Fair and the Sperling Foundation; and from private donors. Other groups, like