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Turning back time at Willamette Mission

Riverkeepers spearhead effort with substantial community support

By LAUREN MURPHY
Of the Keizertimes

Willamette Mission State Park has a lot to offer: equestrian trails, a disc golf course, picnic areas, and thanks to the efforts of the Willamette Riverkeepers and their many partners, a beautiful, native floodplain forest.

Willamette Riverkeepers is a non-profit organization that have been working to restore the Willamette River for nearly 20 years. They have partnered with Oregon State Parks to restore native habitat within the natural areas of the park that were overrun with weeds and blackberries.

They are working on more than 600 acres of land, a task that would be impossible for their small organization without help.

"We used a local farmer to sow the seed, we used a contractor based out of Tigard called Ashcreek Forest Management to do all of the site prep and planting, we had a local farmer that leases within the park help us do some of the initial site prep," said Marci Krass, the Riverkeepers' program manager.

They use contractors to remove the invasive plants that have taken advantage of the bare ground out at the park, such as: Himalayan blackberry, reed canarygrass and clematis. After the weeds are removed the Riverkeepers plant native



plants: cottonwood trees, ninebark, or red elderberries

"All of our restoration work is happening in the natural area," Krass said, which means other parts of the park will not be disturbed. "It's a public park, what we're trying to do is make the forest higher quality." She pointed out bare patches of ground along the path that used to be covered in blackberries, removing them not only makes the park more enjoyable for horses, bikers, and hikers, but it also helps restore habitat for native fish and wildlife.

"Historically, this was most likely a forest and it was cleared for agriculture at one point," she said.

Before the space became a state park it was a mission. It was the first Methodist mission on the west coast, established in 1834 by Rev. Jason Lee.

"They tried to farm it and then they realized it's not good



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In addition to planting native trees and other plants like the cottonwood seen above, the Riverkeepers and volunteers place temporary cages around the trunks to protect them from deer scratching antlers against them. While it's part of a natural cycle, the damage can kill young trees.

for farming and that's because we now know it floods pretty often," Krass said.

The land was cleared for farming but the mission had been abandoned, leaving bare ground, the perfect place for invasive species to grow.

"A lot of the problem, I think, in this park is invasive species," Krass said. "If you let invasive species do what, they want they'll usually win."

Invasive species compete with and usually kill the native plants. The overall impact is reduces the amount of biodiversity in the forest.

"You have diverse plants with different, more complex

root systems, you get different bugs, different insects that are utilizing the plants," she said. More plants mean more bugs and, when the river floods, the fish can eat well because there is enough to go around. When you have a monoculture of weeds it's not as complex of a habituate," Krass said.

When it comes to removing the invasive species the Riverkeepers have several tactics: cutting the weeds, mowing them down, and occasionally using herbicides.

"Sometimes we'll use some herbicide, like spraying, because it's a tool and if we use it in the right way at the right

time it can make a big difference," Krass said, though it is trickier in some areas. She pulled back a clump of weeds that had surrounded a rose, "It's tough because you don't want to negatively affect the rose but you want to get rid of the grass," which is when a cutting treatment would come in handy.

In a project like this it's important to prioritize what needs to get done, "Some weeds can have a bigger impact on changing the ecology of the area, like weed canary grass," she said. "But this annual aster, it's kind of annoying and ugly, but the reality is it's not going to stop a native plant from growing," which is why most of their efforts are

focused on the more dangerous weeds.

A project like this requires collaborative partnerships and grant funding. Willamette Riverkeepers applied for funding through the Willamette River Anchor Habitat Investment Program, which is jointly funded by Meyer Memorial Trust, the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, and Bonneville Power Administration.

There are many other funders, as well as in-kind donations, that make a project like this possible, including the Salem-Keizer REI, which has given \$69,000 to the Riverkeepers since 2014.

In addition to the funds, the Riverkeepers have opportunities for volunteer work, which can be found on their website, willamette-riverkeeper.org/volunteer. They've partnered with the community on several projects in the park. North Salem High School students helped with a project to protect young cottonwood trees from deer by placing plastic netting around the tree trunks. When trees are young deer will come by and scratch their antlers against the trunks, which is damaging to the bark and can kill young trees. The cages deter the deer so the trees can grow and establish.

Willamette Riverkeeper are not the only group trying to restore the river, and Willamette Mission is not the only site they are working on.

"More than 50 organizations up and down the Willamette are concerned about water quality and habitat availability," she said.

The end goal is to have a native forest that Oregon State Parks can manage themselves, or better yet, a self-sustaining forest.

"What we're trying to do is make the forest higher quality."

— Marci Krass
Program manager
Willamette Riverkeepers

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