

Tribal 'prairie' dedicated

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

The 1.8-acre Tyee Nature Reserve, initially planned as a home for "threatened" Nelson's checkermallow plants, was dedicated from the edge of the reserve, behind the Grand Ronde Tribal Housing Authority building, on Friday, May 31.

"It all started with one plant," said Tribal Fish and Wildlife Coordinator Kelly Dirksen.

The Tribe began developing the area in the 1990s. In 2008, the Tribe partnered with the Corvallis-based Institute for Applied Ecology to create a multi-species reserve.

"The first step," said Applied Ecology Program Director Melanie Gisler, "was to collect seed from local Nelson's checkermallow plants and start a farm production field to increase the amount of seed available for restoration."

The land for the reserve is called "prairie" for the many different native plants it is home to and because it fosters grasses, herbs and shrubs, rather than trees, as the main vegetation.

"Prairies used to dominate the landscape of the Willamette Valley," said Tribal Cultural Protection Specialist David Harrelson. Most are gone today. "We're lucky this site was recoverable."

In fact, Grand Ronde is today a productive checkermallow reserve in a world without many of them. The plant grows throughout Grand Ronde. "A hotspot for the plants," Gisler said, "but it's very rare otherwise," showing up in the Willamette Valley, the Oregon Coast Range, Puget Trough and no other place in the world.

Institute Executive Director Tom Kaye said it was "a special day in a special place."

The institute has planted the checkermallow at 13 other sites in Benton, Yamhill and Polk counties, with the idea of planting enough that the plant can be taken off of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's "threatened" species list.

Federal guidelines require 100,000 thriving checkermallow plants across its range before the species comes off the list, and Gisler says that institute projects have almost reached that number.

The institute initially came to



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

David Harrelson, Tribal Cultural Protection specialist, shows a camas bulb that he dug up from the Tyee Nature Reserve during the dedication for the reserve on Friday, May 31. The camas bulbs were planted in the reserve in November 2011.

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the Tribe with grant funding from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to make an ecological home for the threatened checkermallow.

A lot of hard work from staff and volunteers from both entities allowed the Tribe to open the reserve to the public last year, unveiling a prairie with much more than checkermallows.

Dirksen called the work with the institute "a great partnership" in which institute staff and volunteers provided "tons of technical assistance. They donated hundreds of hours of labor," and planted thousands of bulbs and seedlings.

Along the way, developers of the site brought in many native plants that thrive in conditions also ideal for the checkermallow, some al-

ready on site, and as a result the public can walk on gravel paths through the reserve and find camas and iris plants among 42 native species. Twenty-four of those have been planted by Applied Ecology people since 2010 and 18 were already there.

This project of the Tribal Fish and Wildlife Program was coordinated with the Land and Culture and Maintenance departments. Staff provided help with working the land to benefit traditional species while limiting weeds and other intrusive plants.

"I'm really excited," said Kaye. "There were 55 checkermallow plants when we started. There are 594 plants now."

Until the new plants establish themselves, the Tribe has ruled out harvesting any, but once the plants are established, the Tribe will move forward in sustainably collecting traditional native plants from the reserve.

"Managing for abundance" is how Harrelson described it.

The ultimate aim is to have a reserve where Native people collect traditional native plants.

"We're keenly interested in developing traditional plant materials for food and baskets, traditional crafts," said Gisler. The next steps are to develop those on a larger scale. And planting in a way that makes sense for how the plants would be harvested by the Tribe.

Harrelson led Tribal Council member Cheryle A. Kennedy a little way into the reserve to dig camas roots and to describe the process to some 50 staff, volunteers, drummers and Lilu pre-school language immersion class students, who sang "We're going to do better tomorrow" in Chinuk Wawa for the group.

"The children are here to cel-

brate our future," said Kennedy, who blessed the gathering.

"Camas was a food for Kalapuya Native people and for Natives across the Northwest," Harrelson said. A Native staple, "Camas has the same footing as salmon as a traditional food for our people."

Also among the plants is juncus, traditionally used for basket making, as well as tarweed and biscuit root, both collected for food.

"The aim is to restore the land to the way it was 200 years ago," Kennedy said. "This prairie is land to live in, care for and be a part of. We're land people."

Also on the program were two stops along the path. In one, institute and Tribal staff manned an Applied Ecology display of area birds. Visitors got an up-close look at local birds preserved for education and learned some of the ways that researchers evaluate a habitat.

At the second stop, Tribal Elder Connie Graves displayed traditional baskets and showed how some were made.

Tribal drummers and singers also helped celebrate the dedication.

The event was organized by Tribal Public Affairs Director Siobhan Taylor and her acting assistant, Chelsea Clark, and included lunch after the dedication.

"It's been going very well, very successfully," said Gisler. "Our production field has yielded a lot of seed. Grand Ronde has been helpful in providing seed and creating high-quality habitat for the plants."

Although the institute's grant funding runs out at the end of this year, the nonprofit would like to continue working here, she said.

Dirksen said that the project had gone so well that it "sets the template" for future collaborations. ■



Drummers sing a blessing song during the Tyee Nature Reserve dedication on Friday, May 31.