



Conserving the natural and agricultural legacy of the southern Sierra Nevada and San Joaquin Valley



Buckeye Ranch contains crucial plant and wildlife habitat along Tyler Creek, a significant tributary of Deer Creek. SRT © 2006

## Buckeye Ranch: Building a conservation legacy along Deer Creek

When Sequoia Riverlands Trust helped Jim and Gay VerSteege conserve their 360-acre Buckeye Ranch in April, the partnership ensured that a conservation legacy already in the making would continue into perpetuity. The ranch contains crucial plant and wildlife habitat along Tyler Creek, a significant tributary of Deer Creek, and is the first property Sequoia Riverlands Trust has safeguarded in the Deer Creek area.

From its headwaters in the Giant Sequoia National Monument's southernmost grove of giant sequoias, Deer Creek flows un-dammed through steep, rocky canyons down into vast blue-oak woodlands, where it provides significant streamside habitat, including patches of rare sycamore alluvial woodland. In addition, Deer Creek hosts one of the highest-quality aquatic systems in Tulare County.

The VerSteege's, who have lived at Buckeye Ranch for 29 years, have a long history of encouraging conservation research on their land, including work on blue oak woodlands, native grasses, water quality and native fish. They enjoy engaging in these projects and, over time, have gained an appreciation for the complexity of the land.

"It's certainly not a static landscape, though to the casual observer it could appear to be," said Jim VerSteege. "The ongoing change is subtle, but significant, and it's just great fun to be an ongoing observer of the changing dynamics of the land."

In addition, the property serves as a working ranch, where the cattle have long been accustomed to sharing the space with conservation-oriented research and restoration projects.

"This voluntary conservation agreement perpetuates environmentally sound land management practices on a working ranch and ensures that future land uses protect water quality in Tyler Creek," said Sopac McCarthy Mulholland, Executive Director for Sequoia Riverlands Trust. "Buckeye Ranch contains high-quality examples of blue oak woodland, grassland and streamside wildlife habitat and helps maintain an important scenic and ecological corridor for plants, animals and people."

The VerSteege's retain the title to the property and the ability to use the land for livestock production, research and low-impact recreation, while voluntarily giving up the right to subdivide the property or develop it beyond agreed-upon terms. Funding for the conservation agreement came from a private foundation and the Sierra Nevada-Cascade Conservation Grant Program of the California Resources Agency (Proposition 50). Landowners Gay and Jim VerSteege also donated a portion of the value, which may allow for tax benefits under the Pension Protection Act of 2006.

This conservation agreement is the 15th put in place by Sequoia Riverlands Trust in Tulare County, bringing the total of private land conserved through such agreements to 2,594 acres. Additionally, the land trust owns and manages seven nature preserves, totaling 4,565 acres.

"The conservation agreement is not a constraint," said Jim VerSteege. "You can have both. You can have an economic enterprise and still protect and enhance the land."

## VISTAS

Volume 8, Issue 3, Fall 2007  
a biannual publication from:

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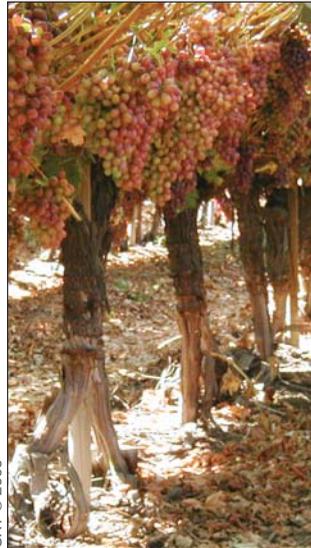
The Sequoia Riverlands Trust (SRT) is a local, community-based, 501 (c)(3) non-profit conserving the natural and agricultural legacy of the southern Sierra Nevada and San Joaquin Valley. A copy of the latest financial statement and registration filed with the Registry of Charitable Trusts may be obtained by contacting the SRT office. Contributions are deductible to the extent allowed by law.



A Tulare County family farm provides crops, open space and wildlife habitat.

SRT © 2005

## A note from the president of the board



SRT © 2005

A row of table grapes is ripe for harvest.

It's harvest time, which calls my mind to the countless September days I've spent on the land gathering the season's bounty. I've had the pleasure to experience nearly 35 years of farm life here in the Central Valley. And no matter how many years pass, I believe I will never fail to marvel at the incredible diversity of fruits, nuts and vegetables that our Mediterranean climate and fertile soil enables us to cultivate. Distributed throughout California and across the globe, these goods grown by local farmers generate a market value of more than \$13 billion annually, feeding our local and state economies.

Yet this landscape of the Southern San Joaquin Valley so familiar to us all as is rapidly changing – soaring property values and limited housing have led once-productive farmland to become part of an ever-increasing urban landscape. Each year, more than 80,000 acres of farmland are converted to other uses in California. Rather than pointing fingers and casting blame, Sequoia Riverlands Trust is taking an active role to partner with farmers, ranchers, developers, elected officials, businesses and agencies.

Partnerships are powerful when they unite diverse voices and perspectives. When individuals with influence come together to tackle challenges, they can make immediate and sustainable change. Sequoia Riverlands Trust values partnerships because we believe that it's through collaboration with others from our community that we can find lasting, sustainable solutions. Working together, we can balance our need for homes, transportation and services while also supplying safe, healthy food and water. And at the same time, we can recognize the value of protecting natural places that provide wildlife habitat, open space, and places for people to play and seek the comfort of nature.

Within the next generation, close to a million more acres of farmland could vanish, putting additional pressure on the ability of the region's farmers to continue producing food for the state, the nation and the world. As this newsletter goes to press, Sequoia Riverlands Trust is beginning an exciting journey to explore expanding its role in partnering with farmers, developers and local officials to plan appropriately for growth that provides the best community services while retaining the best farmland.

We are all stewards of the local natural and agricultural resources entrusted to us. Let us work together to invest these resources wisely in a well-planned future.

Sincerely,

R. Scott Spear  
*President and almond farmer, REY NUT family farm*

## Plans for increased access to Dry Creek and Homer Ranch

*A family is spending the morning hiking together on a handicapped-accessible trail surrounded by colorful splashes of spring wildflowers. They stop at the native plant demonstration garden and learn about how native plants support wildlife, cleanse the air, and provide beautiful scenery. Nearby, a lone hiker crouches silently next to a sycamore, watching a great blue heron fishing for its next meal in the creek. Meanwhile, an amateur photographer captures a breathtaking vista of the Dry Creek floodplain from the observation tower at the end of the trail. Back at the Sequoia Riverlands Trust office, staff prepares for tomorrow's school tour, when a classroom of children will experience firsthand what they've been reading about in their science textbooks.*

This is Sequoia Riverlands Trust's vision for Dry Creek Preserve, a 152-acre reclaimed gravel quarry north of Lemon Cove. In June, Sequoia Riverlands Trust received a California River Parkways grant that will help pay for the expanded amenities, plus an improved parking area, a shade structure, drinking water, restrooms, and other dirt hiking trails. The goal is to make Dry Creek an easily-accessible place for local schoolchildren, families, and visitors to enjoy natural river environments while learning how retired gravel mines can again provide wildlife habitat, scenic beauty, and an opportunity for community stewardship.

The grant will also help with amenities to support guided tours and outdoor education at Homer Ranch, a 1,819-acre working cattle ranch that takes in more than two miles of Dry Creek and contains one of the largest, healthiest, and last remaining sycamore alluvial woodlands in the world. Additions will include an improved parking area, walking trails through the sycamore alluvial woodland along Dry Creek, and a picnic area beneath towering trees at the end of the trail. "It was an honor to receive California River Parkways grant funding

### Spotlight: Andrew Hoover

"It's really a cool thing to have a physical impact on the world," said Andrew Hoover, a recent El Diamante High School graduate who completed his final Eagle Scout service project at Kaweah Oaks Preserve last spring.

He built two benches on the Sycamore Trail that now serve as a nature observation area for students and a resting point about halfway through the three-fourths mile trail. He also built the registry box located at the entrance to the preserve, where visitors can sign in, leave feedback about their experiences, and pick up trail guides and information about Sequoia Riverlands Trust.

"The most valuable thing I learned from my Eagle Scout project is just learning how to follow through on things," Andrew said. "The project was something I did for myself. All of the responsibility fell on me to follow up with people I was working with and to finish what I started."

Andrew brought first-year Boy Scouts to Kaweah Oaks Preserve so that they could learn from him and help with the project.

"Little kids are great," he laughed, "especially when you're the leader of something. They're hard workers and they love to be outside. You let them climb a tree when they're done, and it was the greatest day for them. It teaches them to work with their hands and do something for someone else."



Sequoia Riverlands Trust is working to open Dry Creek Preserve, pictured above, to the public.

to provide public access to these unique areas." said Sopac McCarthy Mulholland, Executive Director for Sequoia Riverlands Trust. "Now we can enjoy Dry Creek and Homer Ranch not only for their amazing scenic vistas, but also for unparalleled recreational and educational opportunities."

Together, Dry Creek Preserve and Homer Ranch protect almost 2,000 acres along scenic Dry Creek as it winds its way from headwaters in Sequoia National Park to the Kaweah River on the floor of the San Joaquin Valley in Tulare County. Nowhere else can visitors experience the unique sycamore alluvial woodland community along an un-dammed stream, visit a working cattle ranch and learn about the first ecologically-based mine reclamation in Tulare County.

Andrew, a freshman at Fresno State, received a full scholarship through the Smittcamp Family Honors College program and is majoring in media production. Even though his Eagle Scout requirements have been fulfilled, the work he did at Kaweah Oaks Preserve is something he says he'll carry with him for a long time.

"Knowing that an extra 20 people can rest easy halfway through the trail is a great feeling," he said.



Eagle Scout Andrew Hoover uses one of the benches he built at Kaweah Oaks Preserve to take a break from hiking.

## Save the date

### Explore your back yard

We invite all ages for fun nature walks up to two miles long. Please dress appropriately, wear sturdy shoes and bring water and a friend. Field guides or binoculars optional.

**Donation:** \$5 members, \$10 non-members or join Sequoia Riverlands Trust that day and attend for free!

### Saturday, October 6 6:30 – 8:30 p.m.

#### Stargazing at Dry Creek Preserve

Join Sequoia Riverlands Trust and local, knowledgeable astronomy enthusiasts for a rare opportunity to stargaze on a nature preserve after dark. *(Join our education and events email list for updates as the event approaches.)*

### Saturday, December 22 6:30 – 10:30 a.m.

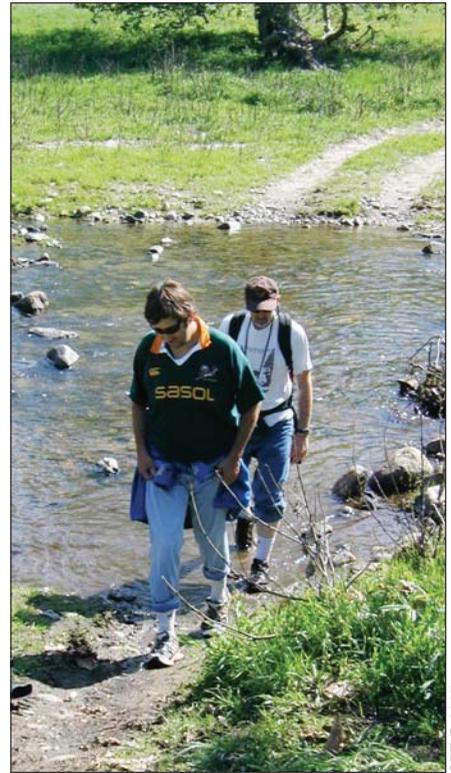
#### Annual Winter Bird Count at Kaweah Oaks Preserve

Join the Tulare County Audubon Society and Sequoia Riverlands Trust to find, watch, record and photograph common friends and rare visitors in our own back yard.

Please check [www.sequoiariverlands.org](http://www.sequoiariverlands.org) for current information and additional programs or call 559.738.0211.

## Send us your email

If you would like to be notified about special events, tours, volunteer opportunities and breaking news from Sequoia Riverlands Trust, please send your email address to [info@sequoiariverlands.org](mailto:info@sequoiariverlands.org) and ask to be added to our email news list.



Participants in a guided tour of Homer Ranch cross Dry Creek.

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