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Batcheller Ranch – Continued Lessons in Love and Mother Nature

by Rebecca Bresnick Holmes

“It is a labor of love,” says Dave Batcheller of his and wife Linda’s ranch (and home), a 31-acre rectangular parcel in the lowlands of western Yolo County. Dave and Linda have spent innumerable hours converting the property from nothing but dirt (not even a fence-post) when they purchased the property in 1981 to what it is today – an outstanding example of how ranching and wildlife management have complementary goals. Working with Audubon California and other resource agencies, the Batchellers have created a three-goal conservation program: increase ranch efficiency, provide wildlife habitat, and participate in outreach and education. The property has become a beautiful and enchanting place to spend time, particularly at sundown, when silhouettes of various birds, ducks, and owls flying by are awe-inspiring and the ranch is quiet, save for the sound of the resident geese.



Although it’s hard to tell, Linda and Dave are relatively new to conservation. While Linda worked a federal government job Dave farmed full-time on leased land. After eight challenging years farming various crops he finally had a bumper crop that provided the down payment for their ranch. They continued to farm, “but it had gotten really tough,” says Dave, and during the last few years, “we were just trading dollars.” Dave knew that they couldn’t row crop the land, so he converted it to permanent pastures for their livestock, but that wasn’t profitable either. Dave got a job in town, sold off their cows (they still maintain about 50

brood ewes), and got rid of their leased land. They couldn’t control the water on their inefficient ranch, the market was bad, the pasture wasn’t making it, and although Dave knew what had to be done, the sheep didn’t generate the income needed to do it. According to Dave, “we limped along until I became so discouraged and frustrated that I was ready to throw in the towel.” That was in the spring of 2000.

Amazingly, that is when Judy Boshoven and Jeanne Wirka, both of Audubon California, came along. “It was just at the right time,” says Dave, “they were truly a god-send!” Judy and Jeanne had sent out fliers to Union School Slough Watershed landowners with information about available grant money. Not knowing the extent of the potential assistance, Dave attended an orientation thinking that he might be able to get help putting in a tailwater pond. That orientation led to a meeting and Dave soon became aware of the incredible resources available to him. Dave relates that this was “huge...they [Judy and Jeanne] said they’d hold my hand and take me through the whole process. There was a mountain of paperwork and Judy and Jeanne were fantastic!”

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Work began in the summer of 2000 after various agencies (including Audubon California, NRCS, Yolo County RCD, and Partners for Wildlife) toured the property. Judy and Jeanne helped Dave help find contractors, including one that would excavate the land even though the water table was very high (18 inches). “This guy had the technology, equipment, and expertise and didn’t mind digging in the mud,” marvels Dave. “And,” he added, “he came in on budget.” Dave remains impressed with the quantity and quality of help that he has received. “The ongoing support has been incredible: the expertise, the connections, the resources, the administrative help...the list goes on,” he explains. “The ranch would not be what it is if not for the people that have helped along the way,” he notes.

While initially most interested in providing wildlife habitat on his property, Dave expanded his interests to include making his ranch more efficient and participating in outreach (which he

greatly enjoys). The Batchellers ended up with a three-acre wetland at the south end of their property and three ponds (South Pond, Willow Pond, and Heidi Pond).

The results of their conservation work are evident to the Batchellers and to anyone who visits their property.

“The wildlife is great – it’s the payoff . . . the monitoring is the best part and we learn something new every day,” explain Linda and Dave excitedly. “It is evidence that the plan is working.” The Batchellers clearly enjoy monitoring and are thrilled by their observations. They see more birds (shore-birds, owls, wood ducks, hawks, bitterns, kestrels, a pelican) than one could list. They even have river otters in South Pond and have the photo to prove it. The Batchellers have no doubt that it works. They regularly see native plants such as Spikerush and wildrye popping up in places where they didn’t plant it. “You provide the habitat and Mother Nature will restore herself,” Dave exclaims enthusiastically.

As to potential loss, Dave calculated that 20% (a lot for many ranches) of the property would be taken out of production, although Dave considers it a temporary loss. He explains, “we’ll still be able to graze and run the sheep in those areas once the trees and shrubs get big enough.”

Batcheller Ranch incorporates many conservation methods. They have a complete tailwater return system, use beneficial insectary plants, have modified hedgerows and have installed various bird and owl boxes to encourage additional wildlife habitat.

Their project was designed so that each pasture’s tailwater (from irrigation and rain) drains into the corresponding pond at the east edge of the property. The “L”-shaped berms guide the water to the grassy waterway that extends all the way from Heidi Pond at the north end of the property, to South Pond at the opposite end



Batcheller Ranch before the creation of Willow and Heidi Ponds

so that when one pond becomes too full, it runs off into the next.

The project has also created raised alleys down the center of each pasture so that the sheep can walk on dry ground even in winter and during irrigation. Modified hedgerows provide shade for the sheep so they can stay out in the pasture, which is healthier than staying in the barn.

All the fields have water troughs for the sheep, which are fenced out of the pond area (one of their current management plans). When the plants get large enough (3-4 years old, estimates Dave), the sheep will occasionally be allowed to run in the three pond areas to forage.

Native plants are located all over Batcheller Ranch, with a great many near the Batchellers’ home and Heidi Pond. Some of these plants, such as Narrow-leafed milkweed, attract many different kinds of butterflies, insects, and ladybeetles that eat aphids.

Dave and Linda relish their reality – the successful functioning of natural habitat and a working farm. They are very excited and enthusiastic about what they’re doing.

Batcheller Ranch is a success and is a terrific example for others to learn from. Dave loves the outreach and never tires of people coming by to look and learn. “So many people come by,” he relates, “We can talk about what we’re doing and show people. Our ranch is a good example because it has a little bit of everything on it. It’s a compact spot and can be seen quickly. People can look at what we’ve done, take what they like and try it on their

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own properties.”

When asked what the biggest problem is for them, Dave replies without hesitation, “the weeds.” He admits that he had no idea about the prolific and pervasive weeds. They reluctantly spray only as an initial means to an end. “The natives need a little help getting started,” explains Dave, “Once they start growing, they can outcompete the exotics.” In a few years, Dave projects, they will likely participate in some prescribed burns.

The Batchellers have a long-term vision for their property: they consider their ranch a work in progress and they are patient enough to take the steps necessary to get there. “It will get better all the time,” claims Dave. Dave and Linda are truly experiencing the joy of living their dream.

To learn more about Batcheller Ranch, conservation methods, or the assistance you may be able to receive, contact the Yolo County RCD at 530.662.2037, ext. 119 or mccloud@yolorcd.org.

FREE Irrigation Testing With the New Mobile Water Lab

If you irrigate your land, then you may want to talk to Max Stevenson, the new Yolo RCD Mobile Water Lab Manager. The lab offers free irrigation system tail water evaluations for farmers, ranchers, and irrigation districts in the Yolo, Colusa, and Solano county areas. Max notes that particularly in light of the Ag Waiver, everyone is interested in finding out what’s in their runoff.

The Mobile Water Lab services include irrigation system evaluations, pump testing facilitation, water quality testing of source irrigation water and/or runoff, nitrogen fertilizer application rate calculation assistance, and economic analyses for cost/benefit comparisons. The tests can be done anonymously.

Max is enthusiastic about the new lab and wants people to know that “some of the tests we do can really save you money, and if you need to change something to control runoff, we can assist with designs, installation, and sometimes even help pay for the change.”

For more information about the Mobile Water Lab, contact Max Stevenson by phone at 530.662.2037, x120 or via email to stevenson@yolorcd.org. You can also get more information about the Ag Waiver in the Regional Water Board’s newsletter at: http://www.swrcb.ca.gov/rwqcb5/programs/irrigated_lands/newslet_101003.pdf.



Capay Watershed Stewardship Plan Released!

At the November 2003 meeting the Cache Creek Watershed Stakeholders Group approved the new Capay Valley Watershed Stewardship Plan, which will serve as their guidance document for conservation work and coordination in the valley.

After an overview of Capay Valley resources and issues, the Plan outlines the group’s resource goals and objectives and the recommended actions for achieving them. Key actions identified in the Plan for near-term implementation include: Develop and pursue funding for a noxious weed management program based on a survey to be completed this month; initiate sub-watershed projects in one Cache Creek tributary (Heather & Hamilton Creeks); implement at least one bank protection, weed control, and revegetation demonstration project on Cache Creek. The RCD expects to hear back

Coming Soon: the Legendary RCD Annual Dinner



at The Farm & Nature Center
5365 Putah Creek Road
Thursday, May 6th
5:30 - 8:00 p.m.



Call the RCD at 662.2037, x 119 for information and tickets.

soon on a grant proposal that would fund a new watershed coordinator for the Capay Valley starting this spring to support Plan implementation through technical assistance, fund-raising (grants), and meeting facilitation.

The next Stakeholders Meeting is Thursday, March 11, from 6-8pm at the Western Yolo Grange Hall in Guinda with Janis Cooke of the Regional Water Quality Control Board as the featured

speaker on new water quality rules (TMDL) for Mercury in Cache Creek. The group meets regularly on the third Thursday evening of every other month in Guinda. To get a copy of the Watershed Stewardship Plan, the Capay Valley Conservation and Restoration Manual, or to learn more about the Stakeholders Group, please contact Paul Robins at the RCD.

Audubon California Landowner Stewardship Program & The Center for Land-Based Learning

Farm and Nature Center Will Grow in 2004

A diversity of teaching gardens will soon replace the lush green blanket of cover crops at the Farm and Nature Center in Winters. Visitors from schools, communities, farms, and ranches from across the country and throughout California will visit these gardens to learn about sustainable agriculture, environmental restoration, and wildlife-friendly farming. Although

about to change its landscape, this land has served as a classroom for several years.

The Farm and Nature Center anticipates exciting growth this year. The Center for Land-Based Learning (formerly FARMS Leadership, Inc.) and Audubon California's Landowner Stewardship Program share office space at the Putah Creek Road site. These organizations, working with partners and community members throughout the region will soon develop 25 acres of gardens, greenhouses, and buildings into a premiere educational facility. The facility will serve youth, local landowners, the public, and others interested in sustainable agriculture, environmental restoration, and land use issues.

Craig McNamara, the Executive Director of the Center for Land-Based Learning explains, "We're excited to develop a

place where we can offer models and host programs to teach about agricultural and environmental stewardship."

A Center-feasibility study is nearly completed and staff are eager to talk with community members about plans for the site. Possibilities include: expanded demonstration areas for livestock, aquaculture, and renewable energy technologies; entrepreneurial and value-added ventures; and a series of workshops for landowners and the public. The Center is already planning the development of a two-acre teaching garden and recently, local artist Troy Corliss took up occupancy in one of the Center's barns as artist-in-residence and is working on a variety of projects regionally.



Odin Zackman Joins Team as New Director

The Farm and Nature Center has welcomed a new director: Odin Zackman. Odin joins an existing team committed to developing the physical infrastructure and the educational potential of the site. He brings over a decade of experience working in environmental and community development to this project, and possesses particular expertise in sustainable agriculture, leadership development, and place-based education.

"This is a unique opportunity. So much great work has already been done" says Odin. "With input and advice from the local community, (farmers, ranchers, and the youth we work with), there's tremendous educational potential here."

The success of this effort will depend upon significant community input, explains Odin. He is already working to design a process that will harvest the ideas and energy of people excited about creating and utilizing such a center.

The Center for Land-Based Learning and Audubon California's Landowner Stewardship Program are looking forward to working with community members and other organizations to design a center to educate and inspire.

We welcome your ideas and involvement! To learn more about the development of the Farm and Nature Center, to get involved, or to host an event or workshop at the Center, please contact Odin Zackman at 530.795.9569.



Odin Zackman



Miles DaPrato

Audubon California Landowner Stewardship Program Update

Wirka Wins Winters Top Award

Jeanne Wirka, Landowner Stewardship Program Restoration Ecologist, recently garnered the Theodore Winters award for outstanding service to the Winters Community. Jeanne won the award for her outstanding commitment, knowledge of natural history, and restoration expertise for work on Putah Creek riparian restoration projects. Congratulations Jeanne!

New Landowner Stewardship Projects

The Landowner Stewardship Program began two new and ambitious restoration projects in partnership with the Center for Land-Based Learning SLEWS Program and NRCS. John Foster is planting native trees and shrubs and restoring a 1/4-mile portion of Little Lamb Valley Slough. Last year he completed a hedgerow on the same property.

John and Meredith Stephens are benching back Willow Slough and planting with natives. The Stephens' project, which covers about 1/4 mile this year, is a part of a larger vision to restore Willow Slough along a one-mile section of their property.

We hope that neighboring landowners will become interested in the flood conveyance and habitat gains that this work accomplishes. We are continuing to work with existing projects to ensure success and to fulfill landowners' restoration goals!

Miles DaPrato Joins Audubon

Miles DaPrato (photo at left), joined the Landowner Stewardship Program in late October 2003 as a restoration technician. He has extensive knowledge of restoration work on the ground and is looking forward to meeting the local community! ☞

VEGETATION MANAGEMENT EQUIPMENT FOR RENT OR HIRE

Want to plant or maintain a roadside or plot of native grass but lack the equipment? The RCD can assist you with specialized equipment for native planting and maintenance, including a harrow, seeder, and mower—all pullable by ATV.

Contact Jenny Drewitz at 530.662.2037, ext. 114 for more information on specifications and rates for rental or hire.



RCD Sponsors Roadside Vegetation Management Workshop on March 18

The Yolo County Resource Conservation District will host a free, two-hour field meeting on the use of native grasses to enhance rural roadsides Thursday, March 18th starting at 9 am.

Roadsides are one of the most weed-infested areas on any farm and are the source of weed seeds that repopulate farmed fields and other areas. If these areas are managed at all, they are often sprayed or graded year after year, with no overall reduction in weeds. Landowners bordering a County roadside can try a different approach in partnership with the county and the RCD. Through a new county permit program they can plant roadsides with native perennial grasses, which will compete effectively with weeds and not become weedy themselves. This brings with it another benefit - a reduction in herbicide applications and a related improvement in water quality. The strong root systems of these grasses also stabilize the soil, which reduces erosion.

Another benefit to a roadside managed in this way is that it provides beneficial insect and wildlife habitat. Recent studies have shown that more pest insects than beneficial insects are harbored in the weeds typical of these edges, whereas the reverse is true of a re-vegetated roadside - there are typically more beneficial or predatory insects than crop pests. Wildlife native to the area

often prefer these types of plantings, too, and find improved cover and food sources.

The setting of the meeting is a two-year-old planting of native perennial grasses along the Davis Bike Path on County Road 32, 2.5 miles west of Davis, where participants can see and walk a sample roadside project.

Participants will learn the basic techniques required to create their own native grass plantings on roadsides. Meeting topics will include potential benefits, installation and maintenance techniques, available support, and permit requirements.

Participants will learn the basic techniques required to create their own native grass plantings on roadsides. Meeting topics will include potential benefits, installation and maintenance techniques, available support, and permit requirements.

This meeting is the last in a five-part "Farm Edge Conservation" series offered by the RCD this year. Meeting sponsors include: the CALFED Bay-Delta program and the California Department of Conservation. For more information, please call the RCD at 530.662.2037, x119. ☞



Yolo County RCD Publications

The Yolo County RCD offers various resource material for sale. To place an order, send your request to Yolo County RCD - Orders, 221 W. Court Street, Suite 1, Woodland, CA 95695; call 530.662.2037, ext. 119; or send an e-mail to mccloud@yolorcd.org. Please add tax and shipping and handling costs to publication prices below:

- Know Your Natives; A Pictorial Guide to California Native Grasses \$25
- Bring Farm Edges Back to Life! \$15
- California Native Grass (poster) \$17
- Monitoring on Your Farm \$15
- Establishing a Hedgerow (video) \$9
- Working Habitat for Working Farms (video) \$10
- Yolo County Soil Survey (CD-ROM) \$13.92

Please add 7.75% sales tax to above prices

Shipping & handling:

(no charge if item is purchased on site)

- 1 item: \$3.00
- 2-5 items: \$5.00
- 6-10 items: \$10.00
- more than 10 items: \$15.00



Kid's Corner

Life of the Soil

Soil is made up of different things. When you circle all the words in the puzzle, a hidden message will be revealed in the letters that remain!

AIR	S O I L S I S A S
ANIMALS	S K C O R A N S E
CLAY	S I L T I I N P V
LEAVES	E C I R M A L D A
PLANTS	S T N A L P S T E
ROCKS	U F L R E T A W L
SAND	F S L N H H Y Y C
SILT	Y A L C P Y M H T
WATER	

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For environmental education links, go to:
<http://nacdnet.org/resources/Links-Education.htm>

Answer: Soil is special stuff!

Find project progress reports, events, links, and updated conservation articles on the RCD website at www.yolorcd.org

If you would like to receive this newsletter electronically instead of by mail, please notify Susan McCloud at mccloud@yolorcd.org.

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