

East Bay Conservation News: Saving the Last Wild Canyon

by Jacqui Smalley



In August of 2000, when I first walked the Last Wild Canyon, adjacent to Joaquin Miller Park, I was amazed at the fabulous wild beauty of this half-mile watershed valley with its abundance of wildflowers, birds and oaks and a creek running through it.

I was walking with Amy Evans McClure, a member of a neighborhood alliance called Friends of the Last Wild Canyon, who had contacted GGAS and asked for our support in their efforts to preserve the canyon. After our walk, I invited the Friends to attend a GGAS Conservation Committee meeting where they presented their preservation ideas and screened a video of the canyon. Our committee unanimously agreed to lend our support to their efforts. Since then we have spent considerable time brainstorming and lending advisory support to the Friends as well as writing letters and calling city officials and other organizations.

The Last Wild Canyon and its watershed originate in Joaquin Miller Park where it abuts Joaquin Miller Road. As it passes the junction of Robinson Drive and Butters Drive, the canyon deepens and widens. The creek flowing through the canyon forms a tributary of Peralta Creek which is part of the Sausal Creek watershed. The canyon opens into preserved steep headlands on the property of Holy Names College. There the creek joins other tributaries and eventually drains

into San Leandro Bay.

When the neighborhood became aware that subdivision and development of several properties along the canyon were being planned, over 200 residents came together to preserve the canyon. The canyon and creek are a thriving example of what the Oakland Hills ecosystem must have looked like prior to development. There is surprisingly little infiltration by non-native species. There are groves of California live oaks, Bay laurels, and flowering wild Indian plums. Redwoods flourish alongside the streambed. Upper portions of the canyon, as well as the lower slopes, are filled with a profusion of wildflower meadows, native grasses, ferns and mosses. It is a refuge for a host of bird species including owls, raptors, woodpeckers, tanagers, orioles, finches, nuthatches, cedar waxwings, chickadees and juncos. There are several flocks of California quail, golden eagles, and a variety of butterflies, reptiles and amphibians. Foxes and coyotes have been sighted in the canyon. In the rainy season, numerous seeps and runoffs provide habitat for wildlife as well as the sound of rushing water for hikers, horseback riders and cyclists.

As the organization of Friends and their supporters grew, so did the development threat on many fronts. As the Friends searched for funding to buy threatened land, it became apparent that a legal entity in the neighborhood to hold title to the lands and to hold conservation easements

was essential. In June 2001 the Butters Land Trust was formed to carry out the neighborhood preservation plans. As of this date the trust holds three lots assessed at over \$1.25 million. Two more lots will be transferred to the trust in 2003.

Multiple canyon neighbors are investigating either conservation easements on their land or outright donations.

The Friends of the Last Wild Canyon and the Butters Land Trust have done and continue to do what many thought was impossible. They have saved pristine land in the Oakland Hills that is a haven to wildlife and native vegetation. They have protected a significant watershed from destruction, thereby avoiding further degradation of our Bay. A neighborhood of concerned and involved people really can make a difference!

GGAS is proud to have been a part of this project by providing advisory support and expertise. The Butters Land Trust has invited GGAS to continue its advisory role by serving on their Board of Directors. Working together, we are hopeful that ultimately all of this exquisitely beautiful canyon with its natural diversity will be preserved. If you would like to learn more about the trust, or take a guided tour of the canyon, contact the Butters Land Trust, through its Board President Priscilla Stuckey at pstuckey@california.com, or GGAS Conservation Chairperson Jacqui Smalley at smalleyj@pacbell.net. 