



OAK LEAVES

A PUBLICATION OF SMALL WILDERNESS AREA PRESERVATION
P.O. BOX 6442, LOS OSOS, CALIFORNIA 93412-6442 ❖ (805) 528-0392 ❖ APRIL / MAY 2018

New Faces, New Directions

By Bill McQuilkin, SWAP Planning Committee Chair

Changes are afoot within SWAP--- incoming and outgoing board members; new board leadership; and new energy going forward. The ultimate measure of our success with these changes is our ability to protect this extraordinary Elfin Forest that we cherish, along with all the biodiversity it supports.

My point of departure for elaborating on our forward-looking vision is the SWAP Mission:

To preserve and maintain El Moro Elfin Forest Natural Area; inform and educate about the natural history of the Elfin Forest and the Morro Bay Estuary; promote and support scientific research in the Forest.

Our education program for both students and adults must be strengthened and expanded to reach its full potential. This will include more direct interactions with local elementary and high school science teachers to encourage their support and participation with SWAP. Our docent programs will benefit from proactive partnering with other conservation organizations such as Morro Bay National Estuary Program and the Central Coast State Parks Association. To be successful, conservation must be a collaborative effort.

We need to build upon past botanical and other research studies focused on the Elfin Forest ecosystem. SWAP can benefit from the knowledge and scientific expertise of the surrounding Cal Poly, Cuesta, and Hancock academic communities. New research studies around this Living Laboratory are needed to elevate the value of

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Baywood School First Graders Visit Forest



By Yolanda Waddell

How do woodrats and coyotes make a living in the Elfin Forest? Surely no one cooks for them, or puts out woodrat or coyote food. Four SWAP docents helped to answer this question for 54 first graders from Baywood Elementary School. The children and their teachers walked to the Elfin Forest on January 17th, meeting docents Cheryl Dove, Vicky Johnsen, Pete Sarafian and Chris Van Beveren at the 11th Street entrance of the Forest.

The walk focused on two of the Elfin Forest's resident animals: the Big-eared Woodrat and the Coyote. The children learned that both are "night" animals, although coyotes do move around during the day. Woodrats' homes are made of collected sticks fashioned into a dome. Coyotes make dens when they are raising their young. Woodrats eat seeds, nuts, fruits, leaves, bark and stems of Coast Live Oaks. Coyotes are omnivores, and will catch and eat woodrats if they can.

The children learned that one of the differences between a predator and a prey animal is where the eyes are located. Predators' eyes are at the front of the head, and the eyes of prey animals are at the side of the head. Docent Vicky told them how to remember that with a little rhyme: "Eyes in front, I hunt; eyes on the side, I hide." In the adjacent photo, Docent Vicky is telling the children about the time when a brush rabbit was so still that she didn't see it until she spotted its ears sticking up from a plant that she was looking at. The Elfin Forest is a superb natural classroom for students of all ages.

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BOARD OF DIRECTORS

*of the Los Osos/Morro Bay Chapter of
Small Wilderness Area Preservation (SWAP)
consists of the following members:*

Jan DiLeo, Chair
Skip Rotstein, Vice Chair
Dave Bowlus, Treasurer
Bill McQuilkin, Secretary
Pat Murray, Member at Large
Leslie Rotstein, Member at Large
Yolanda Waddell, Member at Large

The SWAP Board of Directors meets monthly
at 3 p.m. on the 2nd Monday of the month
at the Community Room,
Morro Shores Mobile Home Park,
633 Ramona Ave., Los Osos.

The next meetings are
**Monday, April 9,
and Monday, May 14.**

**All Board meetings are open to the public.
To confirm the date, time and location
(which are subject to change),
call (805) 528-0392.**



CONTACT SWAP

If you have questions about SWAP activities or
want to volunteer, please call
(805) 528-0392 and leave a message.

A recorded message will give information
about our 3rd Saturday Walks,
Work Saturdays, and other events.

If you have questions, concerns or comments
about any problems in the Elfin Forest,
call or write: Bob Yetter

SLO County Parks Supervising Ranger
1144 Monterey Street, SLO, CA 93408
(805) 781-1196

Owners of dogs off-leash can be cited. If you
witness dogs off-leash, vandalism or obvious
crimes, call the County Sheriff at 781-4550
or Bob Yetter at 781-1196.

New Directions *continued from page 1*

the Elfin Forest and to help make sure this valuable community asset is not lost to climate change or other threats.

Past efforts to acquire adjacent properties as additions to the Elfin Forest need to be revived. This will require raising funds via a capital campaign once specific properties are identified. Our donors will be considered as "Partners in Conservation" with plenty of encouragement and recognition that can lead to success.

Our board, committee, and volunteer organization is the engine to propel these new directions. We will require new board members with energy and expertise to guide the future of SWAP. Our activated board committees will be the workhorses for the board, and our expanded volunteer organization will provide important added wisdom, talent and inspiration to help us reach our goals. GO SWAP!

SWAP Board Elects New Officers

By Yolanda Waddell

In the December/January issue of Oakleaves, we reported that Ron Rasmussen, long time Chair of the SWAP Board, had retired. Vicky Johnsen also retired from the Board in December, but is active on the Conservation Committee as Co-Chair. That left the SWAP Board of Directors with too few members to take care of all of our organization's obligations.

Fortunately, in January, three new members joined the SWAP Board: Dave Bowlus, Bill McQuilkin and Leslie Rotstein. There is information about them in the February/March Oakleaves on pages 1 and 3.

At its February meeting, the Board held an election of officers. Jan DiLeo, SWAP's Treasurer since 2010, was elected to be the Chair. Dave Bowlus accepted the position of Treasurer, and Bill McQuilkin is now the SWAP Secretary. We are grateful to them for taking on these responsibilities to care for our organization and the Elfin Forest.

Conservation Committee Report

By Vicky Johnsen, Conservation Committee Co-Chair

Swap's Conservation Committee met on February 15th at Leslie & Skip Rotstein's home. Present were Skip, Vicky and Dave Bowlus and our intent was to begin the process of drawing up a plan for future Work Party projects.

It has been 15 years since the 2003 Recovery Action Plan for the El Moro Elfin Forest was drawn up. We feel it's time to re-evaluate SWAP's stewardship role, within the parameters of our "Adopt-A-Park" permit with San Luis Obispo County Parks. In the past, SWAP's primary goal was:

Restoration: which included removing invasive plants and fencing sensitive areas that were still recovering from human and vehicular traffic.

Now we feel that our emphasis could be on:

Preservation: evaluating and monitoring the health of our unique ecosystem.

One of the key elements of the Elfin Forest is the boardwalk, which gives residents and visitors access with minimal impact to the natural area. To this end, the boardwalk is being continually inspected and repaired by the monthly Work Party volunteers. Another important element of our stewardship efforts is our ongoing battle against the invasive plant threat to the native plants of the Elfin Forest. We also maintain vigilant monitoring of any human and animal activity that would lead to habitat degradation.

All these activities are performed by our Weed Warriors: loyal, hard-working cadre of volunteers who spend at least one morning a month with shovels and rakes, pruning shears and clippers, drills and screws. None of this could be accomplished without them!

Looking Back: SWAP in 1998

By Yolanda Waddell

In April, 1998, SWAP's new Chair Gordon Hensley took the helm following the resignation of past Chair Rose Bowker; Treasurer Jerry Deitz; and Recording Secretary Les Bowker. The latter three had been key figures in the acquisition of the southern 38.7 acres of the Elfin Forest and production of the Elfin Forest Management Plan for County Parks. Bob McDougle became SWAP Treasurer, and Beth Wimer was elected Secretary.

Gordon wrote in June/July, 1998 *Oakleaves*, "In many ways, SWAP has entered a new day. From our 98-99 Planning Meeting, the Board has begun to formulate goals and objectives ... Part of that vision includes:

- Construction of the Elfin Forest Boardwalk by year-end
- Training and recruitment of additional SWAP Board members
- Expanding educational opportunities at the Elfin Forest."

The Board's 1998-99 goals and objectives took longer to realize than planned, but were eventually completed.

Decisions about design, obtaining a Coastal Commission permit, and finding funding delayed the Elfin Forest boardwalk. Construction began in February of 1999, and the boardwalk was completed in November of that year. The official opening of the boardwalk took place the following Spring, with a celebration held at the 16th Street entrance.

Board members came and went during 1998 and 1999. At one time SWAP had a 13-member Board of Directors. Volunteer Coordinator Janice Verity supervised the creation of informational notebooks for each new and current board member. Janice also organized a very special Volunteer Recognition luncheon in Woodrat Hall (now called Rose's Grove) in June of 1998. Past SWAP President Rose Bowker was named SWAP Volunteer of the Decade for her volunteer leadership in securing preservation of the Elfin Forest.

Toward the end of 1998, Jan DiLeo became the County Parks Planner. From that time until the present, Jan has been an important influence on the Elfin Forest and SWAP. She coordinated the planning and building of the boardwalk, including finding funds to hire the California Conservation Corps to do the construction. In 2003, she coordinated an extensive biological study of the Elfin Forest that developed recommendations for continued maintenance of the Forest. Whenever Board or committee members had a question or problem, Jan was the go-to person at County Parks.

The 4-member Education Committee began doing school talks illustrated with slides created by past Board member Larry Grimes. They also worked on creating a docent program, and developed a teacher survey to learn what our local elementary teachers wanted in the way of topics for school walks in the Forest. Petra Clayton became the 3rd Saturday Walks Coordinator, a position that she holds to this day.

In the twenty years since 1998, SWAP has continued as the steward of the Elfin Forest. The SWAP Board membership has swelled and diminished. School walks have been given to many hundreds of children. Over 230 3rd Saturday nature walks have



*At a Volunteer Recognition Lunch held in the Elfin Forest in June, 1998, past president Rose Bowker (seated, center) was named SWAP Volunteer of the Decade. The presentation was made by past Development Coordinator Barbara Machado, standing. Photo (from the Aug/Sept 1998 *Oakleaves*) by Larry Grimes.*

been given, as well as walks for college classes and special groups like the ones reported in this issue. The boardwalk has had over 1000 of its planks replaced, and thousands of its deteriorating galvanized screws have been replaced with stainless steel screws. Weed Warriors and the CCC have removed most, but not all of the invasive plants from the center of the Forest. Native plants in the Forest have grown vigorously with less foot traffic and relatively few invasive plants holding them in check. The Elfin Forest has been stewarded well. It is clear that SWAP will continue into the future to care for the Forest on behalf of San Luis Obispo County Parks.



OAKLEAVES

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Text and Photo by Jean Wheeler, Ph. D.

California Towhees (*Melospiza crissalis*) are unusually large members of the family of American sparrows. Ground huggers, they are even larger than the Spotted Towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*, my article on that species is in our February/March issue 2017). About 8.5 to nearly 10 inches long, California Towhees are almost as large as American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*), in the thrush family. Most other species of sparrows we see in the Elfin Forest vary from only 4.5 to 6-7 inches in length.

While the Spotted Towhee is spectacularly colorful and prominently perches on the very tops of our Elfin Forest shrubs, the California Towhee is a plain brown bird with the short round wings and long tail of sparrow. It can often be seen scratching on the ground or jumping among the lower branches of our shrubs and trees in the Elfin Forest and in our backyards.

Cornell Lab of Ornithology amusingly says “in flight they look out of practice, using lots of wing power to travel short distances.” Invariably described as one of the plainest, dull brown birds we have, the overall color is grayish to dark brown. Some rusty tinges can usually be seen around the face and under the tail, and there is

a light buff or rusty-colored eye ring. Males and females look alike.

California Towhees are basically a chaparral species. They live as permanent residents (not migratory) in dense shrub areas and neighboring riparian woodlands in California, Baja California and Oregon as well as in nearby suburban gardens (including mine). Interestingly, they are quite at home with poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*), and many towhees build their nests in those plants and dine on their numerous white berries.

Nests are bulky cups low in shrubs, are about 8 inches in diameter, and are made by the female. Guarded aggressively against rival males by her mate, she uses twigs, bark, grasses and flowers with fine linings often including animal hair. She incubates usually 3 or 4 eggs for up to 2 weeks. Both parents feed the young, who may leave the nest in little more than a week after hatching, as yet unable to fly well and remaining with the parents for several more weeks. They’ll be driven off the territory when the next of 2 or 3 clutches per season hatches. Pairs may be mated for life.

These towhees are mainly ground foragers, scratching with beak, one foot, or jump scratching with both feet mostly for seeds. They also get some seeds and insects like caterpillars and beetles in low shrubs as well as some berries and small fruits, such as the afore-mentioned poison oak berries. They will scratch for seeds fallen under feeders around homes but rarely perch up on the feeder itself. Although the adult diet is very heavily seed oriented, the young are fed almost exclusively on insects.

Recent mitochondrial DNA studies indicate our species, formerly joined with Canyon Towhees (*M. fuscus*) of Arizona, is more closely related to Abert’s Towhee (*M. aberti*) also of Arizona. So the three are now considered distinct species in the same genus, all of them plain brown to grayish brown, often described as among the duller brown in color of birds we have.

Our California Towhee is, however, one of the easiest birds to see in our Elfin Forest and in our yards if we just take the time to listen for their sharp chipping call, and look down, not up, for a large stocky all brown bird scratching on the ground and hopping between low shrubs and the ground. Several at a time may be called a “tangle” or a “teapot” of towhees!

Education Notes

By Leslie Rotstein, Education Committee Co-Chair

New co-chair leaders of the Education Committee, Leslie Rotstein and Cheryl Dove, met to begin their journey of leadership. A discussion sprinkled with laughter and teaching stories proved that they were a perfect pair. Leslie and Cheryl share a similar teaching philosophy and they both loved the act of teaching.

Cheryl and Leslie decided that their first project would be to remove all the teaching materials that outgoing Chair, Pat Akey, had been graciously storing in her house. They corralled Pat Murray, who held the keys to the SWAP storage room and made their way to the Akey home. Pat and Dave Akey could be seen smiling as the last of the boxes left their home, giving them some much-needed square footage. We thank Pat for her years of service to SWAP as Education Chair.

Once at the storage unit, Leslie and Cheryl spent the afternoon culling through the many years of stored education materials. As they opened boxes, they found many gems such as, “El Moro Elfin Forest Coloring Book” with drawings by Katie Davis, Calligraphy by Lesa Smith and narrative by Rosemary Bowker.

Now that the materials are organized, the next step is to sit down and plan. Let the fun begin!

Common, Bush or Sticky Monkey Flower

By Dirk Walters, Ph.D.; Drawings by Bonnie Walters

(Ed. Note: Revised by Dr. Walters from June/July 1998 issue)

The bush monkey flower is one of the most common and obvious flowering shrubs all along our immediate Pacific coast. It is also one of the most common shrubs throughout the California floristic province that extends west of the crest of the Cascade, Sierra, and peninsular ranges from southern Oregon to northern Baja, California. In this county at least four more or less recognizable types are known. The one around the San Luis Obispo, Morro Bay and Arroyo Grande areas has flowers borne on long stalks (pedicels), shorter tubes, and is orange in color. *Mimulus* and/or *Diplacus aurantiacus* is the form Bonnie has drawn. I suspect it would make a great addition to any garden as it is tolerant of a wide range of exposure, moisture, and soil type.

Common names for this plant include common, bush or sticky monkey flower. Monkey flower comes from the observation that one can recognize the face of a (laughing) monkey in the spot pattern of the fused petals (corolla). I have to admit since coming to California, I have often looked for this 'face' and have yet to see it in any of the species I have observed. In an Internet search I found that others have had the same problem. One author even indicated that over-active imaginations may be the source of the name. The adjectives, common, bush, and sticky are all appropriate as each is descriptive of this monkey flower. It is the most common and widespread monkey flower in our area and the only one visible from the boardwalk in the Elfin Forest. Bush means that it is tall (up to 3 feet or 1 meter) and somewhat woody, i.e. a shrub or bush. 'Sticky' refers to trichomes (hairs) that cover the leaves. They have bulbous tips that break down into a sticky goo.

The scientific name does offer some confusion. *Aurantiacus* is generally no problem especially for plants growing here on the coast and in the Elfin Forest. Derived from New Latin, it means orange, the color of the corolla in our plants. But this species of monkey flower is extremely variable and changes color in different areas of its range. For example, it is mostly yellow in our county in the Santa Lucia Mountains and eastward.

The genus name is more confusing. Is it *Diplacus* or *Mimulus*? A little literature search on the Internet revealed there is no scientific consensus on this question so maybe a little history would be helpful. When I came to California in 1969, the main flora in use at the time was Munz and Keck, *A California Flora*. They placed ALL of the California monkey flowers into the single genus, *Mimulus*. By 1973, Dr. Hoover, in *The Vascular Plants of San Luis Obispo County, California*, placed the monkey flowers in two genera. He placed the woody ones in *Diplacus* and the herbaceous ones in *Mimulus*. The current botanical bible, *The Jepson Manual*, once again places all the monkey flowers in *Mimulus*.

It is now time for DNA to confuse the story. But before I go there, I need to also note that this genus has also switched botanical families. In older references, monkey flowers were in the very large and diverse figwort family (Scrophulariaceae). General consensus now places them in the family, Phrymaceae. This family has a worldwide distribution, but most of its genera are native to the Southern Hemisphere. North America has only a couple of genera in the family. California, however, has most of the species and they are ALL monkey flowers. The basis for this family switch is primarily DNA based sequence comparisons. While they were getting the data to justify the family switch they also discovered sequence inconsistencies within the genera as well as between them. One of these inconsistencies apparently led to the breakup of the genus *Mimulus* and/or *Diplacus*. Chloroplast DNA sequences indicated that *Mimulus/Diplacus* needed to be broken up into several genera. Most of the species (both herbaceous and woody), including ours, ended up in the genus *Diplacus*. *Mimulus*, according to that research, is reduced to seven species in North America with only two in California. The rest go to *Diplacus* based primarily on flower features and DNA sequence data. So our monkey flowers seem to be *Diplacus aurantiacus* at least for now. I noted a problem when I read the paper. It seems that DNA from chloroplasts indicates one relationship while nuclear DNA indicates another. Keep tuned.

When you go out to observe the flowers of the shrubby monkey flower, you may want to see it move. Most people know plants can move their leaves in response changing light conditions and that seeds and pollen move if wind, water or animals carry them. However, these types of movements are often so slow that most of us will never have actually seen them except in time lapse photography. In plants of this genus, the stigma (the end of the central bowling pin shaped structure, called the pistil or female organ) consists of two small flat plates. When the flower opens, the plates are spread apart exposing the lower part of the upper plate and the upper part of the lower plate. These two surfaces are the pollen receptive portions of the stigma. When pollen is deposited on one of these surfaces, the two plates move together relatively rapidly or 'slam' shut. This relatively rapid movement can be seen anytime by simulating a successful pollination: gently rub the stigmas with a pine needle, pencil point, or grass leaf and watch the stigmas close. If you return to the same flower after a few hours, the stigmas will have reopened, so no permanent damage will have been done.



Weed Warrior Report

By Yolanda Waddell and Vicky Johnsen

January 6th – Many Tasks, Much Accomplished

Although it was an overcast day, twelve diligent Weed Warriors woke up early and gave their Saturday morning to the Elfin Forest. Crews were formed to do boardwalk repair, erosion control and shrub trimming along the boardwalk and trails. Pete Sarafian was joined by Sharon Rooney for a special task of removing a huge agave from the edge of the Forest. Agave plants spread via runners, and the large agave had already sent out many pup plants.

Prisila and Rich Johnson saw to it that a good number of rusted boardwalk screws were replaced with stainless steel screws. Dean Thompson, Vicky Johnsen, Barrett Holland and Lannie Erickson did some expert shrub trimming. And Dave Bowlus, Barbara Rosenthal and Charlie Sitton did erosion control, making sure that the sand trails leading from the street ends were ready for the next rain. All, of course, enjoyed Ron Rasmussen's famous cookies at the end of the morning's work.

February 3rd – Trimming, Pulling, Repairing

Four delightful and energetic Cal Poly students joined our February work party: Thomas Dillon, Amanda Le, Savannah Silva and Brooke Thompson. Savannah and Brooke helped Vicky Johnsen with brush trimming along the 12th and 13th Street trails. Amanda and Thomas followed Pete Sarafian into an untraveled part of the Forest where Cape Ivy is thriving. They pulled the ivy out of Coast Live Oak trees and shrubs for later spraying.

Drew Bentz came prepared with his own cordless drill and tools to help Rich and Prisila Johnson with boardwalk plank repair and replacement of rusted screws. Lannie Erickson, our poetess laureate, helped with trail trimming. All enjoyed Ron Rasmussen's delicious cookies after a good morning's work. Thanks to all!



Weed Warrior Drew Bentz repaired a broken boardwalk toe rail during February's work party. Photo by Rich Johnson.



Pete Sarafian and Sharon Rooney cut back a large, invasive agave plant to prevent it from spreading more of the non-native species into the Elfin Forest. Photo by Ron Rasmussen.

Join First Saturday Work Parties

We invite you to join us on any first Saturday from 9 a.m. to noon at the north end of 15th Street in Los Osos to enjoy satisfying physical activity in fresh air amid lovely surroundings. Please dress for wind, fog, or sun. Layers work well. Long pants and long shirt sleeves are good. Sturdy shoes are a must. Take care not to park in front of driveways or mailboxes. To request more information, call (805) 528-0392.

Please Report Elfin Forest Sightings

Have you observed any unusual birds in the Elfin Forest? Mammals? Reptiles? Amphibians? Insects? Interesting activities or footprints of wildlife in our Elfin Forest? Unusual plants? Taken a good photo? Please report any interesting sightings to your Oakleaves editors at: oakleaf@elfin-forest.org for inclusion in future issues under "Elfin Forest Sightings." You can also leave a message on SWAP's answering machine, (805) 528-0392.

Let's All Pull Together

By Lannie Erickson

Another winter has near run out,
With longer days to be out and about.
Our Elfin Forest needs grooming for spring.
With fine folks to help, it's not a big thing.

With warm, sunny weather to help them get going,
A new crop of weeds is cheerfully growing.
So let's pitch in and rout them with all of our might,
To keep our fair forest a beautiful sight.

When all's said and done, we'll say it out loud,
'We're helpful and happy! We've done ourselves proud!'

Birders and Botanic Garden Docents Visit Elfin Forest

By Jean Wheeler

On February 8, docents for walks in San Luis Obispo Botanical Garden came on a field excursion to visit the Elfin Forest. The Garden exists to showcase plants native to the five Mediterranean Climate areas of the world, and to educate visitors about those vegetations. Our Elfin Forest is, of course, a marvelous example of such a native ecosystem in California. I was delighted with the response of my fellow Garden Docents to the excellent introduction our own talented SWAP Docent, Vicky Johnsen gave for this outing. She introduced many plants in our little wilderness, including several grown in the Garden, but many more species than the Garden has room for. The docents much enjoyed her emphasis on plant roles in feeding and housing bird and other animal life in our small wilderness ecosystem.

The very next day, February 9, I served as our docent for a group of Audubon birders from both northern and southern areas of our state. I had been advised they were interested in learning the habitats of our small wilderness area in the brief hour available rather than frantically seeking birds for their life lists. I focused on the coastal dune scrub, maritime chaparral, and live oak/morro manzanita habitats around the boardwalk. They were fascinated with the interactions between plants and our wildlife, especially oak gall nurseries for a tiny species of wasp and the high correlation known between presence of wood rat nests and high animal diversity in local ecosystems. They were so appreciative of what SWAP has accomplished to protect and restore this precious little ecosystem that several pulled \$20 bills out of their pockets to donate to our continued efforts.

Winter Bird Festival Attendees Visit Elfin Forest

SWAP Docent Vicky Johnsen was asked to lead a walk in the Elfin Forest on Sunday, January 14, for visiting birders who were attending the Morro Bay Winter Bird Festival. Seventeen interested birders came to learn about the Elfin Forest, and to spot a few of its resident birds. Vicky took the group to Rose's Grove and the smaller Dudleya Grove so they could see the ancient and twisting Coast Live Oaks in those groves. She had found a bushtit nest hanging over the boardwalk to show to them. As they were looking at the bushtit nest, a small flock of bushtits appeared to everyone's delight. Those who hadn't visited the Elfin Forest before were thrilled with the view from the Siena's View Overlook, with the sandspit, ocean and Morro Rock in the background and hundreds of shorebirds in the estuary before them.



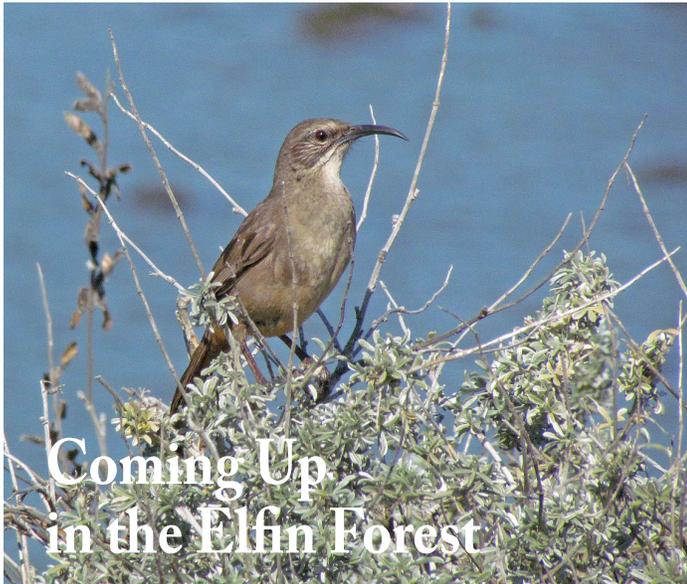
In Rose's Grove, Vicky Johnsen, standing at right, talked with the docents from the San Luis Obispo Botanic Garden about SWAP's efforts to protect the Coast Live Oaks. Photo by Jean Wheeler.

It is our task in our time
and in our generation,
to hand down undiminished to those
who come after us,
as was handed down to us by those
who went before,
the natural wealth and beauty which is ours.

~ John F. Kennedy ~



SWAP Docent Vicky Johnsen (at right) led 17 Winter Bird Festival attendees on a walk through the Elfin Forest in January. Photo by Loren Chipman.



California Thrasher

Text and Photo by Jean Wheeler

Our ceanothus (buckbrush) shrubs were covered with lots of buds again this autumn, ready to surround our boardwalk with their white to lilac blooms by the end of December, as usual. But then we had almost no rain in the last months of 2017, which should have been the beginning of our rainy season for this winter, and they responded by keeping virtually all of those buds tightly closed.

With a few very minimal misty rains in February, the many buds on our ceanothus plants finally began to open, more than two months later than in most years. Heavier rains are expected tonight as I write—March 1st is coming in with a somewhat lionish arrival—so we should have enough rain to keep that wall of flowering ceanothus shrubs surrounding our boardwalk into April this year.

The Morro Manzanitas are now covered with their tiny bell-like blossoms. This week I noticed many of the earliest bells have progressed to the “little apple” reddish fruits from which their Spanish common name is derived. So look for these tiny red “apples” in April until the birds have eaten them all.

The red trumpets of Fuchsia-flowered Gooseberries should continue to bloom into April and May. In these months many more flowers should join them in bloom—the yellows of Deerweed, Coastal Dudleya, and Suffrutescent Wallflowers; orange of Sticky Monkey-flowers and California Poppies; pink of Cobwebby Thistle; red of Cardinal Catch-fly; blues of Woolly Stars and Silver Dune Lupine; and Purple Nightshade. And these are only an outstanding few of the many species likely to show their colorful flowers in April and May, which should have the most copious and colorful flower display of this year.

April and May are also the two best months to look for “flying flowers” in the Elfin Forest. One of the most numerous is the Variable Checkerspot Butterfly. It looks brown to black with cream to light yellow rectangular spots.

Other butterflies to look for include the similar Gabb’s Checkerspot (checkered much more orange and cream with less brown-

black background than the Variable Checkerspot), the smaller green Coastal Bramble Hairstreak and Silvery Blue Butterflies, the large yellow and black Anise Swallowtail, the brownish Common Buckeye, and the colorful Painted Lady. The Moro Blue may be seen fluttering about the host for its caterpillars, the Silver Dune Lupines for which Bush Lupine Point is named.

While admiring butterflies and flowers from the boardwalk and sand trails, your eyes will no doubt also be attracted by the flight of avian residents. Most of our year-round birds are actively building nests or already raising young. Especially likely to be seen and heard are the bright blue California Scrub Jays, orange and black Spotted Towhees, chattering flocks of tiny fuzzy gray Bushtits and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, and similarly talkative little brown birds including several species of sparrows and wrens. Look for the California Towhee (see my featured story on page 4) scratching on the ground and jumping between low shrubs. The large brown bird with the big down-curved beak (pictured) is the California Thrasher. The fat gray and brown birds with head plumes are the state bird—California Quail.

Among avian arrivals in April or May from winter homes farther south are Warbling Vireos, Hooded Orioles, Black-headed Grosbeaks, and Yellow, Townsend’s, and Wilson’s Warblers.

Other residents especially active as summer approaches are Western Fence Lizards, Brush Rabbits, Ground Squirrels, and Coyotes.

What a colorful and exciting time to visit the sand trails and boardwalk of our small wilderness area!

Your dog is welcome, but only on a leash. The leash is required to protect our plants and wildlife from disturbance and to protect you and your dog from aggressive action by our coyote residents. They can get aggressive, especially in spring and summer, near canines they consider invasive and potentially harmful to their pups.

Celebrate Earth Day in the Elfin Forest

By Jean Wheeler

SWAP volunteers celebrate Earth Day year round by actively working to preserve our environment. Botany Professor Ed Bobich of Cal Poly Pomona praised the success of SWAP’s commitment, saying our Elfin Forest “has to be one of the most amazing and successful restoration projects in California and it makes me feel good knowing that the Elfin Forest is in such good hands. You have all preserved a small piece of what was likely a more widespread ecosystem in California.” We invite you to honor Earth Day by visiting the Elfin Forest and enjoying the results of our commitment.

The column “Coming Up in the Elfin Forest” in this and every issue of Oakleaves features native flowers and animals likely to be seen currently in our wild little patch of Earth. Also, take advantage of SWAP’s 3rd Saturday Walks (See page 9) and learn more about the natural wonders in the Elfin Forest.

We also encourage you to visit the **San Luis Obispo County Earth Day Festival** from 9 am to 5 pm on Saturday, April 21 at Laguna Lake Park in San Luis Obispo to learn more about Earth Day and other environmentally active organizations in our area. Look online at www.earthdayalliance.com for additional information.

WALKS in the ELFIN FOREST

April 21, 9:30 a.m. – Butterflies & Native Plants

In honor of California Native Plant Week, butterfly guru Pat Brown will introduce you to several native plants and talk about the butterflies that sip their nectar and the caterpillars that eat their leaves. Pat has photos of butterflies in all stages of development from eggs to mature butterflies, and will share them along with fascinating butterfly facts. She'll lead you to hangouts of Variable Checkerspot, Moro Blue, Swallowtail, Hairstreak and other butterflies that make the Elfin Forest their home. She will also share information about butterfly books, web sites and butterfly-related materials. She recommends that you bring a pair of close-focusing (5-10 ft.) binoculars.

May 19, 9:30 a.m. – Wildflower Walk

Dirk Walters will take us on a delightful tour of every blooming plant that is visible from the boardwalk in the Elfin Forest. There will be bright yellows Rush-roses, Deerweed, Golden Yarrow and of course California Poppies. White Popcorn flowers, Pearly everlasting and Yarrow plants are in abundance too, as well as pink Cobwebby Thistles and blue Wild Hyacinths. The Silver Dune Lupines at Bush Lupine Point should be covered with pale blue blossoms, and alive with honeybees and Moro Blue butterflies. Treat yourself to a springtime experience in Nature's own garden.

Walks in the Elfin Forest begin at times stated above at the north end (1100 block) of 15th Street off Santa Ysabel in Los Osos. Wear closed-toe shoes, long sleeves and pants to avoid poison oak and mosquitoes. Park carefully, avoiding driveways and mailboxes, and leave pets at home. The easy paced walks last 1-1/2 to 2 hours. For more information call (805) 528-0392.



Even with the extreme shortage of rain before Dennis Sheridan's annual Fungus Foray, he and his large following managed to find several species of mushrooms and other fungi, even at the culminating stop in Rose's Grove. Photo by Jean Wheeler.



John Roser displayed this wing saved from a deceased Brant as he talked about the migration of these splendid black geese and the history of their use of Morro Bay National Estuary, some as their winter residence and some as a stopover en route to winter destinations farther south. Photo by Petra Clayton.

13th Annual Cambria Wildflower Show – April 28-29

You are invited to see a display of fresh wildflowers collected from the Monterey County line to the Morro Bay Estuary and from the coastal bluffs to the ridge of the Santa Lucia Mountains. The 13th Annual Cambria Wildflower Show, presented by the Friends of the Fiscalini Ranch Preserve, will take place at the Vet's Hall, 1000 Main Street in Cambria.

The show will be open from noon to 5 p.m. on Saturday, April 29; and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sunday, April 30. An admission donation of \$3 is requested; students are free. For more information or to volunteer to help, call 927-2856 or e-mail ffrpcambria@sbcglobal.net.

Thinking of Switching to Online Oakleaves?

Tired of looking at that pile of newsletters and magazines waiting to be read? If you use your computer a lot, we encourage you to take a look at the online *Oakleaves* at www.elfin-forest.org. Being able to see the 20 or so photos in full color makes it a very attractive alternative to the black-and-white printed copy. If you miss an issue for some reason, it is there, waiting for you. Simply click on "Forest Library," then "Oakleaves Index" and finally the year and month of the issue that you want to read. Just e-mail us at oakleaf@elfin-forest.org with the subject: Switch me to online.

Thank You to Our Generous Members

Compiled by Betsy Kinter, SWAP Database Coordinator

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Reggie & Jessie Gaylord*

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DONATIONS:

Kaaren Perry
Docent Walk Birders
from the Audubon Society

**Thanks to those listed
above who donated more than
the \$25 (regular) or*

*\$15 (senior or student) membership dues.
The additional donations will be used for special
projects in the Elfin Forest.*

*If you recently sent a donation to SWAP and don't
see your name in this issue's New and Renewing
list, be assured that your gift will be acknowl-
edged in the next bimonthly issue. Gifts are pro-
cessed by two different volunteers before reaching
our editors, and newsletter copy deadline is one
month before the date of the issue.*

Photos From the Forest

Thanks to Rich and Prisila Johnson for these images of the Forest.



(above) Rich Johnson caught in his lens these starkly twisted dead branches that contrast with the lush landscape of the Elfin Forest, Morro Bay, and the State Park beyond.

(below) Prisila Johnson captured the start of spring with this photo of blooming Ceanothus.



Pink Flamingos – Really? In February, we were told that pink flamingos had been seen marching through the shrubs below the Bush Lupine Point overlook. Photographer Pat Brown took her camera to the Forest to check the report, and sure enough, 3 plastic pink flamingos had been planted in the bushes below Bush Lupine Point. She took the accompanying shot of someone's mischievous prank.



Elfin Forest Mural Print

Do you enjoy the mural by Barbara Rosenthal painted on the wall of the Rexall Drug Store in Los Osos? Get a signed full-color print (mounted on black foam core as shown) to hang on your wall or give as a gift (#3 below)!



SWAP Shoppers' Order Form

See Photos of All Items at www.elfin-forest.org

All Prices Include Sales Tax

1. MURAL SHIRTS

Mural design by artist Barbara Rosenthal on both front and back. Words on shirt: "El Moro Elfin Forest Natural Area" above mural and "Small Wilderness Area Preservation" and "Los Osos, California" below mural.

Circle Sizes:

- ___ Short Slv. T-Shirt (S, M, L, XL) @\$20.00 = \$___
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2. POCKET GUIDE

Useful 56-page guide to plants and animals of the Elfin Forest. Lists for mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, arthropods including moths and butterflies, gastropods, vascular plants, lichens, and mushrooms. Some with charts for seasonality, color and more.

___ @ \$3.00 = \$___

3. ELFIN FOREST MURAL PRINTS

Signed prints by artist Barbara Rosenthal, image size 4 1/2 x 16 1/2 in; mounted on foamcore

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4. ALPHABET BIRD BOOK

With clever verses and superb photos, this book is sure to please young and old.

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One size fits all caps with adjustable straps in back, 100% cotton. Two colors, forest green and maroon. Specify color when ordering.

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Flamingos in the Elfin Forest?! See page 10.

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Wanted - A Few Good People

Help SWAP support the Elfin Forest with just a few hours a month of your time.



Leave a message on SWAP's phone number 805-528-0392 if you might be able to volunteer for any of the following or would like more information.

Visit a Board Meeting on the second Monday of the month at 3 p.m. at the Community Room, Morro Shores Mobile Home Park, 633 Ramona Ave., Los Osos.

Join our Education and School Walks Committee. We need school walk docents and people to develop a good docent training program.

Become a Weed Warrior (see Saturday Work Parties notice on page 6) or greet and inform visitors as an Elfin Forest Ambassador.

Service to the community is a way to spread happiness and to be happy.

MEMBERSHIP FORM

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I want to help, please call me!

Memberships include a subscription to SWAP's bimonthly newsletter, *Oakleaves*.

Check here to receive the online version only.

All donations to SWAP are tax-deductible.

EVERY membership counts!

Make checks payable to: SWAP

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