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## Beyond beauty alone, Carr Ranch adds significant habitat to Lamorinda open space

By Sophie Braccini



Glen Lewis, left, guides the group through a new gate onto the Carr Ranch land. Photos Andy Scheck

The dedication of a new piece of land to open space preservation in perpetuity is a special moment that brings a lot of satisfaction to the hearts of those who have worked on the project, and those living nearby with a consciousness of what they owe to nature. Giving back to beauty and preserving it to future generations elevates the soul. This was indeed the mood of the celebration of the opening to the public of the Carr Ranch preserve in Moraga.

The celebration itself was a two-part event, due to the air's high fine particle content on Oct. 14 resulting from the then raging North Bay fires. The officials' discourses and presentations were still held that day at Rancho Laguna Park, while the first official walks were conducted on Nov. 11, exploring the unique beauty of this site.

The large wild expanse belonged to the Carr family, one of the rancher clans who once developed Moraga as an agricultural community. During the official ceremony,

Moraga Historical Society member Dave Trotter retraced the significance of the family and its land. Since these early days, the only inhabitants of Carr Ranch have been wildlife, with cows grazing peacefully.

According to Jake Schweitzer, wildlife biologist with Vollmar Natural Lands Consulting who accomplished John Muir Land Trust's Resource Area Report(s) for Carr Ranch, the property is not just any piece of land, it harbors unique ecosystems and natural plant and animal resources, and it also creates a complete watershed ensemble with neighboring properties belonging to East Bay Municipal Utility District. The agency donated to JMLT a significant portion of the agreed purchase price. That money comes from open space fees developers pay EBMUD when they develop other lands.

When Schweitzer investigated the conservation value of the ranch, he discovered that Carr Ranch is a particularly interesting site. It includes ridge tops in a zone that receives more precipitation than surrounding ridges. The biologist explains that it is located in a gap where the winds come through carrying higher precipitation. The result is the existence of the year-round productive Buckhorn Creek with a tall riparian corridor, and a wide variety of tree species providing a good wildlife habitat.

During the Nov. 11 hike, it took the group of about 40 walkers about an hour to reach the creek and the entrance of Carr Ranch. The hike started at Rancho Laguna Park, and up the Rocky Ridge EBMUD trail, from which the Carr Ranch loop trail branches off after 2.5 miles. The views and the lush vegetation along the creek provide a wonderful opportunity to communicate with nature and marvel over the beauty of the East Bay.

Vollmar Natural Lands conducted a live observation of the property, but also installed wildlife cameras that take pictures day and night when movement occurs. Many animal species were observed on the property, either in the riparian corridors, near the multiple springs that exist within Carr Ranch, or roaming the open expanses: mountain lions, Alameda whip snakes, American badgers, red legged frogs, California newts which Schweitzer says are an indication of good water quality, and western pond turtle, to mention some of the land wildlife besides all the species of birds such as woodpeckers, owls, quails, vultures, cranes, hawks or golden eagles to name a few.

On the Nov. 11 tour, birds were easier to spot than other wildlife. Walking Carr Ranch requires good stamina, or time, in order to climb the heights of the property. It took four hours for those who did the entire hike. They were rewarded by views of the San Mateo Bridge and the bay, the delta area and Benicia Bridge, Tilden Park, or Bollinger Canyon. They spotted numerous birds and a coyote leisurely inspecting his kingdom. The trail is now open to the public; an EBMUD trail permit is required to access the ranch, which can be purchased on the agency's web site.

JMLT has purchased over 3,000 acres in the East Bay, all dedicated to open space in perpetuity. As its executive director, Linus Eukel, explained, it takes years of patient negotiation with property owners to get a contract, then vigorous fundraising strategies to garner the price agreed upon. JMLT continues to sign new contracts, including with several local property owners, a rare opportunity that will have an enduring impact in Lamorinda. For more information and to make donations, visit [www.jmlt.org](http://www.jmlt.org).



A hiking map for the Carr Ranch loop trail can be found at [www.jmlt.org/downloads/JMLT Carr Ranch Trail Map.pdf](http://www.jmlt.org/downloads/JMLT_Carr_Ranch_Trail_Map.pdf).

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