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restore restory

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE CACHE CREEK NATURE PRESERVE

AUDIO TOUR INTERVIEW WITH

Ann Brice

STOP 1:

The Overlook



Stop 1: The Overlook

Can you describe where we are and what you see and feel around you?

We're standing at the overlook here at the Cache Creek Nature Preserve and we're looking out at the restored wetlands that not too many years ago was just a barren gravel pit that then was converted into a farming area and they grew crops in it for a number of years and when the Cache Creek Conservancy was formed, we began – well that was at the end of my time there, but it was begun; the transformation into a wetlands and the area was sculpted out and now you see a series of little islands, what I call loafing islands for birds and all sorts of native plants have been planted and I remember when some of them were planted, especially on the other side. Kids came out from nearby schools to help us. It's fun to see how it's all grown up.

What do you see and what is it like?

We're standing at the overlook for the wetlands at the Cache Creek Nature Preserve and I'm looking out at a series of little islands that have been built up to offer protection for the birds and possible sites for them to nest. Nobody's nesting at this time of year. We're doing this in the late fall, but I'm hearing birds and I just saw a Pied-billed Grebe dive under and we can hear the White-crowned Sparrows have arrived and I hear them in the bushes. It's a beautiful afternoon and the leaves are turning on some of the plants and trees, many of which were planted certainly just in the last ten years. They're looking wonderful.

Can you point out some of the flora and fauna around us?

As I look around, it's fun to take a look and see how everything's grown up. Certainly there're lots of tulles that are around each of the islands and around the edge of the water and a couple of species of willows that have gotten nice and big that are right at the edge of the water. They like to have their feet wet and different native bushes that have grown up too. I see coyote bush and I'm sure there're a lot more that are farther over because I was involved on the other side when kids came and planted a series of native grasses, different rushes and grasses. Everything's looking very healthy.

Tell me about the birds that use this wetlands.

Right now I'm not seeing many birds in the water. I did just watch a Pied-billed Grebe dive under and he's probably here most of the year I would guess. I know that there are often Canada geese here and for better or worse, some of them stay year-round now because they find a place like this to be a wonderful spot to just stay. Some of the fall migrant birds have come through. The White-crowned Sparrows we've been hearing just arrived in the last few weeks.

Now comes a really easy question. Tell me your name and your occupation.

My name Ann Brice and currently I'm a Co-Executive Director at the Yolo Basin Foundation in Davis.

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Can you tell me your name and your background and your training?

My name is Ann Brice and I have a PhD in ecology from UC Davis and over the years I've worked mainly for non-profits. That's why I went to graduate school in the first place because I wanted to learn more about ecology but I also have always wanted to run a non-profit and merge science and non-profit management.

How long you've been involved in doing ecology work here in Yolo County?

I started here at Cache Creek Conservancy in the mid-1990s. I was the first executive director and we started the organization from scratch then.

Before that I had been working out of the country and I'm really a bird specialist. I spent several years studying parrots in Guatemala and before that had done my dissertation on hummingbirds.

So starting with the Conservancy I began working with native species and local species here in Yolo County and when I left the Conservancy in, I think it was 1999, I worked on my own for a while and then I moved onto Yolo Basin Foundation where I've been for the last ten years.

Can you give me a nutshell description of what ecology is?

Ecology is the study of living systems and how they work together. It's not just the study of birds, which is one of my interests, but it's the study of birds in their habitat and how it all relates.

There's a wonderful sound in the background. I imagine that's the Pied-billed Grebe. I don't know if you can pick that up.

What do ecologists do?

Well, the beauty of ecology is it's very wide-ranging and at UC Davis, which has one of the top ecology graduate programs in the country, it's wonderful that you can study almost anything. When I was a graduate student, I was looking at protein nutrition in hummingbirds. It was a very specific thing, but you can also look at any level from micro and molecular all the way up to whole ecosystems. So you name it, you can do it under the broad rubric of ecology.

Do you remember the moment you thought, "I'm going to be an ecologist"?

Honestly, no. My interest when I went back to graduate school was birds and I was housed in the Avian Science Department at UC Davis and then I decided to stay on for a PhD in ecology. By then I began to learn more about ecology and I just got more interested in it as a topic, but it wasn't something that I've wanted to do since I was a ten year old. That's the benefit of going to a wonderful university and learning completely new things and what you can do with them.

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Since then, what have you come to love about ecology?

Well I guess I'd have to say what I love about ecology is I love nature and I love being outside and I love introducing children to the outdoors and watching their natural curiosity grow. And where I work now, our main focus is environmental education and science education and we really feel that we're helping create the future stewards of the environment and that's what's most important to me.

Can you tell me your name and your expertise?

My name is Ann Brice. My expertise is I have a PhD in ecology. At the present time I'm co-running a non-profit organization; Yolo Basin Foundation, which is dedicated to wetlands education and conservation.

What are some of the different organizations that you've been involved with in Yolo County doing ecological work?

I've been involved with several organizations as an employee and as a volunteer. I knew when I finished graduate school that I wanted to be involved in running a non-profit organization and I started with Cache Creek Conservancy in the mid-1990s. I was there at the very beginning and was the only employee and at the same time I was on the board of directors of Putah Creek Council in Davis and involved with creek issues at that end of the county. When I left Cache Creek Conservancy, I went to Yolo Basin Foundation and I've stayed there, as I said, and I'm also on the board of directors of the Yolo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District and we do the irrigation water for most of the county and that involves Cache Creek, so I've come back to Cache Creek in that sense.

Can you give me a nutshell description of what ecology is?

That's a big – the question of what ecology is a really big question. For me ecology is sort of the study of all living things, but all living things in their environment. It's not living things by themselves. It's more than the biology of the organism. It's how it fits into its environment and how it deals with other organisms and I've chosen, as an ecologist, to look at it on a pretty broad level. Although my passion is birds, I focus more on whole ecosystems in my work. I have friends at UC Davis who are looking at it on a very micro level; just studying parasites and even on a molecular level. So it's a very broad field.

What do you love so much about birds?

I've always really liked birds. Everybody has something that they have a passion about, and for years before I went back to graduate school I was involved in wildlife rehabilitation programs; starting those in different places and editing newsletters about wildlife rehabilitation and I guess now, with the wisdom of many years of study, I'm not sure that rehabilitation of an individual animal really does that much on a population level, but it shows a commitment to protecting wildlife and it makes people feel better, so I like that even though I'm not personally involved in that anymore. But that was the impetus that got me back to graduate school to want to learn more about birds.

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What motivates you to protect wildlife?

What motivates me about wildlife – it's an interesting question because for years I was in the people field and trying to help people with problems and I just gradually transitioned to feeling that animals needed help and their environments needed help so somehow it just evolved into a concern for animals and their habitat.

And then I've gone back a little, because I'm very involved in environmental and science education now in my current job, that's what we do every day; we have thousands of children a year that come out to learn about wetlands and how to protect them and I feel that that's important work.

What's your favorite part about doing ecology and preserving and protecting wildlife?

I guess for me the most important and thus my favorite aspect of being an ecologist at this point is sharing what I've learned with younger people, with children and getting them excited about protecting the environment.

We deal with a lot of children from the Sacramento urban areas who've never been out to a wild place and whether it's the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area or the Cache Creek Nature Preserve, it just opens kids' eyes to see what's out here and it's a wonderful thing and if we can get them more than once, it's more than doubly wonderful.

In general, what do ecologists do?

Ecology is such a broad field that you see ecologists doing a huge array of things. It's always through the eyes of ecologists looking at what makes the system work, but it can be anything from, as I said, being a parasitologist looking at how a parasite lives in a host animal to studying entire ecosystems and how they work or how they should work if they're not working that well anymore and what can be done about it. So there's something for everybody in ecology.

Can you tell me about the first time you came to this land that is now a preserve? What brought you here? What were you doing?

Well I was asked if I would be interested in helping start the Cache Creek Conservancy and protecting the lower 15 miles of Cache Creek after years of gravel mining and a lot of destruction of the creek itself. The miners really wanted to do something to help the creek and so they funded this project.

And when I first came out, it looked sort of like a moonscape to me. You know, if you look at certain times of year when there's not much water flowing and a lot of exposed sandbars and it just didn't look very inviting and I think a really seminal moment for me was when I was looking at that. I was standing at the bridge at 94 B trying to decide if I really wanted to get into this job and an osprey flew over which is a beautiful raptor that fishes in the creek and swoops down and grabs fish and I thought, if he can still be here and if he thinks the fish are edible, you know maybe this place has some promise and that was an important moment for me.

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How did that visit lead to your work here?

Well my excitement about seeing the osprey led me to say yes to taking the job and then when Cache Creek Conservancy first started, the nature preserve wasn't here. Teichert hadn't donated the land yet and in fact we worked out of a little building on my property, which is just a couple miles away. I should say I did. It was a one person position.

And because I had a background in environmental involvement I knew a lot of people and could kind of introduce the concept of the Cache Creek Conservancy to the environmental community and the educational community so I was probably a good person to start things off.

Do you live on this creek?

I live about three miles south of Cache Creek so unfortunately I'm not right on the creek. I'm right on the north fork of Willow Slough, which unfortunately has been completely channelized and is quite uninteresting now, but I feel that I'm close. Cache Creek is my creek. It's the closest creek and I feel like it's mine in a certain way.

What got you to feel such a bond with Cache Creek?

After I worked at Cache Creek Conservancy for several years and during those early years before the Nature Preserve was here, I felt very strongly that our mandate was to work up and down this lower 15 miles and look at different projects for restoration. So I worked in several different areas doing a variety of restoration projects; everything from putting giant rice straw bales in the creek to try to shore up a bank that was eroding to bringing kids out to plant oaks and other native trees much farther down the creek in an old gravel mining pit. So it was fun because there was a lot of variety and we were trying a lot of different things.

What do you think most people don't know about the preserve in terms of its ecology?

One thing about the Cache Creek Nature Preserve which came into its full glory after I was no longer executive director is it's still a fairly well-kept secret that it's here and some of that's on purpose I'm sure because when Teichert gave the land, they were really committing to having it be open space and allowing the wildlife to come back and not having it overrun with people all the time. So the Conservancy has been pretty conservative about when people come out and how many kids come out at a time and things like that, which is definitely good for the wildlife. The other side of that is there's still a lot of people that don't know it's here or don't know that they can come in.

How would you describe the preserve to a friend?

I would describe the Cache Creek Nature Preserve to a friend as a wonderful place to visit. It has a variety of habitats in a relatively small area. I would talk about the wetlands because a lot of work has been put into restoring that and it's fun to see it mature. Cache Creek at this spot, the riparian area, is very interesting to look at and spend time along and the birding is good here.

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I think the nature preserve also represents a wonderful partnership with the aggregate companies and agriculture. It was farmers that were here and farming families that have helped.

And when I looked at the October Fest dinner that the conservancy put on, it was a lot of the community members who were here, so they definitely consider this theirs now.

And it's just a wonderful place to get away. It's so close to Woodland yet it's wild and feels good and you can – if you're allowed to walk around, you can have a wonderful peaceful afternoon.

Lovely.