

restore restory

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE CACHE CREEK NATURE PRESERVE

A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT OF



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AUDIO TOUR INTERVIEW WITH

Ann Brice

STOP 4:

Oak Savannah



Stop 4: Oak Savannah

Okay so, where are we now and what are some of the trees and shrubs and things you see around you?

Well this is an interesting area and really this is completely new to me. This has all been done since I worked here and it's very pleasant. It's almost like a park-like atmosphere directly in front of me as I sit on this bench.

There have been lots of nice native plants planted and I still see they're being watered and taken care of to get them established. The deer grass and muhlenbergia and there's some coffee berry and different low shrubs that seem to be doing really well and it's resulted in a nice open area here with a path so people can come up here and be kind of high up and enjoy looking down over towards the creek and then over into some of these low lying areas that have been left completely natural and wild.

You can go sort of look over the edge into that area that I don't know what it's called or if it has a name, but it's wonderful because it's completely wild and tangled and has berries and I see a – sitting here a big tree that's dead that has provided wonderful snags for birds. There was a raptor there when we first came up and just a variety of other trees that are growing up. That has to be a wonderful habitat for all sorts of critters down there, mammals as well as birds.

I've heard that this area is one of the few remaining oak savannah's along Cache Creek. Can you talk about what an oak savannah is and why it's so cool?

I also see sitting here the wonderful and predominant valley oaks that are straight ahead of me and they're hundreds of years old and they frame the whole landscape where we're sitting and a valley oak likes to be close to water, but not too close, but you see them in the upland areas away from the creek and obviously these have done really well. There also is a slew that runs by them that probably helped give them moisture when they were really young, but this is a precious site to have this many mature oaks and to see that they're still doing well. It really makes it pleasant and it also helps protect the whole, from where we're sitting, it protects you and keeps you feeling that you're in a wilder place and not quite as close to farming and other signs of civilization because they provide a backdrop for this whole wonderful scene sitting here.

What role do oak trees play? Do they play some special role in the habitat?

Well a mature oak just provides an incredibly diverse habitat for a huge diversity of species of birds and mammals and reptiles because they are so big and as they get older, I can see one from where I'm sitting, they provide cavities for animals that open up on some of the dead and dying limbs and they provide wonderful nesting habitats in the forks of their branches for various birds and they bring in a variety of birds and then other critters come to hunt those birds and it just provides its own little microcosm. I mean an oak tree by itself is a wonderful habitat on its own.

Also the dead oaks are still home for woodpeckers and just a variety of cavity nesters; swallows, blue birds come down this far. There's lots going on in an oak tree.

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And how about grasslands? I know that beyond here are all these grasslands. Can you talk about what grasslands are and maybe the role they play?

Yeah, there is a nice grasslands here. I'm not sure that historically, I'm guessing that a lot of that area would have been riparian hundreds of years ago because it's so close to the creek, but it probably had livestock on it and opened it up and sort of turned it into a grassland.

And now I know that there's been work on restoring with several different species of native grasses and I think it's been pretty successful and it's just another habitat in this relatively small nature preserve to talk about and teach people about that grasslands were a part of, historically of California and certainly when the first livestock came, it was a wonderful place for them to graze and as we were walking up here from the creek, we just saw four deer and they certainly would enjoy getting out there when it's safe to do it.

Is it unique to have so many different habitats in such a small patch of land? We've talked about wetlands and riparian forests and oak woodlands and grasslands. I mean is that unusual?

I think it's especially unusual given how much of our native habitat has been degraded to find such a rich spot as this that – where the nature preserve is. It's a wonderful treat because again, I often come back to teaching kids about wild places and why they're important and just within a relatively few acres here we have four or five different habitats that are wonderful. Even if they're small or even if they may not be completely natural, they're wonderful teaching areas for children to learn about what ecology is all about and what habitats are possible in this area.

Could you name the habitats?

The Cache Creek Nature Preserve is only around 130 acres and within that, I mean let me try to think of the various habitats that we have. We have certainly the wetlands is wonderful and prevalent and the creek with its in-creek habitat and then the riparian or shoreline creek-side habitat is right there with so many things to see and talk about and now we're up in an area where, from where we're sitting in this open space, we can see the wonderful oak woodlands and I guess you would actually call this area – it's becoming an oak woodland again; there's great old oaks. And then beyond that is a grasslands which is yet another unique habitat type. So it's – this is pretty rich in diversity of habitats in a small area. That's what makes it a perfect teaching lab.

What would you say to kids to get them excited about learning about oaks or grasslands? What's so cool about those habitats? Why are they important?

Well with the oaks especially, I remember when I used to work with younger children, there's a wonderful book that's all about an oak and who lives in an oak tree, from the squirrel to the various birds and it just goes on and on in getting the kids involved and thinking who might live there and why they would live there. I think it's pretty easy when you look at this tree and you tell a kid that's its hundreds of years old, if that means something to a child that it's so old, but to think about that just has to give them a different perspective on life.

Oak Savannah, continued (p.3 of 4)

Here goes a California quail running right in front of us. This is a nice habitat for the quail.

It's – I think especially the oaks are just amazing and the grasslands beyond that probably I think kids can relate to grasslands a little more because it feels slightly less wild so maybe they can learn a little bit about grasslands in the olden times and the animals we might have expected to see at that time and what we might still see. It would interest them. Yeah.

Okay. What was this area like when you first started working here?

When I was working for Cache Creek Conservancy and Tiechert, the mining company that had owned this property offered it to us, we were not so focused on this side of the property.

Oh, there goes a hummingbird.

I remember coming out here and thinking that it was – it just didn't look so good. The grasslands had so many non-native species in it and it was all overgrown and brushy and a lot of work has been done in that area.

And the area where we're sitting now on the benches has been – it looks like to me it's been opened up some and cleared out and then replanted to give the natives a chance to get in and it's provided a really nice open field.

What do you think about the change?

I like the change that I see here. I'm really impressed with everything that's been done and it's just provided a wonderful place for school kids to come certainly, but also on the weekends when – I think once a month that the nature preserve's open, families should be out here with their kids enjoying this. It's so easy to get here and it has so much to offer.

My second to last question is, just looking around and taking this all in as an ecologist, what do you appreciate the most about where we're at now?

You mean at this stage or in this particular area?

Yes. As an ecologist, what do you like most about this place?

For me personally as an ecologist sitting here, what I like most are the wonderful old oak trees and seeing that they've been able to survive and no one cut them down and now they're protected of course.

And I like, just within my view here, I see these nice healthy native plants that have been planted and they're being watered and nurtured and will be for a few years until they're really established on their own.

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And but I like to be able to peek just beyond that and look down into the slew, the grotto area, where it's just kind of wild and crazy. I mean I see a non-native there, the tobacco bush, the tree tobacco, but that really attracts hummingbirds and it's not – among the non-natives it's not as aggressive as some and I've never felt as unkindly towards it and I'm sort of happy to see it there and I did just see a hummingbird fly by a minute ago.

But there's lots of varied habitats down there that is a little less organized than what we see right here when we sit on the bench and I like all of it because it's diverse. Each area is slightly different.

It's beautiful.