

Cows and Creeks

Rivers to Ridges restores Jordan Creek

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Jordan Creek runs through the Mattson family's land at Polyrock Ranch. The creek is located in the out in the open hills of southwest Eugene, in the Coyote Creek sub-basin of the Long Tom Watershed. The creek is symbolic of the Rivers to Ridges (R2R) partnership, a collaboration of public and private entities working together to acquire and manage natural open spaces in and around Eugene. While cattle can damage streams, and ranchers and environmentalists are often portrayed as at odds with one another, the story of the restoration of Coyote Creek is one of collaboration.

"My family has always been interested in stewardship of the land and conservation," ranch owner Deborah Mattson says.

"It goes in line with our family values." Polyrock Ranch has been in operation, in the cattle industry, for about 31 years. In restoring Jordan Creek, R2R partners Long Tom Watershed Council (LTWC) and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) worked together with the Mattson family to address the health of this watery ecosystem and its greater contribution to its surroundings.

The Mattson family regularly allows watershed council members to access habitats on their land that are critical to a healthy watershed system to test environmental quality factors that contribute to both environmental and human health. "We bring a private lands perspective to the R2R partnership," says Dana Dedrick, watershed coordinator and executive director at LTWC. And, she says, they bring private-land conservation accomplishments that are a necessary complement to those achieved on public lands.

"I met Cindy almost 10 years ago," Mattson says. LTWC Restoration Team Director Cindy Thieman would come out to the ranch to do temperature analysis of Coyote and Jordan Creek, both of which run through the Mattsons' property. "It just kind of evolved and got started from there," Mattson says.

They started by fencing off the creek, Mattson says, to get the cattle out of the water. "The immediate change in the water was just tremendous," she says, "It went from icky muddy green to nice clean cool streamy looking water, right off the bat." By keeping the cows from defecating in the stream, their fields could retain the nutrients important to the local ecosystem cycles.

"You can see the effects of grazing," says Thieman, referring to a photo of Jordan Creek before the ranch installed fencing in 2007. "Animals definitely keep things cropped pretty close." By keeping the cow's hooves out of the stream, bank stability improved and native vegetation repopulated the area, both naturally and through management and planting efforts made by the watershed council. Pointing out what she called a "series of riffles and pools" on a section of Jordan Creek, Thieman explains about a section they re-vegetated: "We put erosion fabric on the banks and native grass seed underneath it to help stabilize everything" she says. Without the stabilization, she says, the creek would have washed out, especially in the winter.

But thanks to managing the habitat in a way that allows for the channel to hold together while avoiding impact from livestock, and importing gravel — a key habitat feature for cutthroat trout — the rehabilitated section could remain in place and continue to serve.

LTWC worked on many improvements to the two streams located on the 440-acre ranch over years. On Coyote Creek and, more recently Jordan Creek, they did extensive work to enhance fish passage, improving ecosystem fluidity by opening up clogged waterways. They removed culverts and replaced them with solutions including "fish-friendly culverts" that matched the width of the

stream which allowed water to move through easily “In the past, you use the smallest culvert you can get away with,” says Karen Han of ODFW, “and it didn’t just cause problems for fish passage, it caused problems for the whole hydrology of the creek.”

According to LTWC’s report, by unblocking the streams on the Polyrock Ranch property, fish populations can now access an additional 46 miles of habitat on Coyote Creek.

But getting to this point wasn’t easy. Funding for these kinds of private land operations can be hard to come by. “We have to be really effective with public funding and with grant funding because there’s never enough to go around and we have to match our local needs to state and private funding priorities,” Dedrick says. But by being economical in obtaining resources and staying determined through times of limited support, LTWC has been able to obtain its goals along with the help of the Mattson family, volunteers and ODFW to help the job get done. “It’s been a saga,” Theiman says.

The key was the habitat that was being rehabilitated and reopened. “Jordan Creek is one of three tributaries that are coming in from the Coast Range into Coyote Creek that actually provide cold water habitat. It’s really rare,” Theiman says. “The fact that we had cold water like that that met the state standard all summer long, there’s just not that many sites in the entire Long Tom that we’ve monitored that are that cold,” she says, “and so we wanted to bring that cold water all the way down through Jordan Creek and down Coyote Creek and open up all that good habitat that was upstream; it was a big priority for us.”

Reconnecting this cooler water source to the Coyote Creek drainage gives species like the cutthroat trout back the kind of habitat that so closely resembles healthy ecosystems of the past. “We were pulling out really big cutthroat from this creek in August,” Thieman says. Large fish weren’t thought to reside here, she says, but having determined their presence and implemented key improvements such as importing gravel into this section of the system, “we might actually get some trout spawning here.”

Through the kind of intensive, hands-on work provided by members of Rivers to Ridges collaborating with each other and with private landowners, more spaces like these are being identified and put under management for the benefit of humans and wildlife. And it’s because of the expertise that organizations bring to the table that work can be done to most efficiently determine the best solution for the land. The kind of the work they’ve done, Theiman says, has been “invaluable in assessing the big picture in terms of fish passage and not doing it in a patchwork. We’re trying to be really systematic and we’ve had good luck.”

The partners of Rivers to Ridges continue to carry on work they’ve done with thoughts of what’s best for the land on multiple levels. “We’re not suppose to wait until the crisis moment to do anything,” Dedrick says. “The whole point is backing up.” By considering not just the one species when it’s at the critical moment, groups like these and other Rivers to Ridges partners are putting in the time and effort to combat the problem together.

About the Author »

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Dana Dedrick, LTWC · a year ago

Thanks for the great article, and yes the Mattsons were wonderful to work with. Check out their PolyRock Ranch online if you are interested. Just wanted to clarify from the lead organization on the project, Long Tom Watershed Council (LTWC), that we did not plant horsetail, but instead a range of native riparian shrubs and trees that are starting to take off, and that we are currently helping to steward with water and mulch until they are ready to grow on their own. LTWC focuses our work on restoration and education. Thanks to everyone out there who participates in their local watershed council!

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The Mattson family sure sounds like very nice people cooperating like that. Many more of that kind of nature loving folks, please! It was indeed a lovely story.

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The Author's Proud Father · a year ago

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