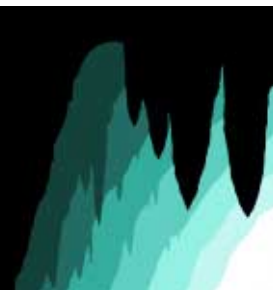


Western Cave Conservancy

Protecting the West's Last Frontier

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A New Era for Windeler Cave

WCC signs an MOU with the Stanislaus National Forest

by Joel Despain

Good News! The WCC has taken over management of Windeler Cave under a new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Stanislaus National Forest, Mi-Wuk Ranger District. Work to re-gate the cave and reopen it has begun. This is going to be a significant and challenging project for the WCC and we look forward to the assistance and support of Western cavers.

Windeler is a delicate and sensitive cave with a unique species, outstanding cave formations, and an underground stream that has been carefully protected for decades by dedicated Diablo Grotto cavers to whom we all owe a debt of thanks. The WCC will continue with and build upon the history of protecting this resource, while allowing experienced and cautious cavers opportunities to see and enjoy this very special place. There is restoration work to do, and we expect all future trips to be work trips, where volunteers clean the cave while enjoying its sights.

To accomplish protection of the cave the WCC has a great deal of work to do and funds to raise! First and foremost, it is imperative that the cave be protected by a strong and secure cave gate system. Luckily for the WCC and the cave, Diablo Grotto cavers have had a significant head start on this challenge, and they are actively working on the project now. Funds have been raised for a surveillance system for the gate and the WCC is working with United States Forest Service (USFS) staff on the management of the selected system. Also on the list of Windeler tasks is beefing-up the existing road gate. The Forest Service has taken this



Photo: Bill Frantz

Some of the many beautiful speleothems found in Windeler Cave.

on, and new locks and a promise to reset the gate have come forth. Also to be done by the USFS will be the construction of a dirt and rock road barricade at the end of the construction work. This work will likely take place on a series of weekends over the next year. We may need your help. This could be your chance to do work on something very positive for cave conservation and management!

Administrative measures also must be taken to protect the cave. These include recruiting local cavers to check on the security systems regularly, creating a fair but strict plan for access, and developing a good working relationship with the Stanislaus National Forest to encourage their assistance with the work ahead and with the long-term monitoring of the cave. This will all come together with the WCC Stewardship Committee's development of a management plan for the cave. In addition, a stewardship subcommittee has been created to manage the cave into

the future. This subcommittee will include a cave steward for the property, people who have experience with the cave and its protection, local cavers, and WCC members and staff.

Watch for announcements of work weekends and chances to visit Windeler Cave in the future.

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Strange Things are Afoot!

Work Progresses at the Weller Natural Preserve

Since the very first day of 2007, small groups of volunteers have participated in frequent work trips at the Weller Natural Preserve. The following volunteers have been working on cave survey, property line survey, brush clearing for fire prevention, Scotch Broom control, and biological inventory: Rolf Aalbu, Denise Aalbu, Tracy Audisio, Kip Baumann, Scott Bellows, Ron Davis, Jeff Fitzwater, John Gardner, Tom Grundy, Dale Hartwig, Sherry Hartwig, Greg Wilson-Hartwig, Jerald Johnson, Matthew Leissring, Heather McDonald, Bill Papke, Marianne Russo, Rich Sundquist, and Cathy Weibel.

Cave Survey and Mapping

Volunteers have put in many hours working toward finishing the map of Rippled Cave. The first few trips of the year were primarily concerned with this task. Several areas had been inadequately sketched. They needed re-doing in order to complete the map. The first task was to relocate fifteen-year-old stations, followed by a trip throughout the cave to tackle minor discrepancies in the notes. The Breakdown Maze off the main passage, the Lower, Middle, and Upper Balconies, and the Confusion Room, a nasty bit of business on the



Tom Grundy takes a compass reading for the Rippled Cave survey.

way to Cinderella's Closet, all had to be resurveyed and sketched. These daunting tasks took several trips. New exploration, survey, and mapping included a high lead that the mapper, Rich Sundquist, had only recently learned about, and a tight lead that turned out to go back to a known area. Marianne and Rich have nearly completed a profile of the cave. Undoubtedly, there will be a few more areas of cleanup, but most of the important survey and sketching has been done now. Hopefully, we will soon see a published map of Rippled Cave.

Property Line Survey

Since the end of January, a concerted effort has been directed towards determining, clearing, and marking the western boundary of the Weller Natural Preserve. Preliminary work on

determining the boundary included following an old barbed wire fence thought to be on the property line (completely inaccurate), and using a Suunto compass to survey through dense brush, and marking the line with flagging (surprisingly close). It turns out that the fence, probably installed by the people who owned the property before the Wellers, was lined up on magnetic north. The property line is on true north. The brush that impaired the Suunto surveys had affected their morale

more than the accuracy of their survey. Thus it was decided that since a firebreak needed to be cut along the property line anyway, clearing the brush would maximize line of sight, allowing the use of a surveyor's transit and stadia rod.



Photo: Jerald Johnson



Photo: Jerald Johnson



Jerry uses the transit to locate the western boundary of the Weller Natural Preserve.

This task ended up taking quite a few work days. Jerry, Heather, Matt, and Dale went back and forth several times

surveying and clearing brush, narrowing the survey error each time until the line could be traced for hundreds of feet by eye and was as accurate as possible. The four of them, along with Sherry, Greg, Rolf, Rich, and Marianne cut the

ever-widening firebreak along the route, burning the cuttings on days allowed. The western boundary is now within a few inches of being completely accurate, and is marked with 15 white-topped green T-posts, placed at 100-foot intervals, with small property boundary line signs attached to them.

Brush Clearing for Fire Prevention

WCC representatives had met with the CDF fire captain from the Sutter Hill station to find out how to reduce the fire hazard at the Weller Natural Preserve. After a walking tour of the property, the captain gave his recommendations for a fire safety plan. Certain areas of the property contained a dangerous amount of concentrated brush, especially Manzanita, which,

on steep south-facing slopes and ridge-tops could create a lethal fire hazard. Reduction of these brush concentrations and the creation of good fuel breaks were the first priorities. The

next most important area of concern is the corridor along Soke Springs Ranch

Road. Heavy vegetation right along the road can become a death trap for residents trying to escape a fire (The worst

portion of this corridor contained a dense concentration of Scotch Broom, a highly flammable species). While other areas of the property on north or east facing slopes and in drainage bottoms were less fire prone, the fire captain did recommend thinning of un-

healthy, stunted trees and dead limbs. These "ladder fuels" can carry flames up into the canopies of mature trees, resulting in a total loss and presenting a hazard to homes and lives. Thus, a plan was laid out for selective brush removal. A burn permit for the year was secured, and work began on these areas.

The first priority was the western boundary of the preserve, which was being cleared for survey anyway. A firebreak needed to be cut along that boundary line. The Weller Preserve is some fifteen acres in an irregular and elongated con-

figuration. The western and northern boundaries, in particular, extend for

more than a thousand feet each, and were not marked or fenced. The neighbors to the north had partially cleared their land, so there a fire break exists, but to the west was an uninterrupted area of Manzanita, Madrone, oak, pine, Toyon, and Poison Oak, much of which was small, unthinned, and partially dead.

Brush clearing has taken several trips, and there is still a lot more to do. Thanks to the efforts of our volunteers, it is now very easy to walk from one end of the property to the other without crawling or getting poison oak. Fire control clearing has begun in other high priority areas as well: near the building, along the southern slope near the cave, and in the creek bed to the north. In the clearings,

individual trees and shrubs have been set aside for protection and there are many young specimens that will now thrive in the sun.

WCC volunteer John Gardner has

a heavy-duty chipper shredder, and in April of this year, a group of volunteers helped him try it out. It should be an effective way to dispose of cuttings once it is too hot and dry to burn.

While our concerns about fire safety are certainly valid, it is important to note here that the WCC has no intention of removing all brush everywhere on the property. Our goal is to balance fire prevention efforts with the maintenance of good habitat for wildlife and our desire to foster native plant species. Ultimately, we would like to bring the property back to a condition that would have been common for the area before the effects of

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Marianne cuts up Manzanita branches that are too large for loppers.



Dale tends a burning pile of cut brush and deadfall.



Jeff Fitzwater and John Gardner feed cut brush into John's Chipper-Shredder.

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farming, mining, logging, and other historic activities occurred.

Scotch Broom Control

Volunteers discovered an infestation of Scotch Broom, an invasive non-native shrub that spreads aggressively, crowds out native plants, forms dense stands that pose a fire hazard, and makes poor forage for deer. Once the western property line had been cleared and surveyed, work began to stamp out this invader, a pest in California since the early 20th century.

Because Scotch Broom, a legume, spreads seeds ballistically in the summertime, the goal was to remove as many plants as possible before they could go to seed. Fortunately, plants do not flower until they are two or three years old. Wherever possible, small plants have been uprooted by hand and larger ones cut to about a foot above ground level. Burning is the most effective disposal method for Scotch

wrench to uproot the stumps of large broom plants, which can get to be over two inches in diameter, with multiple trunks. Fortunately, these plants do not have taproots like those of oak trees.

Though Scotch Broom is somewhat pesticide resistant, concentrated Roundup® has proven effective on dense groupings of young broom seedlings where uprooting has been an impossible

task.

Though there is still a lot of work to do, and a huge stand of broom plants on another property across the road from the Weller Natural Preserve, volunteers have succeeded in removing or cutting down nearly all the mature

Scotch Broom plants on the property. Many stumps will need to remain in the ground until the first rains of the fall soften the soil, however, and stumps can resprout. Seeds of Scotch Broom can last up to 80 years, so while much of the source of seeds has been removed, constant followup and removal must continue for many years in order to completely eradicate this noxious weed. To that

end, before removal began, volunteers flagged the perimeter of the infestation and mapped it.

WCC volunteers have met with several of the neighbors to discuss the Scotch Broom infestation, and plan on working with them to eradicate it. In the future, we hope to secure permission to remove all the Scotch Broom from the property across the road.

Biological Inventory

While all of these activities have been going on, work has begun assembling a plant and animal inventory of the preserve. The biodiversity on the preserve is impressive. Plants on the preserve include some really nice pines, canyon live oaks, and some large Madrones. With volunteer effort, a very detailed description of the plant and animal resources of the Weller Natural



Photo: Heather McDonald

Matt Leissring loves the Weed Wrench! He's just used it to uproot another scotch broom stump.



Photo: Marianne Russo

Jerry Johnson examines a Bush Lupine for the biological inventory.



Photo: Gerald Johnson

Marianne points to the Weller Natural Preserve (right), where all the Scotch Broom has been cleared, and the the property across the road (left), where broom still dominates. Before control efforts began, the broom was equally dense on both sides of the road.

Broom, as it is very fibrous, and has a tendency to jam a chipper-shredder. Volunteers have used a device called a weed

Preserve can be assembled. Volunteers Jerry Johnson and Bill Papke have been photographing as many different plants as possible. On at least two occasions, cougar tracks have been found and photographed. Any visitor to the preserve who has photographed plants or animals there is invited to contribute their images to the inventory. Volunteers with knowledge of plant, fungi, lichen, and animal characteristics are needed to assist with the identifications.

These volunteers have put in many long days, surveying—both under and above ground, clearing and burning brush, and gathering data, often working in groups of four people or fewer. With more manpower, a lot more could be accomplished. Now, who else out there would like to help?

About Scotch Broom

Why is Scotch Broom such a bad plant?

In Amador County and other areas of the Mother Lode, Scotch Broom was originally used during the Gold Rush to stabilize tailing piles. Because of its aggressive and prolific nature, it soon spread beyond the areas where it had been planted. By the early twentieth century, it was already considered to be a problem, and measures were being taken to eradicate it.

Unfortunately, despite such efforts, ignorance and indifference have allowed its spread to continue. Most counties in California have infestations of Scotch, French, Portugese, or Spanish Broom. Until recently, you could go to a nursery and buy these plants, and since it is a nice-looking bush with pretty yellow flowers, many people, unaware of its invasive nature, do not act to eradicate it when it appears on their land.

In the 1950s, the highway departments in several states planted broom along road cuts, again for stabilization. Again, the plants quickly escaped their original bounds.

Scotch Broom grows in dense, often impenetrable stands. It invades pastureland, cultivated fields, dry scrubland, native grassland, roadsides, and dry streambeds.

It also spreads quickly into forested areas cleared by logging or fire. Broom is somewhat toxic, so few domestic animals will eat it, with the possible exception of goats and maybe sheep.

Dense stands of broom:

- ♦ alter the natural landscape
- ♦ prevent reforestation
- ♦ create a serious fire hazard
- ♦ displace native vegetation
- ♦ degrade wildlife forage and habitat
- ♦ render rangeland worthless

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Photo: Jerald Johnson



Photo: Jerald Johnson

Windeler MOU Signed at Annual Meeting

by Marianne Russo

WCC's annual public meeting was held on January 27, 2007, at the home of Bill and Peri Frantz in Los Gatos, California. For the WCC officers and directors, the meeting was an all day affair.

In the morning closed session, the directors and officers addressed many of the issues scheduled for the public afternoon session. The purpose of these morning discussions is to answer directors' specific questions, address concerns that may be sensitive or confidential, and make sure that no important points have been overlooked.

The public session convened at 1:30 pm. Approximately 20 people attended, to observe, comment, and ask questions. A full agenda started with officer and committee chair reports, followed by detailed discussions of current projects. First up was the Weller Natural Preserve (Rippled Cave). Highlights of this discussion included information about brush clearing, the need for a biological survey, and recognition of the great job the Hartwigs did organizing the Nov. 18th (2006) workday. One concern was that use of Rippled Cave for youth groups and beginner trips could lead to trespassing issues, as happened a few years ago.

The second big item of discussion was the Windeler Cave project. Stewardship Chair Joel Despain talked about the creation of the Windeler Management Subcommittee and the need for baseline inventory work before sightseeing trips into the cave could be contemplated. He warned that the cave reopening would not happen immediately, but invited interested people present at the meeting to join the subcommittee. Several people volunteered, and Joel has a good start on his committee. In an incredible stroke of luck, the WCC had finally received the Windeler Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) from the Stanislaus National Forest just a few days before the meeting. The official "signing" took place after Joel's presen-

tation, with much fanfare and picture taking.

Various other issues were also addressed, mostly having to do with the internal workings of the conservancy. These included long term planning strategy, committee restructuring, conflict-of-interest policy, implementation of an automatic checking account withdrawal donation option, and a proposal to adopt management plans as standard policy for all conservancy properties or special projects. While motions were being crafted for the New Business sec-

tion, attendees were entertained with a presentation of the Rippled Cave Slide Show.

The New Business voting session finished off the meeting. Directors Bruce Rogers and Martin Haye were re-elected for three-year terms. Two other motions were passed. The first created substantial changes for the basic

committee structure. Now committees like Public Relations or Stewardship would consist only of one person, a director, assisted by an advisory committee whose membership can be fluid, eliminating the need for a quorum of members in order to meet and accomplish anything. This and other aspects of the motion will greatly streamline these activities. The second a motion was a proposal to adopt management plans as standard WCC policy.

The meeting adjourned at 4:55 p.m. and the Diablo Holiday Season party began!



Photo: Bill Frantz

Marianne signs the MOU.

Check out our website!

<http://www.westerncaves.org>

It's the place to go for all the latest information about WCC acquisitions, activities, and history, and it boasts a gallery of photographs of threatened, protected, or otherwise interesting caves.

Our thanks to webmaster Bruce Brand, caverns@cavertours.com, for maintaining the site, Martin Haye for technical oversight, and Peri Frantz, peri@frantzfamily.us, for content coordination.



Photo: Kip Baumann

Letter from the President

Dear Friends:

I would like to take this opportunity to recognize and thank everyone who has been so supportive of the WCC in the first half of 2007. It has been a very busy time, thanks to people who have gotten involved! We held a productive annual public meeting, put in many days of work at Rippled Cave and the Weller Natural Preserve, had a successful fundraising dinner at Speleo-Ed, and made progress on the Windeler Cave project. To top it all off, we are now very close to having enough money to pay off the Rippled Cave loans!

I would like to recognize Diablo Grotto for two important contributions. First, with the help of Chair Steven Johnson, they hosted the WCC's annual public meeting in January. Special thanks go to Bill and Peri Frantz who opened their home for the meeting. Since the Diablo Holiday Season Party began immediately after the WCC meeting ended, it was a very full day. Secondly, the Diablo Grotto just recently gave the WCC a wonderful vote of confidence in our ability to manage Windeler Cave. The membership voted to donate \$1,500 to the WCC Windeler Cave fund. This very generous donation will go a long way in helping us manufacture and install the new cave gate. THANK YOU DIABLO CAVERS!

As described in detail elsewhere in the newsletter there have been over 25 trips to the Weller Natural Preserve by dedicated volunteers since January to work either on cave mapping, brush clearing, boundary survey, or Scotch Broom control. Dale Hartwig, Jerald Johnson, Matt Leissring, and Heather McDonald were on most of these trips and have been a driving force behind most of our accomplishments at the preserve. A big thanks to you, and to the other volunteers. I also want to mention John Gardner, who donated the use of his large chipper on one of our workdays. Thanks John!

Last fall, Matt Bowers, Western Region Chair, asked the WCC if we would be willing to put on the Saturday night banquet at the Spring Speleo-Ed as a special fundraiser for the Lava Beds Research Center. With Chef Eileen Belan's nod, we said "Sure!" As usual, Eileen outdid herself, with delicious enchiladas, hot veggies, Bill Papke's delicious salad buffet, and homemade cookies for desert. Yum! Well over 100 people bought tickets for the meal, so after expenses, we raised approximately \$1,000 for the Research Center! Assisting Chef Belan in making this event another WCC success were Bryan Wright (Right-Hand Man), Pat Helton (Right-Hand Woman), Bill Papke (Salad King), Elisabeth Belan (Enchilada Assembly Technician), Tammy Meredith (Official Ticket Taker), Marc Hasbrouck (Vegetable Preparation Specialist) and Claire Lakner (Cleanup Engineer). Thank you all for a job VERY WELL DONE!

As for Rippled, we are very close now. A little over \$3,000 is all the money we need to pay off our loans for the property and still maintain a \$5,000 reserve. Since our last newsletter, several thousands of dollars have been donated. Boosting us recently were a number of membership renewals, many of which were at the \$50-to-\$100-levels. While the WCC didn't receive the proceeds from the Speleo-Ed banquet, many attendees donated generously at Marianne's Famous Schnapps Tasting and Ben Robinson's Ice Cream Social. These modest fundraisers brought the WCC \$307—every penny helping to reduce that debt! Thank you Ben for all your effort. Let's try that again some time. Maybe at the NSS Western Regional Meeting at Pinnacles in October?

What's next? Once we have enough cash to pay off our loans, we can start planning in earnest for other projects. The Windeler Cave project will need more funding, and of course, both Windeler and the Weller Natural Preserve will require maintenance funds. We would also like to be prepared financially to move on other projects, a few of which will undoubtedly become real opportunities in the future.

Thank you everyone for all your financial and volunteer support. The Conservancy is the sum of all of us: all of our hours, our dollars, our confidence, and our belief in the idea.

Marianne Russo
President, Western Cave Conservancy