

KEEP THE SESPE WILD & FREE

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

PO Box 715, Ojai, CA 93024

(805) 921-0618 • www.sespecwild.org

DECEMBER 2014

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LAST CAPTURED GRIZZLY BEAR

"In the days when the California grizzly still roamed the land but was retreating to the high country for his last stand, the connoisseurs of the tall tale knew their finest hour," Charles Outland, a lifelong Santa Paulan, wrote in his 1969 book "Mines, Murders and Grizzlies."

The 1889 grizzly bear hunt had its wellspring in the offices of the San Francisco Examiner. The young William Randolph Hearst had taken over as its publisher some 18 months earlier and eagerly took up a sensational brand of reporting replete with banner headlines and hyperbolic, distorted and dubious stories.

One day, Hearst and reporter Allen Kelly got into a discussion about grizzly bears. Even then, there was talk that California no longer was home to grizzlies, a position Hearst took. But Kelly was sure the legendary beast still survived in the state's remote mountainous nooks. The legend goes that Hearst signed a blank check, handed it to Kelly and said "Go get me a grizzly."

That spring, Kelly showed up on Main Street in Santa Paula to organize the expedition. His party, said to number a dozen seasoned mountain men, two loaded-down donkeys and two Native Americans, marched single-file down Telegraph Road as onlookers cheered them on their way out to the Sespe and into the backcountry.

The backcountry route, per an Outland interview with an old Santa Paula mountain lion trapper named Herman Keene who'd heard the story as a boy, took an old road to Tar Creek, then went by way of Squaw Flat and Bucksnot to Alder Creek and the Sespe Hot Springs. Camp was made somewhere in Mutau Flat or Lockwood Valley, and eventually on the broad shoulders of Mount Pinos, Ventura County's highest point at 8,831 feet. They spent several days building a big log trap strong enough to hold a grizzly. But after a couple weeks, Keene chuckled, "not so much as a coon had stepped into Kelly's trap."

Kelly ordered the camp moved — something the Santa Paula gang didn't want, as it meant a lot

work - they were less interested in snaring a mean grizzly than living up a good outdoors trip on Hearst's dime. So that night, one of them slipped out of camp and made fake bear tracks around the trap. "Sure enough," a laughing Keene recalled, "in a little while here came the San Francisco grizzly hunter storming back to camp, out of breath, and shouting orders to hold everything." The next time Kelly made noise about the scarcity of bears, one of the guys hid in the sage and did a whopping imitation of one plowing through the brush — at night, of course.

They were in the backcountry for the balance of the spring, all summer and half the fall — a fact that chagrined Kelly and, back in San Francisco, Hearst. Expedition members left during the five-month saga. Keene surmised that was due to a liquor shortage, cracking, "They never come out of the mountains until the whiskey's gone." Jokes aside, Outland wrote that the old trapper's overall story was too close to printed accounts to be outright dismissed.

In late October 1889, Kelly returned to San Francisco, accompanying a Southern Pacific Railroad cattle car housing one very large grizzly bear. They shipped out from Ventura, some reports say. The bear, named Monarch, became the toast of San Francisco. Some 20,000 people reportedly showed up to greet the beast and Kelly when they arrived.

Monarch was placed on exhibit at Woodward's Gardens in the Mission district — opening day there, Nov. 10, 1889, reportedly drew another 20,000 people - and later at Golden Gate Park. The bear's every move, whim and idiosyncrasy, Outland wrote, became news fodder for Hearst's paper. The Examiner broke the story of his capture in a Nov. 3, 1889, nine-column spread that covered more than a page. "It is doubtful any bear in history was ever the recipient of a journalistic spree of such magnitude," Outland wrote, adding that no less than 18 drawings accompanied the piece.

Monarch was billed as “the last wild grizzly bear in California.” But, of course, he wasn’t. The last verified wild grizzly bear in California was trapped and shot in 1908 in the Santa Ana Mountains, in or near eastern Orange County’s Trabuco Canyon. A grizzly shot in Tulare County in 1922 is considered by many to be the last grizzly, but it was not positively identified. Outland wrote that the last grizzly in Ventura County dates to around 1905, when a group of hunters on Alder Creek saw some large, 13-inch tracks pointing north; the bear was traced to the creek’s Indian Cave area but was never found. It was the last time, he wrote, that grizzly bear tracks were seen in the county.

In a way, Monarch, whose stuffed body was on display at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco for years until 2012, symbolizes the grizzly’s plight here. At their peak, grizzlies were thought to number about 10,000 in California. They flourished in the days of Spanish rule, when the state was more wide open. The bears had rich food sources; in coastal areas such as Ventura County, they ate seafood, acorns, clover and occasional livestock. Over time, the arrival of more people forced grizzlies into the Sierras and other mountain ranges. When the Gold Rush hit, they were slaughtered by the thousands by miners, settlers and bounty hunters — at times for food in fancy hotels. By the end of the 19th century people had lost interest in the grizzly, part of a mindset to see California as a modern and tamed place. The grizzly was too tied to the old Wild West.

Outland had harsher words in his book - “The California grizzly is extinct today because a few pounds of honey and some bawling ganados (livestock) were more important to the pioneers than saving a species from extinction,” he wrote. “The American ... would sweep aside the bison and the Indian from the Plains to fulfill his destiny; and no proud, independent, unpredictable, dangerous, overbearing beast such as the California grizzly could be permitted to live in the same country.” The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is studying a petition to reintroduce the grizzly in parts of California and several other Western states, but that effort will take years and many say lack of open space amid almost 40 million Californians would douse any glimmer of hope for the grizzly bear roaming here once more. Still, the grizzly remains on the state flag and is the state’s official animal. Monarch lived for 22 years after his capture. When

he died in 1911 in Golden Gate Park, he weighed 1,127 pounds. His remains, fragments of bones and skull, now are housed at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California. His stuffed body later was used as the model for the state flag. A few questions remain about Monarch: Where exactly, how and by whom was he captured? In the Nov. 3, 1889, Examiner story, Kelly wrote that the bear was taken from Mount Pinos, finally lured into his trap after months of frustration by moving the meat bait closer to it every day. Outland’s answer: Monarch was captured on Mount Pinos after he killed a steer, lassoed by some Mexican vaqueros working a ranch near there. Kelly, desperate not to return to San Francisco empty-handed, then paid the vaqueros for the beast. The final indignity for Kelly, Outland wrote, is that some “uncouth and uneducated” local cowboys had roped and captured a grizzly in a matter of minutes — something he’d been unable to do in five months, spending in excess of \$1,200, a hefty sum in 1889.

Still, a vintage Hearst publicity stunt in our backyard, a strong local connection to the enduring state flag and a wild hunt from long ago makes for a good yarn. And as Outland put it, Kelly should have been grateful — if those Santa Paula good ol’ boys hadn’t have faked those bear tracks, he’d have given up the hunt and Monarch never would have seen the Golden Gate.

(This story is an abbreviated version of a County Star article written on August 14, 2014 by long-time reporter Brett Johnson, reprinted with permission.)

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Your donations to KSWC are our sole source of funding. Please keep your donations coming. As we are a 501(c)4 tax-exempt organization, your donations are not tax deductible.

You can also help us in another way – our mailing list shrinks a little each year as people move and the Postal Service loses track of them, or email addresses change, etc.

Please use the enclosed envelope to send us contact info for folks who enjoy the Sespe and who would like to receive our free quarterly newsletter about the watershed and our efforts to maintain fee-free national forests.

MCGRATH STATE BEACH TO BE REDESIGNED FOR WILDLIFE HABITAT & CAMPING

A new plan is underway to resolve the flooding at the popular campground at McGrath State Beach, at the estuary of the Santa Clara River (of which Sespe Creek is the major tributary).

The flooding has two causes – the failure of low winter stormflows in dry years to break through the sand berm to the ocean, and the year-round release of substantial quantities of treated wastewater from the nearby sewage treatment plant for the City of Ventura.

Ventura Coastkeeper has spearheaded the Santa Clara River Estuary Habitat Restoration & Enhancement Feasibility Study, along with the Ca. Dept. of Fish & Wildlife, Ca. State Parks and others. The estuary is one of few left in Southern California, even at only 15% of its original size. It is a very important habitat for several threatened and endangered species, including the southern steelhead and the tidewater goby, that both thrive in the brackish (somewhat salty) waters. Many bird species also populate the estuary and nearby beaches.

In recent years, the adjacent campground has been flooded for most of each year. The proposed plan involves moving the campground to higher ground so it remains above the water level, and further restoration of the estuary wetlands habitat to a total of 35 acres. The study and design stage should take about a year, and the final project will require environmental review before breaking ground.

PUBLIC ACCESS TO MATILIJA FALLS

The KAMFO (Keep Access to Matilija Falls Open) coalition is now preparing to go to court to seek a permanent public right of access to Matilija Falls in Matilija Canyon. Buz Bonsall, who owns about one mile of the creek downstream from the falls (but not the actual falls) began a few years ago to turn hikers back from crossing his property, which he has owned for several decades. KAMFO has attempted to negotiate a number of alternatives with Buz Bonsall, including re-opening the original Forest Service trail on the east bank, high above the creek, which has been lost in the dense chaparral for maybe forty years now. The court is expected to grant the public right of way in perpetuity.



A hiker enjoys a break on a boulder in the middle of lower Sespe Creek near the “ladder”, just up from Tar Creek.

LOS PADRES TO EXPAND PROTECTIONS

Los Padres Forest recently announced their final management plan update for the forest – a plan first proposed in 2006. Lawsuits filed in 2011 forced the U.S. Forest Service to re-evaluate their wilderness recommendations across the four Southern California National Forests. For Los Padres, the new plan still offers no new wilderness beyond the original 37,000 acres recommended in 2006 to expand the Dick Smith, Chumash & Matilija Wilderness areas. It does however place 293,000 acres in a new designation of “backcountry non-motorized”, blocking new off-road trails, but allowing all existing off-road trails to continue as corridors. Forest officials state that now half of Los Padres Forest’s 1.8 million acres will be wilderness, and fully 85% off-limits to motorized use.

NO FOREST FEE BILL ENACTED IN D.C.

The proposed new forest fee bill, H.R. 5204, was not in fact added as a rider to the appropriations bill this fall. Thank you to all of you who contacted your Senators in D.C. to ask them to block H.R. 5204’s addition to the spending bill. It is very likely that the new Republican majority in Congress will try next year to pass some new and onerous fee law. The opinions of Western states citizens will be vital.

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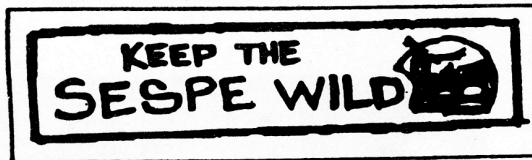
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LIMONEIRA'S EAST AREA ONE PROJECT

The Limoneira Company's East Area One development on the east bank of Santa Paula Creek in the City of Santa Paula has come back into the news with the comment period for the project's Supplemental Environmental Impact Report. About four years ago, KSWC appealed the project's approval because the earlier EIR had failed to address flooding issues in this area and also impacts on the migration of the steelhead trout, an endangered species. Limoneira at that point agreed to fund a Supplemental EIR that would address these issues and be produced by the City of Santa Paula. Santa Paula Creek has frequently topped its too-narrow banks along this stretch in recent decades. Once hundreds of new homes are built on the east bank, future creek widening would be impossible. Limoneira agreed to a setback along the creekbank to allow creek widening at a later date.

CONDOR NEST CAMERA SET UP

Condor scientists have placed a video camera in a condor nesting cave at the Hopper Mtn. National Wildlife Refuge east of Fillmore. This enables scientists to watch the condor family and to schedule visits to the cave to remove micro-trash that the condors collect and may later ingest. The lack of a high-speed internet connection means that the public cannot watch live streamed footage, but highlights may be seen on Facebook from the past year's video footage, which is edited and archived at the Santa Barbara Zoo.

