

Fall/Winter 2020

# The Confluence

Newsletter of the Rogue River Watershed

## Almeda Fire and the Need for Riparian Repair

by Stuart Warren

On September 8th, the Almeda fire scorched approximately 300 acres of riparian area on Bear Creek from the North end of Ashland to Phoenix, Oregon. Fueled by historic winds, low humidity, and prolonged “drought” conditions, Bear Creek and the communities of Ashland, Talent, and Phoenix will most likely never be the same. We lost thousands of homes, hundreds of businesses, millions of dollars of public infrastructure, and human lives. The fire has also presented us with an important opportunity and illustrates the need for riparian area rehabilitation.

Prior to the fire, the Rogue River Watershed Council, City of Phoenix, and Rogue Valley Sewer Services had begun work on a restoration project along Bear Creek near Blue Heron Park in Phoenix, Oregon. Phase one (removal of invasive blackberries) was completed in the spring. Phase two was scheduled to begin this fall, with planting beginning in the spring. The objectives of this project were to repair riparian habitat, improve shading on Bear Creek, open up view-planes to the creek, bring the creek back into the community, and hazardous fuels reduction.

After the fire, I walked many miles of the Bear Creek Greenway. In most cases,

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A scene of devastation after the Almeda Fire

Photo by Stuart Warren



A reminder that not all was lost

Photo by Stuart Warren



# The Confluence Fall/Winter 2020

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*RRWC's mission: Stewardship of the Rogue River watershed through restoration, education, and community involvement.*

*RRWC is tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and a recognized watershed council. Watershed councils were authorized by the Oregon Legislature in 1995 to promote and implement voluntary cooperative conservation actions.*

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## Notes from the Executive Director's Desk

So many circumstances were thrown at us in 2020 that it can be challenging to take a step back and see hope. I refuse to ignore the progress on watershed health improvement that occurred amidst the inconvenient quarantines, the toilet paper shortages, the devastating number of COVID-19 cases, and the wildfires that ravaged southern Oregon.



Photo by Justin Clifton

Rogue River Watershed Council charged ahead, working remotely, generating support for our efforts through a virtual fundraiser, and collaborating with agencies, counties, cities, residential communities, and non-profit organizations throughout the region.

In this issue of *The Confluence*, you'll read about recently forged partnerships to improve the streamside forest and reduce stormwater impacts at Blue Heron Park in Phoenix. You'll see a new irrigation intake on Salt Creek and read about the positive effect this effort will have on the fishes that swim in this stream. And you'll catch a bird's-eye view of Elk Creek where we partnered with the Army Corps of Engineers to improve water quality and stream habitat by reconnecting floodplains with stream channels and installing large wood structures.

You'll also see that we substituted our annual in-person fundraising event with a month-long fund drive. We view the results of that effort as extremely positive. Twenty businesses (some from distant locales like Coos Bay and Corvallis) sponsored the event to the tune of \$11,100. Using a web-based version of our "Get the Salmon Up the River Game," 86 donors purchased 718 miles of Coho Salmon travel (raising \$14,360). The funding raised during this event will be used to respond to water and habitat quality restoration efforts from the Almeda and South Obenchain Fires.

Which brings us full circle to the cover story of this issue. We came into 2020 fresh off the creation of the Bear Creek Restoration Initiative (with the help of many partners, Rogue Valley Council of Governments in particular). This plan identifies priority sites to weave the restoration of watershed health with fire and community safety along the Bear Creek corridor from Ashland to Central Point.

We exit 2020 with ten miles of the Bear Creek corridor burned, in part, because of the dense blackberry stands (instead of native trees like maples, cottonwoods, and pines) along its length. Nothing can make up for the tragedy of thousands of households displaced and hundreds of acres of burned forest and urban areas.

Using the Almeda Fire as an excellent example of the connection between community health and watershed health, now is the time to come together to remediate the damage and set the recovery of native species as a goal that we can all work on together. ***Please join us!***

**Almeda Fire and the Need for Riparian Repair**  
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the fire moved so quickly that many of the trees were left standing. The trees were scorched and most likely dead, but the underbrush (dominantly blackberries) is completely gone. The unusually dry conditions, driven by a changing climate, created conditions for this fire to become the monster that it was.

We find ourselves at a crossroads, where diverging efforts driven by watershed conservation meets neglected hazardous fuels reduction. The Rogue River watershed has thousands of acres of riparian habitat in disrepair and in need of attention. Many of these areas are coinhabited by members of our community or immediately adjacent to cities and towns.

The fire has left us with an opportunity to learn from the many years of poorly managed vegetation that we can no longer be complacent and allow for invasive blackberries to dominate our riparian areas. This is an opportunity to replant and foster healthy watersheds while removing the hazardous fuels that fed the Almeda Fire. This is an opportunity for our community to embrace and support the important work by the Rogue River Watershed Council, not only for our rivers and streams, but for the well-being of our community.

*Stuart Warren was born and raised in Southern Oregon. He is the City of Phoenix Council President, Commissioner on the State of Oregon Land Conservation and Development Commission, and a fly-fishing guide on the Rogue River.*



Photo by Stuart Warren

Burned trees along Bear Creek

**RRWC PROJECT UPDATE**

**Bear Creek Water Quality Improvement Project**

The work on the project at Blue Heron Park in Phoenix continued in October and early November after a hiatus due to the Almeda Fire. Specifically, initial post-fire cleanup included removing debris and trash that was daylighted as a result of the fire. Several tons of concrete, metal, and other debris were removed from the project area. This was followed by an application of grass seed and straw across 10 acres. The goal of this is to spread fast-germinating species and cover that will help stabilize soils during the winter rains, thereby reducing the erosion potential.

This initial seeding effort was bolstered by impressive work from volunteers organized through Jackson County Parks. Additional work included an herbicide application to treat the blackberry and other noxious species regrowth. We'll revisit the site during the winter months to evaluate how the erosion control practices are working and address any spots that need further attention.



Volunteers from the Phoenix High School track team

RRWC PROJECT PROFILE

# Salt Creek River Mile (RM) 3.5 Project

Salt Creek is an important tributary to Little Butte Creek; it maintains colder water temperatures throughout the summer, which is critical for Coho Salmon, steelhead, and resident trout species. It's a priority stream in the Upper Rogue Coho Salmon Strategic Action Plan, and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife had named seven gravel push-up dams on this stream to their Statewide Fish Passage Barrier Priority List. RRWC removed two of those dams in 2018; this fall we removed two more. The most recent project not only included dam removal, but we also installed new pre-cast concrete irrigation intakes at both points of diversion, which will enable the water rights holder to continue receiving irrigation water while allowing fish passage year-round.



Improved passage for fish and irrigation efficiency

During our fish salvage efforts with the Bureau of Land Management, we saved 232 native trout (Cutthroat and Rainbow), 152 sculpin, and 11 Pacific giant salamanders before de-watering the isolated work areas. We piped over 550 linear feet in the irrigation ditches to increase water delivery efficiency, and also returned flow to the original channel of the stream, as one of the diversions had altered the stream's course. We also placed over 50 pieces of large wood at twelve locations downstream of the diversions to improve stream processes and aquatic habitat conditions.



RRWC PROJECT UPDATE

# Elk Creek River Mile (RM) 5.6 Project

Our largest project this year has been our work on Elk Creek. For this project, our focus has been on improving side-channel and floodplain conditions on a little over a mile of the main channel of the creek and 1.3 miles of side channels. After removing 30 acres of Himalayan blackberry and Scotch broom on the project site last spring, we began our instream and floodplain work in the summer.

Under the direction of RRWC and a professional hydrological engineer, our stream restoration contractor removed an artificial berm at the inlet of one side channel – allowing it to flow in the winter – and placed 206 large wood logs at 29 different locations in three different side channels. This will provide important habitat for juvenile fish to survive and grow over the winter and spring seasons.



Photo: Rogue Valley Council of Governments

Aerial view of the project site on Elk Creek

We followed up our instream work with additional weed treatments to recover the native plant community, and the Army Corps of Engineers (the current managers of the project area) is currently building a wildlife-friendly livestock exclusion fence, which will protect the sensitive floodplain habitat from open range cattle. We anticipate that this is the first of many ecological restoration projects RRWC will be pursuing in the Elk Creek watershed.

## SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

# Green Heron

by Bob Hunter

Floating down the Rogue River or hiking along the Bear Creek Greenway in the spring or summer, one might see a lone Green Heron skulking in the streamside vegetation or emitting a *kyow* call when it flies up the creek after being flushed. It is a small, dark heron with a blue-green back, dark head, and short legs.

Unlike its conspicuous larger cousin, the Great Blue Heron, the Green Heron is secretive. It forages along waterbodies in a crouched position from logs, overhanging vegetation, or next to the shoreline. It eats mostly small fish, but it is an opportunistic feeder that will also include frogs, crayfish, grasshoppers, aquatic insects, snakes, and small rodents in its diet.

If one carefully watches a Green Heron feed, one may be lucky enough to observe its unique method of fishing. Not unlike local anglers, the Green Heron uses a variety of baits and lures to attract fish. It commonly drops crusts of bread, insects, earthworms, twigs, or feathers onto the water below its perch and waits patiently for fish to come within striking distance.

The Green Heron does not typically nest in large colonies as do many other herons. Green Herons nest in trees, usually near water. Their nests are simple stick platforms. The male begins construction and then brings materials to the female to finish the nest. The female typically lays between 3-5 eggs.



Photo by Bob Hunter

Green Heron on a winter's morning

Work that the Rogue River Watershed Council does to improve fisheries and restore riparian areas helps support a wide variety of wildlife, including birds like the Green Heron, by providing good habitat and improving the food supply.

*Bob Hunter is a Rogue River Watershed Council board member. A retired attorney, Bob co-drafted Oregon's landmark Instream Water Rights Act and was a leader in removing both Gold Ray and Savage Rapids Dams from the Rogue River. He's an active angler as well as a formidable birder.*

## Celebrate the Rogue!

We Celebrated the Rogue for the entire month of October this year! COVID-19 prevented us from hosting our annual fall dinner and fundraiser, so we decided to go virtual instead. The focus of the event was on getting Coho Salmon up the Rogue to spawn: for every \$20 donated, a salmon could move one mile upriver. In addition to the fundraiser, we gave out prize packages to five lucky donors. We're incredibly thankful for everyone who participated; hopefully, we can see you all in person for Celebrate the Rogue 2021!

Special thanks go to our event sponsors:

Blue Ridge Timber Cutting; Cascade Stream Solutions; Jacobson, Thierolf & Dickey; Jones Water Consulting & Services; L&S Rock Products; Lone Rock Resources; M & M Services; McMichael & Toledo, CPAs; Medford Water Commission; Neilson Research Corporation; O'Connor Law; Plant Oregon; Pronto Print; RH2 Engineering; Richard Stevens & Associates; River Design Group; Silver Butte Timber; Solid Ground Landscape; Terra Science; Watchable Wildlife

## *Support Our Work!*

### **Make a Donation**

All donations are greatly appreciated, put to good use, and are tax-deductible. Donate online at <http://www.rogueiverwc.org/get-involved/donate/>.

### **Bottle Drop Redemption**

Open a Bottle Drop account at an Oregon Redemption Center, drop off your cans and bottles, then transfer your donation to RRWC [online](#).

### **Fred Meyers Rewards**

Help RRWC earn donations by shopping with your Fred Meyer Rewards Card. Link your card to us at <https://www.fredmeyer.com/topic/community-rewards-4>. Search for us by name.

### **AmazonSmile**

Online shoppers can go to [smile.amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), click on your account and select RRWC as your charity of choice at no cost to you.

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