

The Community VOICE

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It's transition time for Cotati Creek Critters

*By Jenny Blaker January 4, 2013 12:00 am*

Cotati Creek Critters is in transition. Wade Belew, stewardship coordinator, and I, would like to take this opportunity to thank the thousands of volunteers who have turned out, rain or shine, to improve the health and vitality of Laguna de Santa Rosa by planting and taking care of native trees, shrubs, and understory plants, and removing trash.

The inspiration, energy, and support of all the partnering organizations and individuals involved has made possible this truly grassroots community project, making a lasting difference both by transforming the waterway in the heart of Cotati and by raising awareness and touching lives along the way.

It all started in 1998. The City of Cotati completed a bike path alongside the Laguna de Santa Rosa channel and installed a new pedestrian/bicycle bridge. Members of Cotati's Environment Commission, Maria Alvarez and Linda Christopher, asked for permission to plant native trees and plants on the exposed soil behind a couple of houses. A handful of friends and neighbors got together one Saturday a month, donating plants and using their own tools. Over the next few years, Cotati Creek Critters (CCC) joined in with Cotati Earth Day events and began planting in a few other areas including behind Putnam Park. As time moved on, the vision grew.

In 2003, Belew and I both, independently (not knowing the other had signed up for it), took a class on Watershed Ecology and Restoration at Santa Rosa Junior College, and for a class project wrote a study of the three miles of the Laguna that runs through Cotati. This baseline study proved invaluable when, in 2005, with a lot of help from Laguna Foundation staff, and support from the City of Cotati, Sonoma County Water Agency (SCWA) and community members, we successfully applied for a \$170,000 grant from the California Department of Water Resources, to engage the local community in planting 2,000 native trees and shrubs along 1 mile of the Laguna channel.

As stewardship coordinator, Belew set up a plant nursery and storage for tools and equipment at Cotati's well lot No. 2, with support from the city staff. We gave presentations to community groups and college classes, tabled at events, contacted local media and gave radio interviews to raise awareness and recruit volunteers. One Saturday morning, 50 volunteers showed up, and the following month, there were 60 – and we knew we'd "cracked" it.

Since then, thousands of volunteers from pre-school to college students, to local families, professionals, and retired people, have participated in regular Creek Stewardship Days and trash pick-up days, including Sonoma State University and Santa Rosa Junior College classes, boy scouts, churches, synagogues, local businesses and community groups.

The Inside/Outside Nature Education series, featuring local experts, was launched in 2006, to offer talks, guided walks, bike rides and field trips to explore the history and ecology of the Laguna and its wildlife, and to learn about our impacts on the environment around us. Related articles have been published monthly in the Community Voice ever since. In 2009, thanks to a team of designers, artists, photographers, historians and ecologists, three interpretive signs were installed, explaining the biology, history and restoration of this section of the Laguna.

In 2011, CCC began a new project, funded by SCWA, to plant another 350 trees and shrubs further downstream from Gravenstein Way to Commerce Blvd. Thanks to St. Joseph's Health Care System of Sonoma County, and Concerned Citizens of Rohnert Park (C-CORP) we extended our community outreach to new neighbors, including with Spanish language translation where needed.

Now, the times are a-changin.' The end of a contract with SCWA and subsequent lack of funding means CCC is no longer sustainable in its previous form, and responsibilities for maintenance of the project sites will transfer to SCWA and the Laguna Foundation. Because of this, there will be no more CCC Creek Stewardship Days as such. However, SCWA may hold "community workdays" and Cotati will still have a place on the Laguna Keepers program. CCC, the Laguna Foundation, City of Cotati and SCWA will collaborate to ensure a smooth transition.

The Laguna Foundation offers an exciting program of educational events, but if Cotati residents feel that there is a unique value to continuing a specifically Cotati-based community education program, this may be possible, if there is sufficient interest. Do let us know what you think – we welcome your input. Meanwhile, Christopher Harrod, SSU graduate and a previous intern with CCC, has volunteered to take over this column, so watch this space!

Cotati Creek Critters is fiscally sponsored by the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation,

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www.lagunadesantarosa.org a 501c3 nonprofit whose mission is to preserve, restore and enhance the Laguna de Santa Rosa, and to inspire public appreciation and understanding of this magnificent natural area. If you have comments or questions about Cotati Creek Critters transition please contact Jenny Blaker, Outreach Coordinator, at jenny@creeks.cotati.info.

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