New Partnership for the Kern River

Working with the nonprofit organization, the Kern River Corridor Endowment, River Partners is preparing a conceptual restoration plan for riparian habitats along the Kern River at the Panorama Vista Preserve in Bakersfield. It is the largest private-lands project for River Partners in its 11-year history.

“What is really unique about this restoration initiative is that it was spear headed by a group of private individuals who really care about the Kern River,” says Julie Renter, Restoration Ecologist. “They make up the Kern River Corridor Endowment and worked to buy and protect the land.”

River Partners staff has started assessing the 936-acre site, which has supported a variety of human uses, from agriculture to oil drilling. By considering the local ecology and historical land uses, this pre-restoration plan will make habitat recommendations for restoring significant swaths of native vegetation within this privately-owned reserve.

“If this preserve could be restored, it would be a significant stepping stone in the Kern River Corridor for wildlife,” says Tom Griggs, Senior Restoration Ecologist. “It will be large enough acreage to support migration, especially for songbirds.”

River Partners thanks the Kern River Corridor Endowment for inviting us to participate in their restoration efforts and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife (Kern National Wildlife Refuge) for partially funding the pre-restoration plan.
Message from the Board Chair

By Irv Schiffman

Levee Setbacks and Meandering Rivers

For a variety of reasons River Partners is supportive of moving levees back from the river and we are involved in a number of levee setback projects. One of the reasons that we support levee setbacks is that it allows the river to follow its natural course of meandering across the floodplain.

In all but the steepest mountain cascades, rivers will meander. In lower gradient valleys, such as the Sacramento and San Joaquin for much of their length, a river’s physical imperative to meander is the greatest.

When rivers are denied the space to meander due to levees, rock revetments, or other impediments, many beneficial river services are diminished. In their natural state, rivers are dynamic ecosystems, supplying the floodplain with soil and nutrients for its diverse riparian habitats and in turn providing organic materials to aquatic species. The meandering river and its floodplain temporarily store excess floodwater and recharge ground water and reduce stream velocities.

Meander bends often form oxbow lakes that eventually fill with soil and vegetation and serve as traces of the river’s previous courses. These oxbows and the meandering river give definition to the land, providing a characteristic “riverscape.”

Beyond the ecological and aesthetic benefits, setback levees make sense economically as well. Allowing a river to meander avoids the expenses involved in maintaining the levees and rock revetments designed to hold a river in place. Further, when denied the space to meander, floodwaters are often “funneled” down stream, leading to increased flood damage, greater downstream shoreline erosion and channel incision.

Once a levee is setback, the river may begin to meander and this poses a challenge to implementing riparian restoration on the floodplain. River Partners works with engineers to plan the restoration design. For example, Eric Larsen of UC Davis has constructed model scenarios that simulate the future migration of the river given different restraint conditions. The application of such models is an integral part of the scientific approach that River Partners takes to restoring native vegetation on dynamic riparian floodplains.

The meandering Sacramento River. Photo by Marli Miller, University of Oregon.
Project Updates

Additional Refuge Land Open to the Public

On March 28th, the Sacramento River National Wildlife Refuge opened to the public the Drumheller Slough and La Barranca Units, two sites restored by River Partners. According to the press release issued by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, “The public may enjoy any of the ‘big six’ public uses including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, interpretation, and environmental education.” More information and maps can be found at www.fws.gov/sacramentovalleynationalwildlifereserves.

San Joaquin Valley Projects

On April, River Partners teamed with Tuolumne River Trust to participate in two Earth Day festivals sponsored by Modesto Junior College and City of Modesto. The San Joaquin staff has begun ground preparation for an additional 5000 ft of vegetated levees on a contract with the California Department of Water Resources at the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge. The San Joaquin staff also has begun to plant three additional riparian brush rabbit refugia and a vegetated brush rabbit corridor.

Wilson Landing Unit, DFG, Sac. River Wildlife Area

River Partners finished planting this 338 acre restoration site located in Glenn County, between Sacramento River miles 203 and 205. The Unit is part of the Department of Fish and Game managed Sacramento River Wildlife Area and is in the first year of project implementation. Eagle Scout candidate, Brett Brown, organized the Durham Cub and Boy Scouts in planting more than 500 trees at this site.

Colusa State Recreation Area 08-13, Sac. River

In May 2009 River Partners began restoring 138 acres at the Colusa State Recreation Area in Glenn County. In cooperation with California State Parks, this work is funded by the Department of Water Resources, with the goal of instituting advanced mitigation for future flood control projects associated with the Tisdale Bypass.

Chico Fest 2009

On April 26, 2009, River Partners ran the beer concession at Chico Fest, a sustainability and live music exposition held at the Sierra Nevada Brewing Company’s hops field. Thanks to help of 19 volunteers who staffed the booth, and the generous invitation from the Brewery, the event brought in more than $6,000 to support River Partners’ outreach programs and new project development.

11th Anniversary Dinner

On April 3, 2009, more than 200 supporters and members attended River Partners’ Annual Dinner & Silent Auction at the Sierra Nevada Big Room. See page 6 where we thank the many sponsors and silent auction donors who contributed to the event’s success.

Ilona Toko, Fred Marken, Marilyn Everett, and Lewis Everett at the River Partners Anniversary Dinner. Photo by River Partners staff.
Endangered Rivers

Sustainable Solutions Exist for the Sacramento-San Joaquin Rivers

The national environmental group, American Rivers recently named the Sacramento-San Joaquin River system as the most endangered in the country. While many Californians are not surprised by this pronouncement, our collective search for solutions to an outdated flood control system now has the nation’s attention. Through its “America’s Most Endangered Rivers List,” American Rivers has called upon Californians and our agencies to consider nonstructural flood protection solutions, such as expanding the floodway by moving levees back to “allow rivers to move.”

What did not receive attention are some of the sustainable solutions for our flood protection system that are available now. Successful examples of environmentally friendly, cost effective, highly collaborative, flood control projects exist in the Central Valley. Though they cover a few thousand acres, if implemented more broadly, these projects offer hope for this endangered system that spans more than 800 river miles and hundreds of thousands of acres of floodplain.

Over the last several years, the effectiveness of set-back levees and nonstructural flood management approaches has been tested within the Sacramento-San Joaquin river system. Momentum for these projects grew thanks to funding from the Wildlife Conservation Board, the Central Valley Flood Protection Corridor Program through the Department of Water Resources, the Central Valley Improvement Act through the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, and other bond funded programs through Propositions 84, 50, and 1E, etc.

The results have been the restoration of thousands of acres of floodplains, the creation of multi-benefit projects, and a new synthesis between riparian ecology and engineering. DOTting the Sacramento-San Joaquin rivers and their tributaries, these on-the-ground projects not only benefit flood management, but also environmental stewardship. They combine innovative habitat restoration components with set-back levees and floodwater storage projects. They have reduced levee maintenance costs, improved public safety, and added open space to the Central Valley. Many believe these new flood management designs will better protect us from the uncertainties of climate change.

One example is the restoration effort on the Feather River (see green box at right), a tributary to the Sacramento River. A multi-agency Safe Harbor Agreement intended to enhance habitat for endangered and other species allowed elderberry bushes to be planted without any obligation to mitigate for their loss if future maintenance or flood fighting activities destroyed the bushes. In addition to helping the endangered Valley Elderberry Long-horned beetle, the resulting habitat restoration successfully improved flood water conveyance during the 2006 floods.

As another example, the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge has appeared in the Central Valley in 65 years. This was the first time this endangered songbird has appeared in the Central Valley in 65 years. In fact, a breeding pair of least Bell’s vireos nested and fledged young in willows planted by River Partners. This was the first time this endangered bird had been seen in the Central Valley since its listing in 1978.

Additionally, River Partners’ various project sites on the SJRNWR are associated with removing barriers to reconnect the San Joaquin River to its historic floodplain and the newly restored riparian areas. River Partners pioneered the development of fish-friendly irrigation practices by installing a state-of-the-art fish screen, which won the approval of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Furthermore, through funding from the Cities of Tracy and Manteca, we developed innovative methods to re-vegetate the levees on the site to maximize habitat and flood-control benefits.

San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge

The San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge (SJRNR) is River Partners’ largest and longest-standing partner. Thanks to this collaboration, more than 2,000 acres have been put into restoration since 2002: the largest riparian restoration initiative in California.

The restoration work has benefited federally and state-listed species including the riparian brush rabbit, valley elderberry longhorned beetle, yellow-billed cuckoo, Swainson’s hawk, Chinook salmon, steelhead and Sacramento splittail, and the least Bell’s vireo. In fact, a breeding pair of least Bell’s vireos nested and fledged young in willows planted by River Partners. This was the first time this endangered songbird had appeared in the Central Valley in 65 years.

The least Bell’s vireo has returned to the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge. Photo by Po-Hsun Liu.

The resulting multiple benefits included: improved wildlife habitat, especially for endangered species (Valley Elderberry Long-horned Beetle), improved flood water conveyance, reduced long-term maintenance costs for the Department of Water Resources (DWR), and reduced liability for DWR and Central Valley Flood Protection Board for elderberry mitigation.

As part of this project, River Partners facilitated the signing of a multi-agency agreement among the Central Valley Flood Protection Board, the USFWS, DWR, and California DFG. The multi-agency agreement (aka a Safe Harbor Agreement) allowed for the planting of the elderberries as part of the O’Connor Lakes habitat restoration project, without any obligation to mitigate for their loss if future maintenance or flood fighting activities damage or destroy the planted bushes.
Thank You River Partners 11th Anniversary

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(530) 894-5401, ext. 222, jpokrandt@riverpartners.org
www.riverpartners.org. Thank you for your support!

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**Silent Auction Donors**

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- **Lifetime Partner** $2,500 - 25 trees
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- **Benefactor** $500 - 5 trees
- **Investor** $100 - 1 tree
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Paddling Season Opens!

Join River Partners on its first tour of the season

Feather River at Star Bend to the Bear River Restoration at the New Set Back Levee

Bring your own canoe or kayak! Explore the Feather River as it flows through Yuba County and meets the Bear River. Several River Partners ecologists will be on hand to talk about native plants, early summer wildlife, and one of River Partners’ largest restoration sites – the Bear River Levee Set-back project.

This is a free community event and reservations are required. Skill level is for paddlers who have the endurance for a 3-hour paddle to cover 6 river miles.

Saturday, June 13, 8:30 am to 12:30 pm
8:30-9:15 am: check in at launch and caravan cars to the take out site
9:30 am-12:30 pm: boats on the river

Feather River • South of Marysville, Yuba County
Put in at the Star Bend Boat Launch • 2034 Feather River Boulevard

What You Need:
Your own canoe or kayak, life jackets, and paddling equipment, sunscreen, water, bag lunch, river shoes, binoculars
A friend to help you shuttle between sites (Ask about shuttling with River Partners)

Reservations & Information:
Call (530) 894-5401 ext 222 or Email jpokrandt (at) riverpartners.org

Future Paddling Trips:
Sign up to receive e-mail alerts at our website: www.RiverPartners.org