

On the Banks of Butte Creek

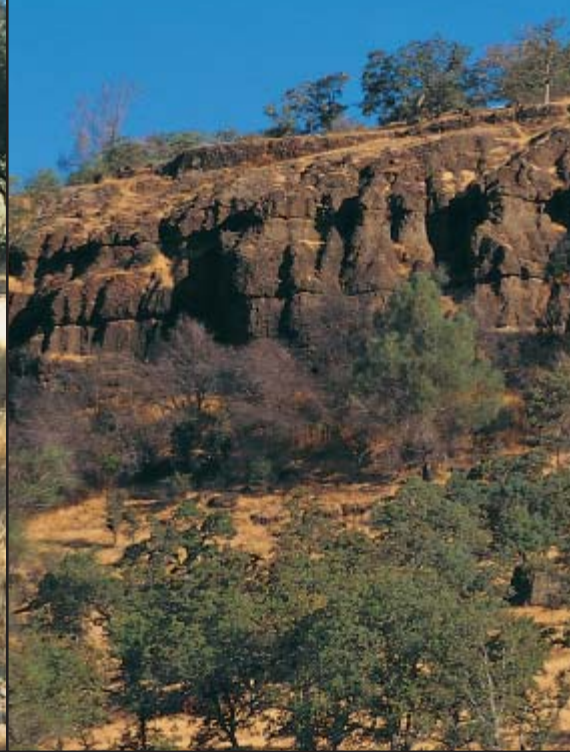
Its nose twitching, its coat a patchwork blend of winter's white and summer's brown, the snowshoe hare emerges into the spring meadow to graze after surviving a snowy winter.

By Colleen Flannery

The snowshoe hare is just one of many species living near Butte Creek which sustains two separate ecological reserves along its banks.

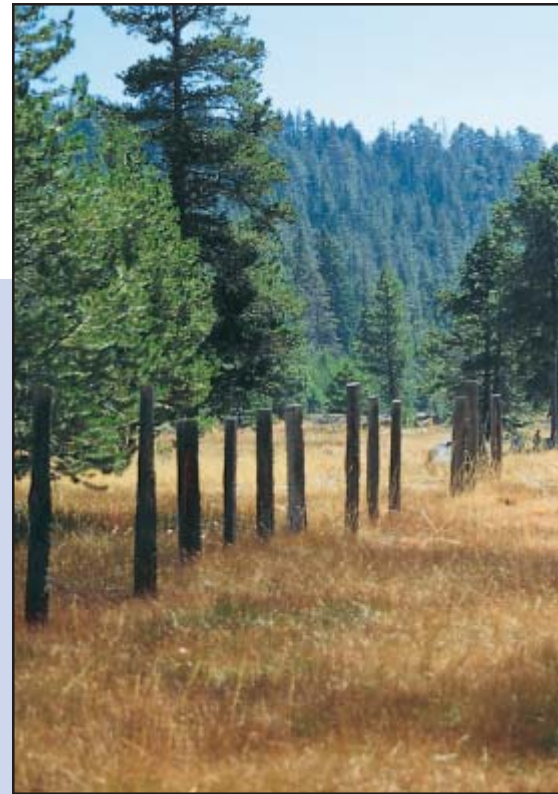
At the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) Butte Creek House Ecological Reserve (BCHER), located about 40 miles northeast of Chico in Butte County, the green grasses of a wet meadow provide nourishment for snowshoe hares as the mating season begins.





DFG photos page 20 to 21 by Robert Waldron.

Centerfold, page 20 to 21, Butte Creek Canyon Ecological Reserve. Photos along bottom of pages 20 to 21 were taken at Butte Creek House Ecological Reserve. Photo above, sign at Butte Creek Canyon Ecological Reserve. It takes only about an hour to reach Butte Creek House ER from the Chico area by car, but it takes the water about 24 hours to cut through the canyons and valleys between



Fresh green meadows also hold their appeal for human visitors. BCHER seems built in layers: the flat glassy surface of the creek gives way to streamside vegetation and grasses. Above grow willows and cottonwoods, giving way to pine and oak on the hillsides above. Over the treetops tower layers of volcanic rock.

The flat-topped ridges that tower above Butte Creek could be described as fossilized valleys. Massive volcanic eruptions filled prehistoric valleys in the area with lava flows, which hardened as they cooled. The hills around the valleys began to disappear over time, worn away by flowing water. Eventually, all that remained were the volcanic rocks, hardened and flat on top. These table tops can be seen as you wind your way uphill to BCHER.

It takes only about an hour to reach BCHER from the Chico area by car, but it takes the water about 24 hours to cut through the canyons and valleys between. A snaking dirt road leads to BCHER. Butte Creek House once housed two hotels and was a stop for stagecoaches carrying mail and passengers east and west. Later, it became a cattle ranch, where the wet meadow (a rare type of wetland) was grazed

by cattle. Centuries of development, logging, gold-seeking and grazing left the land in need of care.

From a precarious perch on a check dam built to create deep pools in Butte Creek, visitors can watch bronze brook trout torpedo through the water. But they cannot see the time it took to turn rough-hewn logs and sediment into a sophisticated conservation plan.

DFG fisheries biologist Paul Ward said the check dams took time to become a reality. After several years of investigation, DFG scientists resolved that "undercutting," erosion of the stream banks, was the problem. Then, crews built sediment traps from logs, stopping or slowing erosion.

"That work was spread over a few years," Ward said.

In restoration, hard work pays off. Wander in the meadow now and it is hard to tell cattle once roamed here. The DFG's restoration efforts have transformed it. Wrapped in this circle of trees, it becomes easy to forget the world outside. Spring's prodigious wildflower display and clumps of bright grass disguise the spongy ground beneath. Small surprises abound in the

Butte Creek area - in the boggiest places tiny wild blueberries grow, providing sustenance for wildlife.

Look around. In the meadow at BCHER, special platforms have been built for nesting Canada geese. The Butte Creek area supports the geese as they migrate. These long-necked honkers are not the only wild birds at Butte Creek ecological reserves. In one year, DFG counted 150 resident and seasonal bird species in the Butte Creek area. Species of special concern such as



DFG photos by Robert Waldron



Photo above center, view of Butte Creek Canyon Ecological Reserve. Just two miles southeast of Chico and about 40 miles downstream from Butte Creek House ER is DFG's Butte Creek Canyon Ecological Reserve. Above right and below center, taken at Butte Creek House Ecological Reserve.

Nevada mountain beaver or the Pacific fisher, all unique in their own way. The snowshoe hare, for example, has large hind feet which work like snowshoes and help it move more easily through the snow. Its brown coat turns white in the winter to help camouflage it from predators. The mountain beaver excavates networks of burrows, navigating its underground spaces with the help of whiskers and extra-long leg hairs. One of the few species that will take on a full-grown porcupine, the fisher (a weasel family relative) might hunt here, among the winter snowdrifts. Black-tailed deer also winter in the Butte Creek area, where food is plentiful and the weather is warmer.

About 40 miles downstream along Butte Creek, a sign designates the DFG Butte Creek Canyon Ecological Reserve (BCCER) just two miles southeast of Chico. The ground here is rocky, but it is only a short walk to Butte Creek, a tributary of the Sacramento River. In the summer, state-listed threatened spring-run chinook salmon rest in deep pools in the creek awaiting cooler weather when they will spawn in the last great event of their lives. The eggs hatch later in the fall, and most

juveniles will begin the long swim downstream with some staying on for a year before leaving as yearlings.

Down Honey Run Road, near BCCER, hikers can find the Honey Run Unit Ecological Preserve, an area managed cooperatively with California State University, Chico. Trails maintained by students and volunteers make a slow loop to the creek and back. Coyotes, deer, and bobcats range through the preserve though bobcats are rarely seen by visitors. Management here and at BCCER includes the removal of Scotch broom and the prickly star thistle, invasive nonnative plants that crowd out beneficial natives. Piles of rocks known as diggings tell a story of Gold Rush miners tearing at the hills and riverbeds with hydraulic hoses and dredges in their search for gold.

Visitors will find their own treasures of gold in the memories and magnificence of the Butte Creek ecological reserves.

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ospreys, golden eagles, merlins, California spotted owls, northern goshawks, and yellow warblers live in and around the area. With its adjoining meadow and forest, BChER appears suitable for the California endangered great gray owl. The great gray searches meadows for prey, gliding on silent five-foot wings.

Wildlife watchers who choose to look on the ground at BChER might see the tracks of mammal species of special concern like the snowshoe hare, the Sierra