



SYMBIOSIS

A Quarterly Newsletter for MRCA Volunteers
Winter 2003/4

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The Fires of October

The Simi Fire cut through a large area of our parkland and open space in the Santa Susana Mountains. The bad news is that we lost habitat, at least for awhile. The good news is that we only lost one structure—a shed at Towsley Canyon. The best news is that no human life was lost.

The fire began in Val Verde on Friday, Oct. 24. Dry conditions and the Santa Ana winds combined to drive the fire WSW. By Sunday evening Happy Camp was burning. The wind direction reversed over the weekend. By Mon-

day morning our MRCA fire personnel were in place to defend structures at Towsley Canyon, Mentryville, Sage Ranch Park and Joughin Ranch. Rocky Peak and Joughin Ranch burned but no structures were lost, thanks to MRCA fire fighters. Sage was unharmed. Flames and smoke could be seen at the top of Towsley Canyons. In Pico Canyon the historic oil town of Mentryville, with it's remarkable wooden buildings, was in danger.

On Tuesday afternoon, our fire fighters were ordered out of Pico Canyon and replaced by (cont. next page)

Table of Contents

- Feature Story
- From the Editor
- Science "News You Can Use"
- Cyber-teer
- MBU news
- Tricks of the Trade
- Book Review
- Training Schedule
- Volunteer Banquet
- Fire Ecology
- Photos From the Fire Lines
- A Final Word



MRCA Firefighters battle to save Towsley Canyon Nature Center and Lodge

From the Editor...

Our agency has many heroes in our midst, although that's not how they would describe themselves. Our MRCA Volunteer Coordinators played an important role during last month's Simi Fire.

Rebecca Farr. Volunteer Coordinator at Franklin Canyon. Served on the fire line.

Francine Godoy. Volunteer Coordinator at Whittier. Served on the fire line.

Nubez Jordan. Scheduling Coordinator at Franklin Canyon. Command Post radio communications.

Laura Just. Volunteer Coordinator at Whittier. Served on the fire line.

Jeanette Leadbetter. Volunteer Coordinator at Towsley Canyon. Command Post radio communications.

Jodi Thomas. MAU Coordinator. Served on the fire line.

Dave Updike. MBU Coordinator. Served on the fire line.



There were other agency personnel who worked on the fire lines: Rangers, gardeners, construction workers, and maintenance staff. Then there were the support staff, the people who delivered food and supplies, handled radio communications and did whatever else needed to be done. Finally there were the volunteers, who made sandwiches, cleaned the Nature Center and, on one memorable occasion, rode shotgun with me while making one last mad-dash supply run to the fire lines in Mentryville.

We lost only one structure—a shed at Towsley. And most importantly, none of our people were injured. To all you incredible folks, what else can I say except “Thank you”.

The Fires of October (cont. from page 1)

fire crews from Shasta and Ventura Counties. Firefighters hosed down structures and set back fires and after a hard battle, managed to save Mentryville.

On Wednesday, it was Towsley Canyon's turn to burn. Our people were determined to save the Nature Center, Lodge and Ranger residence. They did. It was estimated that the temperature in the picnic area at Towsley reached 150 degrees. To quote one laconic firefighter, “It wasHOT.”

Weather conditions changed again on Thursday. The fire crept down East and Rice Canyons. The resultant damage was less severe and the structures were saved.

By Friday all that was left was the mop-up and cleanup. Now we can all move on to the regrowth & restoration phase. And yes, there are ways you can help. Call your volunteer coordinator for details.

Here's the current status of our Northern Rim-of-the-Valley parks in the Santa Susana Mountains:

Happy Camp - burned. Open.

Rocky Peak—burned. Open.

Joughin Ranch—burned but structures saved.

Sage Ranch—OK. Open.

East Canyon—burned but structures saved. Open.

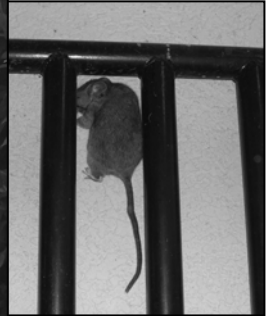
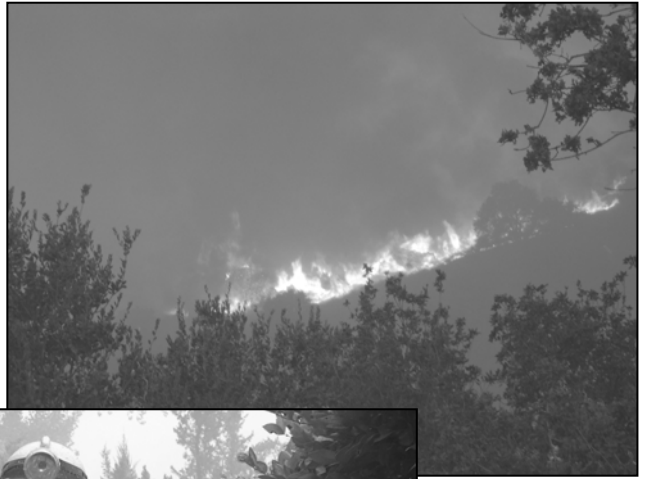
Towsley Canyon—burned but structures saved. Closed.

Pico Canyon - burned but structures saved. Open.

As we go to press, **all parks are open but Towsley**, which will re-open soon. However, as you hike or bike or ride you should **use extra caution** because burned tree limbs and trees can come down at any time. With the winter rains will come rock and mudslides as well. The parks will be subject to closure due to rain (and mudslides). **If you are leading a schedule hike or doing a patrol this winter in Happy Camp, Rocky Peak, Pico, East or Towsley Canyons, please check the day before with the volunteer coordinator.**

We will be offering two 1-day training workshops on Fire Ecology at Towsley Canyon on Saturday, December 6 and 13th from 9-5. Please call Jeanette at (661) 255-3606 to reserve a space. Any and all volunteers are encouraged to

Photos from the Fire Lines



publication.

To submit an article or information: Contact MRCA Director of Volunteer Services, Wendy Langhans at (661) 255-2937 or wlanghans@smmc.ca.gov. Submissions must be received no later than one month prior to

The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) is a public entity of the State of California exercising joint powers of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the Conejo Recreation and Park District, and the Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District pursuant to Section 6500 et seq. of the Government Code.



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MRCA Volunteers...Making a Difference!

Science News You Can Use''...

A information you can use to expand of your programs and perhaps get you thinking in new directions.

Back door of Towsley Canyon Nature Center, Oct. 29, 2003



What do the Towsley Canyon Nature Center and a baby's bottom have in common?

They're both protected by a polymer called sodium polyacrylate. This molecule acts as a super-absorbent sponge, soaking up to 800 times its weight in water. Firefighters mix the sodium polyacrylate powder with water (in this case water from the nearby swimming pool.) to make a sticky gel. Then they spray it onto any surface want to protect (like the wooden windows frames and doors see here). It's like sticking water on a wall.

You may not know it but you've seen sodium polyacrylate every time you change a disposable diaper. It's part of the padding and acts as a sponge to soak up...well...you know.

Barricade International Fire Protection Gel is biodegradable, washes off with water (with a bit of scrubbing) and is safe for the environment. All I can add it that our MRCA firefighters were glad to have it.

Cyber-teer....

(Internet sites of interest for our volunteers.)

In keeping with our fire ecology theme, here's some places you can go for more information.

www.acornnaturalists.com A great source of books about Fire Ecology and other subjects, as well as all sorts of teaching tools. You can also visit their store in Tustin at 155 El Camino Real, Tustin, 92705, phone 800-422-8886.

www.nifc.gov/preved/comm_guide/wildfire/index2.html

The National Interagency Fire Center has some interesting articles on the Science of Wildland Fire, Fire Dependent Ecosystems and Fire effects.

www.coastal.ca.gov/fire/ucsbfire.html

Natural History of Fire and Flood Cycles. A good primer, a report prepared for the Coastal Commission.

www.cnps.org/archives/seeding.htm

Statement of Policy Seeding After Wildfire. Shows that restoration is more complex than we might first assume.

MBU News...

The Mountain Bike Unit (MBU) is a volunteer organization that helps the NPS, CA State Parks and MRCA provide public assistance and resource protection for the Santa Monica Mountains.

- New Volunteers! All you really need is a bike. Orientation begins Saturday, Feb. 7 at Diamond X Ranch. Actual training will be held at NPS Headquarters in Thousand Oaks. Contact Lynne Rubin (310) 391-1121 or yumiMtnBKR@aol.com
- The MBU fundraiser held in October was a big success. They raised over \$3800 for new equipment. Congratulations to a hard-working group of organizers and their generous supporters.
- The MBU Christmas party will be held on Dec. 3 at 6:30 PM at Diamond X Ranch. No need to RSVP. Just bring a salad or snacks (A-G), main dish (H-N) or dessert (O-Z). You are also asked to bring an unwrapped toy (>\$10) for Toys for Tots. Entertainment will be provided.

Tricks of the Trade....

Got a trick to share with your fellow volunteers? Something you learned...perhaps the hard way...or something that makes your volunteer job easier. Submit your "trick" to wlanghans@smmc.ca.gov. If your suggestion is selected, you will receive a by-line, bragging rights and a coupon good for a free Starbucks coffee. 100-words-or-less, please.

Imagine you are in the middle of a program about geology, when someone asks what kind of bird just flew over your head? And you realize that you have forgotten the name since your head has been lost in metamorphic formation land.

Field guides are great, but who has room for an all subject library in their field pack??

Well, the trick is to create a handy little field guide specific to your park that includes many of the common animals and plants you might come across on the trail, you can also include the answers to some commonly asked questions.



This "Trick" is courtesy of Nubez Jordan, the Scheduling Coordinator at Franklin Canyon.

Book Review....

This month's review is courtesy of Jo Ann Koch.

Plant Manuals

"Naming things is one of the oldest and simplest of human pastimes." As volunteers for the MRCA, we are expected to have knowledge of our environment. Our training was the beginning but having books and field guides supplements our knowledge.

Plant guides are very specific. There are books describing trees, cacti, mosses, mushrooms, flowering plants, etc. The field guides are also very area specific. If you travel very much you may need more than one guide.

The [Audubon Guide to Wildflowers, Western Region](#), is widely used. It contains wonderful color photographs for easy identification. The descriptions are in the back of the book. This can be annoying if you mind flipping back and forth. It also has useful information to help you identify the plants.

The [Petersen Guide to Wildflowers, Pacific States](#), is a smaller field guide. The black and white illustrations are organized by the color of the flower, number of petals, and shape of flowers and stems. This book is helpful if you want to see differences between a number of similar plants. I think this book is best used as a supplemental guide rather than a primary source.

A popular local guide is Nancy Dale's [Flowering Plants of the Santa Monica Mountains](#). It is more specific to our area and includes the mountains, coast and chaparral regions. Both black and white illustrations and color photographs are used. The description is beside the picture of each plant. She includes helpful information about plant identification. There is also information about trips you can take, botanical organizations and maps.

A somewhat larger and heavier guide is McAuley's [Wildflowers of the Santa Monica Mountains](#). It not only describes flowers but also has sections on trees, ferns and many other plants (but not grasses). It has information about biomes and plant identification. The color photographs are in the front but the descriptions are in the back. It is an extensive study of our area.

Two books that border on the Northern area of our region are [A Flora of the Santa Barbara Region](#) and [A Flower Watchers' Guide to the Western Mojave](#). The first book includes northern Los Angeles, the coast, and Ventura County. It has black and white illustrations with descriptions close by. It is a bit more technical than the others. The second book has beautiful color photographs. The descriptions are separate and in the back of the book.

Editor's Note: If I personally could only buy one book, I'd choose Nancy Dale's [Flowering Plants of the Santa Monica Mountains](#).

Training for MRCA volunteers...

Because of the fire, some of our previously scheduled trainings have been rescheduled and new trainings have been added.. To RSVP for these free classes, your contacts are: Rebecca Farr, (310) 858-7272 x 132 or farr@smmc.ca.gov for Franklin Canyon and Jeanette Leadbetter, (661) 255-3606 or leadbetter@smmc.ca.gov for Towsley Canyon.

Wednesday, Dec 3, 6:30 PM. Diamond X Ranch.
MBU Christmas Party.

Saturday, Dec. 6, 9:00-5:00, Towsley Canyon.
New. Fire Ecology Training for Volunteers.

Saturday, Dec. 6 & Sunday, Dec. 7, 9:00-5:00, Placerita Canyon.
Wreath making workshop. Open to the public

Wednesday, Dec. 10 & Thursday, Dec. 11, 9:00-5:00 Franklin Canyon.
PRAC training for Rangers—Zoology Volunteers are welcome but you must be pre-approved.

Friday, Dec. 12 8:30-3:00, Northridge & Franklin Canyon.
Rescheduled Day 2 Biodiversity & Cultural Diversity training. Call 310-858-7272 x 132 to confirm.

Saturday, Dec. 13, 9:00-5:00, Towsley Canyon.
New. Fire Ecology Training for Volunteers.

Saturday, Dec. 13 9:00-5:00, Franklin Canyon.
Rescheduled Day 3 Biodiversity & Cultural Diversity training.

Sunday, Dec. 14, 2:00-4:00, Franklin Canyon.
WODOC Quarterly Meeting

Saturday, Jan. 10, 9:00-5:00, Franklin Canyon.
8-hour refresher course on interpretation for pre-2003 volunteer naturalists. Meets the "Certified Guide" requirements for pre-2003 volunteer naturalists.

Saturday, Jan. 17, 9:00-5:00, Franklin Canyon.
Day 1 of Bio & Cultural diversity training.

Saturday, Jan. 24, 6:30-9:30 PM, Los Angeles River Center & Gardens.
Volunteer of the Year Banquet.

Saturday, Jan. 31, 9:00-5:00, Franklin Canyon.
Day 2 of Bio and Cultural diversity training.

Monday, Feb. 9-Friday, Feb. 13. 9:00-5:00, Franklin Canyon.
Certified Interpretive Guide Training. Meets "Certified Guide" requirements for 2003 volunteer Naturalists. By reservation only, contact your volunteer coordinator for details.

Saturday, Feb. 7, 9:00-1:00, Diamond X.
MBU Orientation. Contact Lynne Rubin (310) 391-1121 or yumiMtnBKR@aol.com

Saturday, Feb. 21, 9:00-3:00, NPS Headquarters
Introduction to Santa Monica Mountains NRA. Contact Lynne Rubin (310) 391-1121 or yumiMtnBKR@aol.com.

Saturday, Feb. 28. 10:00-2:00, Towsley Canyon and Pico Canyon.
Fire Ecology tour.

Saturday, Feb. 28, 9:00-10:00. Towsley Canyon.
Quarterly Northern volunteer meeting.

Saturday, March 6, 3:00 Franklin Canyon.
Quarterly WODOC volunteer meeting at the Ranch.

Saturday, March 20, 9:00-3:00, NPS Headquarters
Visitor Contact & Radio Skills & Procedures. Contact Lynne Rubin (310) 391-1121 or yumiMtnBKR@aol.com.

Saturday, March 20 & March 27. 9:00-5:00. Placerita Canyon.
Specialist Training - Mammals. Meets partial requirements for "Specialist Training".



Volunteer Banquet.....

This year we're trying something different. Just in time to celebrate Chinese New Year, our annual Volunteer of the Year Banquet has been scheduled for Saturday, January 24, 6:30-9:30 PM at the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens. Invitations with directions will be mailed in early December. The theme of this year's banquet will be: "Help one another for we are all in the same boat" (as shown below in Chinese characters).



Fire Ecology....

Fire is a natural process in most California ecosystems. Chaparral ecosystems burn extensively and often - historical estimates are every 15-25 years. Periodic fires can be beneficial and chaparral plants have successfully adapted to this fire-prone environment. How can this be?

In the chaparral it is too dry for decomposers like fungi and bacteria to break down the dead plants and animals and return their nutrients to the soil. After 20 years or so, many nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus are locked into the foliage of chaparral plants. After burning, these nutrients are released back into the soil.

Fire can prepare seed beds by burning leaf litter and increasing soil pH. Some seeds even require mineral soil, heat or smoke for germination. Charate, the burned organic material from plant and tree matter, provides a chemical cue for dormant seeds to begin to germinate. For other seeds, the heat from the fire splits the otherwise impervious seed coating, allowing germination. For example, Chamise (greasewood) is a common plant of the chaparral and its seeds require fire for germination.

Fire can remove part of the canopy, allowing more sunlight to reach the lower plant area. In addition, just like a black

car is hotter in the sun than a white car, the black ash deposited on the soil will capture sunlight and increase its temperature.

Fire can kill-off insects, including the harmful ones that destroy plants and infect them with diseases.

Fire will kill off certain invasives and non-native plants, allowing the fire-resistant plants to thrive. Coast live oak is more resistant than any other species of California Oak. The bark is thick and protective and new sprouts grow from the main trunk and upper crown. Even if the tree is top-killed, sprouting can still occur from the root crown, which stores nutrients for the plant. Other common plants, like manzanitas, Ceanothus, and scrub oak, also sprout from stumps.

Finally, slow-burning fires often create a mosaic of burned and unburned areas - the edge effect. Any ecologist will tell you that these "edge areas" are the most ecologically diverse, providing a greater source of food and shelter for wildlife.

A Final Word.....

Sometimes strong emotions can best be expressed through art.



FIRE

Diablo winds spark--
a scorched Earth and burnt spirit
from ash springs rebirth

Nubez Jordan