

## YACHATS COMMUNITY PARK AND WETLANDS

For years, a hidden treasure lay behind the Yachats Commons—a natural wetlands once fed both by streams and by rainwater running down the hills from the east side of Highway 101. Then a manmade ditch drained it and left it to become a tangle of blackberry, salal, and willows. It became a garbage dump for many and was frequented by transients. Over the past ten years, a dedicated corps of volunteers has reclaimed this environmental jewel and brought it back to a healthy, functioning wetlands. This is the story of how the Yachats wetlands was restored.

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In 1997, when Jerry Kraft retired from his position as an entomology professor at Western Washington University, he and his wife Cheryl moved to Yachats. Both of them became active volunteers in the Yachats community. Jerry joined the Yachats Watershed Council and the Mid-Coast Watersheds Council of Lincoln County. He received a grant to monitor water quality in four watersheds in the county, including the Yachats River, and he trained volunteers to do the monitoring. Jerry joined the Yachats Parks & Commons Commission and was elected to City Council where he began developing plans to restore the wetlands behind the Commons. This wetlands area, approximately 4.3 acres in size, was city property. The restoration project had been considered ever since the old elementary school, now called the Yachats Commons, was bought in 1989 to serve as the location for city government and as a center for community activities. After City Council accepted a master plan for the Yachats Parks & Commons Commission, Jerry developed a three-year plan for the project.

Sadly, Jerry died of cancer in 2003. In his memory, a task force was formed by Cheryl and then-mayor, Lee Corbin. The task force included the following people: Don Niskanen, president of the Friends of the Yachats Commons; Cy Kauffman, chair of the Parks & Commons Commission; Leslie Carter, Parks & Commons Commission; David Schlesinger, fish biologist; Paul Engelmeyer, National Audubon Society; Keith Kraft, Jerry's brother and also an entomologist; Chad Link, developer; Betty Bahn, Master Gardener; Jim Gerdemann, botanist; Jim Adler,

water quality monitor; Ray Meehan, city council member; Mark Doyle, excavator; and Larry Lewis, Yachats city planner. Evelyn Everett joined the task force later.

In 2003, the wetlands appeared as an impenetrable barrier of Himalayan blackberry, ivy, and other invasive species. On the west side of the wetlands was a spruce grove, shaped by years of high winds and salt-laden air. The area had been used as an illegal dump and was inhabited by transients and illicit drug users.

In the 1970s, the Yachats fire chief, Frankie Petrick, home-schooled children in the firehouse. When she took her students into the wetlands for a botany lesson, she pointed to a gnarled spruce tree, Big Spruce, in the middle of the wetlands and told them to meet there if they got separated—it was the only visible landmark above the blackberries. It was hard to know at the time that wetlands existed in the area, but people like Jerry and other members of the task force had the expertise to identify the treasure buried under the snarl of brush and garbage.

Historical evidence supported the biological analysis. Sam Case, Farm Agent for the Alsea Sub-agency that managed the forced relocation of Indians during the years 1860-1875, noted in his annual report for 1869 that crops planted in a boggy area, even root vegetables, failed to thrive. That boggy area may well have been the wetlands west of the Commons. Betty Bahn's mother reported her own mother's accounts of seeing migratory fowl, including swans, landing in the wetlands.

When enough of the blackberries had been removed, members of the task force discovered a deep ditch exiting at W. 6<sup>th</sup> Street that had been excavated to drain the wetlands. Bert Harley, who moved to Yachats in 1946, and Al Green who attended the Yachats School, also in 1946, remember a stream that they think may have been manmade. Al and his friends played with frogs and pulled skunk cabbage out of the waterway. He remembers it being muddy and he didn't venture too far into the water. Back in 1948, Judy (Carson) Kauffman and Sherri Hall were not supposed to play that far to the west of the elementary school. Sherri said her parents, Doris and Lester Hall, would have been upset if she had come home with muddy shoes, although Judy remembers that the native plants provided a great place for hide-and-seek. The boys, more willing to venture into

the tangle, discovered the ditch. Elaine Harley attended the Yachats School for 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade (1945-1948). Like Judy and Sherri, she doesn't recall going far into the area to play. The spruces on the west side of the wetlands were tiny, Elaine remembers, and you could see the ocean from the school, something that is no longer possible. Another classmate, Doris Gardenhire, remembers how wet the area was, from the back of the school all the way to the Adobe Resort, a memory corroborated by Al Green. By the early seventies, when Frankie and her students cleared a trail for their botanizing expeditions, the area was already a blackberry jungle, although she does also recall the ditch and the swampy conditions.

No one knows for sure why the ditch was excavated. Betty Bahn, a retired nurse, speculates that it was the polio scare of the 1930s and the locals' fears that the wetlands could be a breeding ground for insects that carried the virus. Elaine Harley, also a nurse, supports Betty's speculation. It's also possible that parents thought their children faced more danger from the wetlands than from the possibility of falling into the ditch. One thing is certain: the mud was like glue and difficult to wash off, something the task force members and other wetlands volunteers can personally attest to.

Members of the task force divided into committees to tackle several jobs. The biggest were grant-writing and fundraising. Planner Larry Lewis searched for grant money. Leslie Carter and Cheryl Kraft led the quest for private donations.

Phase 1 was a challenging learning curve for the task force. Permits and approvals had to be obtained from a variety of agencies, even after the Yachats City Council approved the project. Planning, hiring consultants, and complying with State and Federal regulations for wetland restoration work were ongoing tasks. Public hearings were held to get input from local citizens and groups about what they wanted in the wetlands area. Students in the Yachats Youth and Family Activities Program (YYFAP) had some strong desires, including a skate park and a swimming pool. Despite some strong lobbying on behalf of the skate park, neither idea became part of the wetlands restoration project, but other valuable additions did come out of the students' input. One of their wishes was for a Peace Garden, and

at the initiation of Leslie Carter, it was constructed in 2004. The kids continue to tend the garden, producing vegetables and beautiful flowers in raised boxes shaped like a peace symbol. An arbor and trellis were designed and built by Syri Hamilton, bordering the parking lot behind the Commons and creating a separation between the cars and the children's playground to the west.

Larry Lewis, with the assistance of Don Niskanen, wrote a grant application to the Oregon Parks & Recreation Department for \$75,000. The task force met the 40% match requirement, for a total budget of \$125,000.

The task force hired retired OSU professor and landscape architect John Stewart to create a conceptual master plan. John's fee was \$4,000; however, he never sent in a bill for his work, in essence donating his fee to the wetlands project.

In December 2003, a boardwalk was constructed between Big Spruce in the middle of the property to West Sixth Street, connecting to the Yachats Library on Seventh Street. The boardwalk was built by Lake Price, a contractor from Reedsport. The treated wood was environmentally safe, but careful attention was paid to make sure that no treated wood would touch the ground or the wetlands themselves. Concrete pilings supported the framing and decking. One part of the boardwalk is removable, and it was removed temporarily when the west pond was graded in 2006.

Before any further wetlands restoration work could begin, a permit was needed from the DSL. One of the permit requirements was a wetland delineation report. Loverna Wilson, an environmental consultant, prepared a report which documented four separate wetlands areas. Both John Stewart and Loverna visited the site several times in order to complete their reports. Paul Adamus, a wetland scientist, and Nancy Holzhauser, a wetlands consultant, prepared the final report on which the DSL application was based, with a detailed plan for restoration of a fresh-water wetlands.

While DSL is vigilant about approving restoration plans, they may have been "kinder" to the Yachats task force, since it was obvious that the task force was proceeding with persistence and incredible attention to detail to reverse the

damage to this fragile landscape. It took some time, but DSL finally approved the project.

Approval was also needed from the Army Corps of Engineers. However, since the project was small, DSL and the Army Corps of Engineers agreed that no additional permit was needed. The task force also contacted the State Water Board to make sure no additional permits or other requirements would be imposed. They were assured that none were.

While approval of the DSL permit was pending, David Schlesinger, on behalf of the City of Yachats, prepared a grant application to the state Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) for a supplemental grant for wetland restoration. The guidelines for the grant included improvement of access to coastal resources. Of course, that is not what the project intended. The access was there; money was needed to improve the wetlands (coastal resources). Despite not fitting the guidelines, a grant of \$27,000 was awarded with no match requirements. The task force speculated that the reviewers were impressed with the project goals, the objectives already met, and the honesty of the task force.

In 2006, Phase 2 began. Bill Bodewig, a local tree cutter and invasive species remover, and Calder Bell, arborist, were hired to clear out the invasive plants so that others could access the property and start restoration work. The first project was to remove the blackberries and other invasive species covering the four wetland areas, grade those areas, and fill in the drainage ditch that had been there for decades. Steve Trask, a fisheries biologist from Alsea, was hired as the project manager. Terry Duman from Florence, who had done similar work for the Forest Service, was hired to do the grading.

It was determined that additional boardwalks were needed. Application was made to LCDC to re-direct funds still remaining in the grant to finish the boardwalk project. They readily approved, since the boardwalk additions clearly met the application guidelines for enhancing access. Doug Thompson from Roseburg was hired to construct the boardwalk from Big Spruce to Fourth Street. An additional extension was built from the main boardwalk into the spruce forest.

Later, an additional path was built along the east side of the wetlands, again with volunteer labor.

The ballfield was re-oriented from the northwest to the northeast section of the open area adjacent to the wetlands. Fencing was installed on the north border of the field and around home plate to prevent balls from hitting cars, people, and nearby buildings. Nine benches were constructed by Steve Kolstad of Yachats and placed around the wetlands area. All were donated by people to commemorate different individuals. The first plaque was in honor of Jerry Kraft.

An osprey platform was installed. This took some ingenuity. Ordinarily, utility poles are used. New poles, made of specially-raised Douglas fir from Canada, cost \$6,000. Some “retired” poles were located in the Central Lincoln PUD utility yard. The platforms themselves are usually built with a pallet or similar material. However, Betty Bahn and the task force decided they needed something sturdier and found a suitable pallet plan online. PUD paid for the pallet and the task force used their funds to have all the nuts and bolts changed to stainless steel. Ray Meehan built the platform. PUD brought the pole to the chosen site and augured a hole thirteen feet deep. While the PUD staff went to breakfast, task force volunteers attached the nesting platform to the top of the pole. When the pole was finally in place, it stood 60+ feet off the ground. To date, no ospreys have made a home there, but hope remains.

It was agreed that there would be no further alterations beyond the grading and removing invasive species and planting native species. If the wetlands were to fill with water, nature needed to run its course. The task force agreed to wait and see—and as is obvious today, the wetlands did fill with water.

The next phase—planting—was crucial. The deep wetland soils are clay and highly acidic, which is why it takes a lot of scrubbing to remove it from clothes and skin. However, certain plants thrive in this environment. Many wetland plants returned by themselves; a testament to the dormant seeds in the soil bank awaiting suitable conditions to grow. Much to the delight of the task force members, native plants started to appear almost immediately. Green false hellebore

(*Veratrum viride*), Coast Boykinia (*Boykinia elata*), and cattails (*Typha latifolia*) soon appeared.

Two major planting days were scheduled, one in the fall and one in the following spring. Volunteers placed over 4,000 plants in the ground during those two planting days. Nootka rose (*Rosa nutkana*) was planted around the osprey pole, extending thirteen feet out to discourage people from trying to climb it.

Experimentation is ongoing to determine what will grow and thrive in the four wetland areas. Kathleen Sand, previous co-owner of the Gerdemann Botanical Preserve, David Schlesinger, and Betty Bahn planted Western lily (*Lilium occidentale*), a rare and endangered plant, originally collected by Jim Gerdemann. This proved quite successful. An illustrated list of plants can be found on the [yachatstrails.org](http://yachatstrails.org) website under the Commons Wetland tab.

Many wildlife species now make their home in the wetlands. Red-legged frogs, an endangered species, are present, as are a variety of ducks, including mallards, scaups, and red phalarope. Green herons, great blue herons, and egrets frequent the wetlands. There are rough-skinned newts and numerous songbirds, including red-winged blackbirds and marsh wrens whose calls ring out from their nests in the willows and cattails. In summer 2012, a muskrat was seen in the main pond harvesting the cattails.

Another YYFAP wish was to have a treehouse adjacent to the playground. The kids brainstormed the design features. Over the next several years, funds were raised and then increased by additional contributions from the Friends of the Commons and the Commons budget. However, when sufficient funds were available, the project stalled because a county permit was needed, including an engineering design. Several local engineers were approached and all declined—for liability reasons and probably lack of experience in designing treehouses. A year or so later, Charlie Greenwood at Treehouse Engineering, agreed to provide the plans at 10% of his standard fees. Bids were obtained from a local licensed builder, but the engineered design and the higher-than-expected labor costs, left the project short of the necessary funds. Ultimately, Chris Graamans, a local wood artist who

had served as chair of YYFAP for many years, offered to build the tree house for free. YYFAP scraped together more money for materials. Construction began in October 2010 and was completed in December.

The covered picnic shelter behind the Commons was completed several years earlier, sponsored by the Lions and the Parks & Commons Commission. However, the cold north winds that blow in the summer diminished its usability. In 2011, glass enclosures were installed under the direction of Dave Rieseck, a city council member at the time.

Maintenance of the wetlands is an ongoing project. It was originally undertaken by Betty Bahn, David Schlesinger (now deceased), and Don Niskanen. Dylan McDowell, a high school student, monitored the area for a year, reporting on plant and wildlife in the wetlands to the Parks & Commons Commission.

YIPS volunteers – a subcommittee of the Yachats Trails Committee – are now doing much of the wetlands maintenance. They have spent many hours in the wetlands park removing blackberry and ivy and mulching the cleared areas with bark. Once the invasive plants are under control, there are plans to add more native plants.

While oral reports from people who lived in Yachats in the mid-forties make it clear that the ditch that drained the wetlands went in before that time, their testimony also attests to the persistence of the wet, boggy area, begging to come back as a functioning wetlands.

This was achieved, as is so much, in Yachats, by the competence, collaboration, tenacity, and vision of the local all-volunteer wetlands task force, and all the many others who donated labor and expertise to achieve that vision. Yachats is a community that is proud of its achievements. As long as we continue in this tradition of volunteers and cooperation, our village will thrive and continue to meet its mission.

*The history of the Commons Park and restoration of the wetlands was compiled by Joanne Kittel in consultation with Betty Bahn, Frankie Petrick, David Schlesinger,*

*Don Niskanen, Cheryl Kraft Wade, Al Green, Sherri Hall, Elaine Harley, Bert Harley, Doris Gardenhire, Larry Lewis, and Andrea Scharf.*