

Call of the Wild: The Creeks of San Anselmo

by Charles Kennard

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San Anselmo's creeks are a thread of the wild, twisting through our neighborhoods. San Anselmo Creek flows from Fairfax, to be joined by Sleepy Hollow Creek and then by Sorich Creek before reaching Ross. Along the creeks, native trees have a chance to regenerate, thanks to the protection from garden landscaping and human feet afforded by steep banks, frequent high waters in winter, and garden fences - which, although intended to keep deer out, also keep residents in!

A summer walk in a creek bed, trousers rolled up, is like being in another world. Cars and commerce are far away. Beneath towering alders and bays, for company you have snowy egrets, raccoons leave their prints at the muddy edge, while a rustle overhead draws attention to a squirrel on its aerial way.

At your feet, in places you can see the valley's bedrock, fifteen or so feet below the level of adjacent gardens. The thickness and character of the earth layer determines how much household chinaware you lose in an earthquake. Three or four feet below lawn or patio, a yellow clay begins, which, if fired in a kiln, turns an intense red-orange. Most of our bedrock is the dark and fractured "Franciscan" formation, but in one place, on Sleepy Hollow Creek, this is overlain by water-sculpted golden sandstone.

During the summer - the critical time for plants and wildlife - San Anselmo Creek continues as a shallow flow between pools one- to five-foot-deep. Water-loving alders are restricted to this creek, which also supports more of the colorful box-elders and bigleaf maples than do the two tributaries. Sleepy Hollow Creek, joining the main channel at Drake High School, lies closer to the hills, and is only a trickle in summer. Perhaps for these reasons, greater numbers of bays, buckeyes and oaks line its banks. One gnarled buckeye, leaning over the rocky bed near Brookside School, sheltered a hummingbird, phoebe, titmouse, robin, and a pair of western tanagers, all observed in the few minutes spent photographing the tree.

Native arroyo and red willows are common on all the creeks, that is, wherever bays do not cast their deep shade on the banks. The upper reach of Sorich Creek - in Sorich Park - supports a small patch of milkweed, foodplant of the monarch butterfly. (Its horned caterpillar appears to be double-ended, like an old car ferry!) From there, the creek dives into a willow thicket, through back yards, and into a 400-yard tunnel under Redhill Shopping Center, joining San Anselmo Creek near Madrone Avenue.

Native shrubs are relatively scarce along the creeks. Bays shade out many shrubs, but retaining walls and invasive non-native vines such as ivy, periwinkle, and Himalaya blackberry give natives little chance to establish themselves. Among those natives found in San Anselmo, blue elderberry, snowberry, creek dogwood, toyon, twinberry, honeysuckle and hazel all provide food for birds. The exotic-looking pipevine is host to the pipevine swallowtail butterfly, a dark iridescent beauty.

Some non-native shrubs do provide food for wildlife, but do not support as much insect and bird life as natives do. In San Anselmo's creeks, the most invasive non-native shrubs are plum, privet, bamboo, and giant reed. Fig, Jimsonweed, an orchid, and a wide variety of garden mints are some of the more curious non-natives that have found their own niches in the creek.

Birds and squirrels are the unwitting propagators of many trees and shrubs, including the magnificent valley and live oaks which dot the valley floor between magnolias and silver birches. Studies of the European jay have noted that a single bird can store away as many as 5000 acorns in a season;



Mule deer in San Anselmo Creek

fortunately for the rest of us, the jay's limited memory and appetite don't allow the retrieval of the whole cache. Those seedlings that poke up inside a hedge or behind a garage, often survive the summer drought and garden clippers, and may, in a hundred years, shade home and creek. At the creek's margin, young Oregon ashes are springing up, where, perhaps, the winged seeds came to rest after rainfall. Native riparian shrubs need a helping hand in our peopled valley, so if you are lucky enough to live by the creek, consider planting them in your garden or on the creek bank. These shrubs are adapted to dry summers, are very varied in their growth habits, and mostly deciduous. Nurseries (for example O'Donnell's in Fairfax and Mostly Natives in Tomales) can give advice as to their requirements for sunlight. In this way you will add to our little wilderness's riches!

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