



Creek Chronicles

Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed

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New Head of County Parks

by Ann Thomas

Now in its 53rd year, Marin County Parks continues to do what it does well: stewarding thousands of acres of land purchased for the people of Marin for open space, natural habitat, scenic values, and recreation.

Chris Chamberlain, who began his career with Marin Parks as a student intern before being hired as a park ranger in 1998, was named in January of this year as Marin Parks Director. He succeeds Max Korten who held the post for eight years, and expects the district to continue its work largely unchanged.

The idea of a park district distinct from other county operations was first broached in the early 1960s by the county's parks and recreation commission. It took a decade before The People for Parks and Open Space was created to work toward establishing the district with a measure on the 1972 November ballot. Parks and Recreation Commission director Pierre Joske, who would become the new Parks District's first administrator, urged approval of the measure to create "a dependable source of money...the only way we can have long-term programs," according to the *Marin Independent Journal*. The measure's approval was widely endorsed: the only opposition was from Irate Taxpayers of Marin.

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*In the Loma Alta Open Space Preserve, bay trees atop a knoll overlook the Fairfax hills.
Photo by Charles Kennard*

Green Light for Creek Project

by Sandy Guldman

For several years, readers of Creek Chronicles have been receiving reports on our progress to restore Corte Madera Creek by removing parts of the concrete channel that constrains it in Kentfield and Ross. We have some exciting news!

A huge milestone has been reached: on June 24 the Board of Supervisors approved a construction contract with Ground Control Inc. for the Lower College of Marin Corte Madera Creek Restoration Project. This project will remove several hundred feet of the concrete channel at its downstream end, below the Stadium Way footbridge. It is a result of much hard work and perseverance from our partners – College of Marin, the Coastal Conservancy, the

Flood Control District, Marin County Parks, and many others.

The heavy equipment can begin working on September 1, 2025. Work in the wetted channel should be complete by October 15 although the restoration will continue in upland areas into early 2026, with the planting of shrubs and trees, the installation of fencing, signage, and seating.

The restored, natural shoreline and revegetation are designed to be resilient to sea level rise and climate change. Public access to and along the creek shoreline will be preserved. Friends secured a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Founda-

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Gardens to Inspire

by Alycia Matz

I parked along the graveled shoulder of Indian Valley Road in Novato, not knowing I was about to feel like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. I walked the paved road, in a world of artificial structures, until I reached the entrance to Home Ground Habitats, where I stepped into a technicolor world of wonder. An explosion of color saturated the garden scene, the finale of a fireworks display captured in floral form.

Home Ground Habitats was just one of nineteen gardens participating in this year's Eco-Friendly Garden Tour. In its fifteenth year, this self-guided tour is organized by the Sonoma-Marín Saving Water Partnership. The partnership comprises thirteen water utilities, including Marin Water, that collaborate to provide regional solutions for water use efficiency. As the climate warms, California is projected to experience an increased number of extremely wet and extremely dry weather seasons. As a result, not only do water agencies need to create robust management strategies for our water supply, but the community needs to do its part to conserve our precious wa-

ter resources for future generations.

To that end, the Eco-Friendly Garden Tour serves as one means of engaging and educating the public about sustainable landscaping practices “by showcasing inspiring gardens throughout Sonoma and Marin counties.” The two gardens I visited as part of the tour, established by Home Ground Habitats and Refugia Marin, were prime examples of what an environmentally conscious garden can be, using mostly native plants.

Home Ground Habitats is a non-profit organic plant nursery and education center founded by Charlotte Torgovitsky in 2011 and supported by a dedicated group of volunteers. Spanning an acre in Novato, the habitat garden and nursery demonstrate that an individual's traditional desires for outdoor space—be it an area to gather with family and friends, a spot to grow food, or a peaceful place to relax while soaking up nature's beauty—can co-exist harmoniously with meeting the needs of wildlife.

In acknowledging that human development has adversely impacted native plant communities and the creatures that co-evolved to rely on

these plants, Home Ground Habitats works to reestablish habitat and all of its assets: food, cover, water, nesting opportunities, and more. Part of how they accomplish this is by having an array of plant types that together proclaim biodiversity. Trees, shrubs, vines, perennials, geophytes, grasses, and annuals all are here, from blue elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*) to California phacelia (*Phacelia californica*) to deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*), to name a few.

Home Ground Habitats' reach extends beyond their literal home grounds. They grow native plants for the Marin Chapter of the California Native Plant Society (Marin CNPS) to sell at their biannual fundraising sales to the public, as well as native plants for restoration projects throughout the Bay Area. These efforts include growing plants for the Lower College of Marin Corte Madera Creek Habitat Restoration Project, which will partially remove a section of concrete channel downstream of the Stadium Way pedestrian bridge, restore 1.44 acres of tidal wetland, transition zone, and upland habitats, and enhance public access. As many readers know, Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed is a sponsor of this restoration work.

Refugia Marin is a nonprofit that works to restore public areas throughout Marin by using native plants and water-wise practices while also educating the community about the countless benefits of native plants. Founded by Dana Swisher in 2021, Refugia Marin carries out this mission by partnering with community leaders, like-minded organizations, and local schools—notably Neil Cummins Elementary. Here, the school's garden has been transformed into a flourishing habitat where youth engage in hands-on learning by actively participating in planting, mulching, and tending the garden.



Shonny penstemon and seaside daisy, planted by Refugia Marin, bloom in full force at Corte Madera's Town Park. Photo by Alycia Matz

They also cultivate their curiosity through outdoor activities such as nature journaling, where students use all their senses to observe the beauty and benefit of native plant gardens firsthand: western bluebirds flit about, nesting in the garden, the aroma of white sage (*Salvia apiana*) infuses the air, and the literal fruits of the students' labor, from manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* "Emerald Carpet" hybrid) to toyon (*Heteromeles californica*), gradually ripen. Therein, the next generation of ecological stewards begins to blossom.

Corte Madera's Town Park is just one of several native plant restoration projects spearheaded by Refugia Marin. Dana related to me how this city property had been covered in weeds and she felt that it had so much untapped potential. She sought approval from the Town of Corte Madera to install a native plant landscape, with funds from local organizations such as Marin CNPS to accomplish the work. Now, this once-neglected area is bright with all shades of the rainbow, from the familiar, cheerful orange of our state flower, the California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*), to the electric purple of showy penstemon (*Penstemon spectabilis*), whose scientific name leaves no question as to the extraordinarily showy appearance of this perennial flower.

Refugia Marin, with Friends of Corte Madera Creek and Marin CNPS, has advocated for inclusion of native plants in the new Larkspur Library landscaping plan. Speaking up for incorporation of native plants in urban projects is vital, as too often planting palettes consist of limited, primarily non-native plants that result in homogeneity and provide little ecological value. Case in point: in the Town of Corte Madera's "Recommended Street Tree List," published this May, only three of the 14 species are native to California.

So, what exactly makes these organizations' gardens earn the distinction of "sustainable," per the Eco-Friendly Garden Tour's mis-



An array of native plants installed by Refugia Marin, including California poppy and mauve De La Mina Verbena show off their vibrant colors at Corte Madera's Town Park. Photo by Alycia Matz

sion? Using a diverse mixture of native plants is essential. From the Sonoma-Marín Saving Water Partnership's standpoint, native plants are a boon to water conservation efforts. Since native plants have evolved to withstand California's dry summer climate, they need less water to survive than non-native plants. A City of Santa Monica study compared a native garden to a traditional garden in adjacent residential front yards and found that the native garden used 83% less water on average.

Another unifying feature of both Home Ground Habitats and Refugia Marin's gardens? No lawn. A traditional grass lawn requires more water than native plants do, as well as other resources involved in lawn management. Routine mowing, fertilizing, and chemical applications, from herbicides to fungicides, not only create more maintenance work for the lawn owner but can contribute to increased water pollution. To not discount the value many people find in having a lawn, there are native plants, such as red fescue (*Festuca rubra*) and meadow sedge (*Carex prae-gracilis*), that have a similar look and feel to non-native turf grasses without the same high maintenance re-

quirements. Overall, native plants have fewer maintenance demands and many are adapted to the insect pests and diseases of our region.

Often, insects are not just "pests" to be avoided. Home Ground Habitats says it best: "When designing your habitat garden, plant for the insects first—all else will follow!" Many native insects co-evolved with native plants, which insects rely on for nectar, pollen, food, and nesting sites, while plants, in turn, depend on them for pollination. During my short visits to each garden, I saw at least two dozen native bee species, as well as monarchs, gulf fritillaries, dragonflies, and beetles. The persistent hum of bees serenaded my garden visits, an orchestra in miniature. A staffer at Refugia Marin also shared a personal anecdote that he has seen more pollinators not only at the Town Park garden as a result of the native plant restoration work but also in his yard just a few streets down. Whether it is the reality or simply a result of the act of learning to observe, of developing an awareness of our non-human neighbors, either is valuable. The insects that native plants draw to the garden are

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Marin Parks

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The ballot measure garnered about two thirds voter approval to create the new Marin Parks district along with funding for the district separate from the County's general fund. The measure set the boundaries of Marin County as the boundaries of the new park district, made the Marin County Board of Supervisors the governing board for the district, and authorized funding to come from 10 cents per \$100 assessed valuation of properties in the district. The new district's first goal, according to the *Independent Journal*, would be acquisition of "certain lands under pressure from development: North Ridge between Mill Valley, Corte Madera, and Larkspur; Mount Burdell near Novato; China Camp near San Rafael, and the ridge running along the Tiburon Peninsula." These first goals were accomplished, followed by many more.

Marin County Parks District now manages 34 open space preserves totaling more than 18,000 acres, 43 park facilities, 14 beaches/wetlands/marshes, and seven paved multi-use pathways. It also adminis-

ters several county service areas and a landscape and lighting district, each with its own operating budget. The department staff consists of 93 full-time staff plus an additional 65 seasonal employees during the peak recreation and construction season. The 2025–26 budget is projected to be about \$31 million, half of the funding coming from general county funds along with grants from state and federal agencies, the other half coming from the one-quarter cent sales tax first approved by voters as Measure A in 2013, and reimplemented in 2022.

Public input to help guide the District is offered by the Marin County Parks and Open Space Commission, comprised of seven at large public members, each serving two years. The Commission's purpose is to study, help formulate, and make recommendations for plans and strategies related to acquisition, development, and management of the county parks, open space, and trail systems.

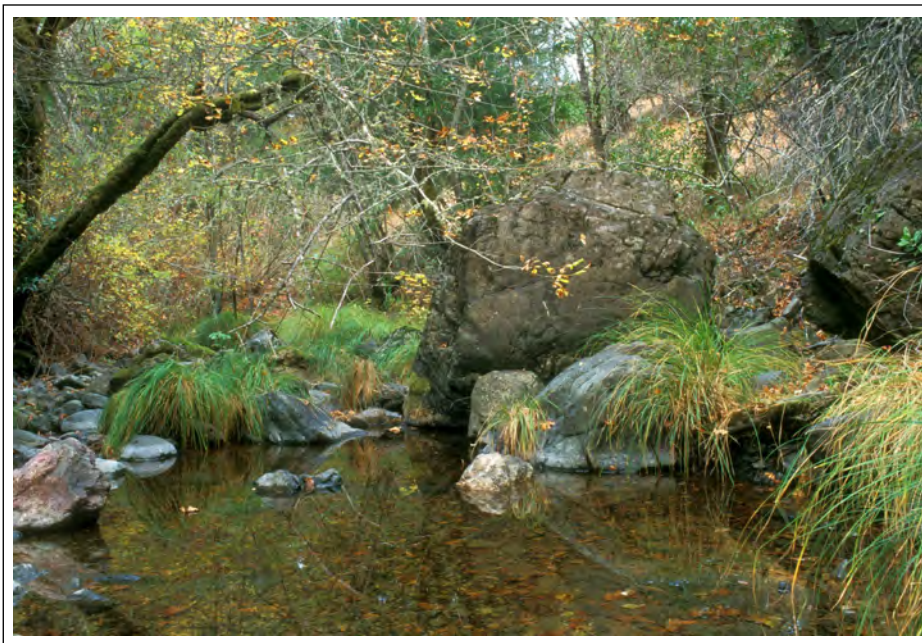
In a time of generally tightening budgets and challenges, Chamberlain said the Parks District does not expect any change to operations. "We are closely monitoring our revenues, communicating regularly with our

grant program managers to make sure all is still going as planned, and staying connected with the County Executive and Budget Manager," he said. The Parks District, he added, is "extremely fortunate" to have the funding provided by the Measure A sales tax that enables "a fairly limited dependency on the County's General Fund. If sales tax or property tax revenues slump, we may consider delaying some projects, but we are not there currently, and we are hopeful we don't get there."

Over the past eight years the district has completed many of the major acquisitions outlined in its long-term strategic plan, including one on Bald Hill in the Corte Madera Creek Watershed. This means more focus can be put on maintenance and operations of the parks and preserves, including restoration and accessibility, pathway improvements, and ensuring fire roads are accessible to emergency responders. "Still," Chamberlain said, "we will evaluate opportunities and work closely with the Board of Supervisors to support their priorities."

Marin County Parks works in partnership with other agencies on specific projects, a major effort being the One Tam collaborative, devoted to joint work on Mount Tamalpais. Along with Marin County Parks, the partnership includes Marin Water, National Park Service, California State Parks, and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. This partnership has helped leverage millions of dollars in outside grants and philanthropic donations to support work on Mount Tamalpais.

Marin County Parks, Chamberlain said, "prides ourselves on being accessible to the community, including members of local committees and commissions, and on supporting community efforts where it makes sense." He noted the 2024 acquisition of the Bald Hill summit, which involved close coordination with the San Anselmo Open Space Committee and Marin Open Space Trust.



Leaves in fall color hang over San Anselmo Creek in the Cascade Canyon Open Space Preserve. Photo by Charles Kennard

Of the Parks District preserves and parks, the Corte Madera Creek watershed includes about two thousand acres, including some of the district's most-prized properties. These include the following:

Baltimore Canyon Open Space Preserve Located in Larkspur, this 193-acre preserve features lush forests and scenic Dawn Falls Trail. It protects the upper watershed of Larkspur Creek, a tributary of Corte Madera Creek.

Corte Madera Pathway The popular 3.5-mile multiuse pathway along the creek from Larkspur to Ross, is accessible to people of all abilities, with scenic creek views.

Hal Brown Park at Creekside The 27-acre Kentfield park offers walking paths with Mount Tam views, a playground, benches, and picnic tables. Wetland areas protect wildlife and sensitive habitat. Endangered Ridgway's rails breed in the marsh and many other birds are found here.

King Mountain Open Space Preserve Adjacent to Baltimore Canyon, overlooking Kentfield and Larkspur, the preserve offers panoramic views and connections to other trail systems.

Loma Alta Open Space Preserve This preserve includes the prominent Loma Alta peak, one of the highest points in the county, and offers trails with expansive views. Its slopes contribute to four watersheds including the headwaters feeding into the Corte Madera Creek system.

Terra Linda/Sleepy Hollow Divide Open Space Preserve Situated near San Anselmo, this preserve has ridgelines that form part of the watershed's boundary.

White Hill Open Space Preserve Located near Fairfax, White Hill features mixed woodlands and grasslands, playing a role in the watershed's ecology by supporting various wildlife species.

Cascade Canyon Open Space Preserve This preserve protects the



Springtime view from White's Hill towards Mount Tamalpais. Photo by Charles Kennard

headwaters of San Anselmo Creek, a major tributary of Corte Madera Creek, and offers trails through oak woodland and chaparral, and along cascading streams. It offers excellent spawning habitat for salmonids, and foothill yellow-legged frogs are permanent residents in the canyon.

Bald Hill Open Space Preserve Overlooking the Ross Valley, the Bald Hill Preserve provides critical habitat and recreational trails.

Ring Mountain Bridging the hill between Tiburon and Corte

Madera on the watershed's southern end, with trails accessible from Paradise Drive, the 385-acre preserve has a storied past including a stint as a Cold War military installation, along with serpentine soils that support the endemic Tiburon mariposa lily.

Along with parks and preserve operations, the Parks District offers the public a monthly calendar of open space walks, habitat restoration workdays, and coffees with rangers. Information can be found on their website at parks.marincounty.gov

Green Light for Creek Project

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tion for the revegetation component of the project and will start salvaging wetland plants from the work area with hand tools in mid-August. The plants to be salvaged include pickleweed, saltgrass, jaumea, marsh lavender, gum plant, alkali heath, and bulrush. Because the area to be planted is much larger than the area where we are salvaging plants, the Watershed Nursey is growing almost 6,000 of the same species for planting in the project area.

The salvaged plants will be stored in shallow pools until they can

be replanted when the final grade is established in the area inundated by tides. We had great success at plant salvage several years ago when the culvert near Bon Air Bridge was replaced, so we are optimistic that this effort will succeed.

We will be recruiting volunteers to help keep the plants in the pools wet, from mid-August until mid-October when they can be replanted. If you are interested in helping with this effort, please let Sandy Guldman know at sandra.guldman@gmail.com or 415 456-5052.

Bridge over Puddled Water

by Sandy Guldman

Marin County Parks held a celebration at Hal Brown Park on April 14 with a dual purpose. First, the party honored Neil Park, a local resident and driving force behind the formation of Creekside Park, (since renamed in honor of the late supervisor Hal Brown) and active in its management for decades. The celebration also included the ribbon cutting for a new bridge, which replaced a short wooden bridge and a frequently-flooded asphalt path.

Visitors to the park can celebrate the new bridge for a variety of reasons. Even at high tides, the bridge will not be underwater. This allows users to skip the detour on Bon Air Road when the shortcut is flooded. Some kids will miss riding their bikes through the puddles, in spite of parental admonitions to keep their bikes out of the saltwater!

Removal of the supports for the old bridge and the asphalt path provide opportunities for more tidal wetland vegetation—we expect pickleweed, saltgrass, and jaumea to spread into those regularly inundated areas in coming months. Marin County Parks' Kirk Schroeder had led volunteers in planting in areas



Officials and park supporters gather at the opening of a new bridge over Creekside Marsh in Hal Brown Park, adjacent to Corte Madera Creek. Photo by Gustavo Perez.

not regularly inundated by tides.

Another more subtle benefit is a big improvement in drainage. Even though the asphalt path was underwater at high tides, it was still slightly higher than the surrounding area and it prevented the saltwater from draining normally as the tide retreated. The result was an area of very

high salinity and pH, hostile even to plants that tolerate tidal inundation. The conditions were so bad that not even invasive cordgrasses and Russian thistle could grow there.

We look forward to a healthier environment, better habitat for birds using marsh, and improved water quality near the new bridge.

Is That a Fish or Gravel?

by Gerhard Epke

Sculpin is a small fish that lives in Corte Madera Creek, doing its best to avoid detection by very effective camouflage and remaining still. Even though there are at least three kinds here, many people don't notice them. When most people hear the word "sculpin," they think of the Ballast Point beer or bigger saltwater fish, like scorpionfish. But just like other native fish such as the California roach and three-spine stickleback, sculpin play an important role in our local ecosystem. Entire populations of them eat, breed, migrate, and die in our streams and estuaries year after year.

Sculpin live at the bottom of the water column, hiding among rocks on the streambed. They are small, usually only 1 or 2 inches long in our stream, although some of the species that use the estuary can grow up to 6 or 8 inches. They mostly hunt at night, looking for bugs and other small prey. During the day, they stay still and hidden because they are also hunted by larger fish and other predators. Sculpin have big heads and large side fins, which make them look a bit like tadpoles, but they have superior camouflage and their fins have sharp rays that help protect them from predators.

They belong to the genus *Cottus*, which includes species found all over the world. The group was first named by Carl Linnaeus, who classified the European bullhead. Sculpin are also sometimes called muddlers or stargazers. They are part of a group of fish called Perciformes, or perch-like fish. Most Perciformes live in the ocean, but some, like sculpin and sticklebacks, adapted to freshwater.

One of the biggest local sculpin species is the cabezon, which lives in the ocean among kelp beds, rocky reefs, and tide pools. Another species, the Pacific staghorn sculpin,

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Gardens to Inspire

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all part of the complex web of life. As the insects discover the native garden landscape, other animals that feed upon the insects arrive as well—birds, reptiles, and mammals. All these creatures, too, rely on native plants, be it for food, nesting materials, or shelter.

You may now be pondering, “How can I make my outdoor space more eco-friendly?” Or simply, “How can I make my outdoor space pop with vibrant color?” For starters, the Friends’ website has much useful information, at friendsofcor-temaderacreek.org. Sonoma-Marín Saving Water Partnership, Home Ground Habitats, and Refugia Marin all provide informative resources as well. The Sonoma-Marín Saving Water Partnership provides tips geared toward water efficiency, such as setting night-time watering schedules to reduce water loss from evaporation and wind and using drip-irrigation. It also provides links to rebates and incentives, such as Marin Water’s “Cash for Grass” lawn replacement program, wherein customers may receive a rebate of up to \$4.68 per square foot for replacing grass in their landscapes. Home Ground Habitats offers on-site classes and workshops, such as plant propagation methods. Charlotte also occasionally teaches a six-part series at the College of Marin, titled *Watershed Approach to Landscaping*, based on a free, downloadable handbook published by Marin Water, to which Charlotte contributed. Refugia Marin provides helpful links to native plant lists and, just as importantly, what not to grow. They also have upcoming volunteer opportunities, which is a perfect way to learn about native plant landscaping while building community with others who are passionate about our local ecosystems. Other considerations for getting started with native plant gardening include:

Explore our watershed: ob-

serving native plant associations in nature can be an inspiration or model.

Familiarize yourself with trusted resources: CNPS and its product, CalScape, are great for acquiring native plant information, gardening tips, and design templates.

Get to know your outdoor space: factors such as sun exposure, soil conditions, slopes, and wet spots help inform what to plant where.

Keep diversity in mind: including a variety of plant types (such as trees, shrubs, forbs, and grasses), as well as plants that fruit or set seed at different times of the year, will help establish a high-value habitat.

Shop small: support local growers and seed collectors, who are

more likely to have native plants available that are adapted to our region compared to big-box stores.

If just a small fraction of individuals converted their lawns and non-native plantings to native species, how much water would we save, how many more pollinators would we see, and how would our mental health benefit? Rather than a relationship with a garden centered on taming, controlling, and homogenizing the landscape, we can form a reciprocal relationship, which sustains diverse lives, which sustains us. This abundance of native plants and wildlife can become the new normal for our landscapes, infusing each day with beauty, revelation, and wonder

Fish or Gravel?

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lives farther up in the San Francisco Bay estuary. It can move between fresh and salt water and where passage is unimpeded, it moves down into the saltwater to lay eggs. In winter, once they are strong enough, fry swim upstream and live in freshwater. This is like a reverse commute, compared to salmonids.

Also inhabiting the lower watershed is the prickly sculpin, *Cottus asper*. This species tolerates different salinities and higher temperatures than others. The prickly sculpin is one of the more widely distributed species of sculpins in California, and has been positively identified in this watershed by several scientific studies but its exact distribution is hard for anyone to tell because a conclusive identification to species level is very hard even for professionals, and often requires killing the fish.

Farther upstream yet, is the habitat of the riffle sculpin, which prefers cool, high-quality headwater stream habitat and often overlaps with steelhead. As the name implies, the riffle sculpin is often found in the gravel substrate of riffles. Researchers from UC Davis recently completed a study of riffle sculpin genetics, and deter-

mined that there are several distinct sub-species in California living on different sides of San Francisco Bay.

This ambiguity of the species boundary is a common theme among the native fishes of our watershed. For example, steelhead and rainbow trout represent two life histories of the same species. Roach elsewhere hybridize with hitch. Isolated populations of sticklebacks rapidly adapt and speciate. Four kinds of sculpin are found in our watershed and no one can tell them apart without analyzing their DNA. Nonetheless, this is a fish worth watching out for, among the pebbles in clear water.



The bottom-dwelling sculpin is well camouflaged to blend in with gravel. Photo courtesy of California Sea Grant

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Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed was formed in 1994 and became a non-profit organization in 1996. Our goals are to protect the health of creeks in our watershed and help the public learn to care for creeks.

Thank You!

Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed wishes to thank the following individuals, agencies, and organizations for their contributions:

- The Coastal Conservancy for continuing to fund our participation in the Invasive Spartina Project and for on-going support of Lower COM Corte Madera Creek Habitat Restoration
- Marin Water's AmeriCorps team for organizing a very successful volunteer workday at Hal Brown Park
- Bio-Marine for suggesting and participating in a creek clean-up event with more than 90 volunteers
- Marin County Parks for support of our work at Hal Brown Park by providing mulch and volunteers, and for providing tools for other volunteer events
- The Environmental Action Club of the College of Marin for restoration work at the Ecology Study Area
- Parker Pringle for diligently installing and monitoring temperature loggers in Ross Creek
- Other dedicated volunteers who make our activities possible, including removal of invasive plants
- The many people who make financial contributions that allow us to continue our day-to-day work

Friends Calendar July-November 2025

Please check www.friendsofcortemaderacreek.org for updates.

July-November: Friends' Board Meetings on third Thursdays at 7:00 p.m. No meetings in December.

Please check the calendar at www.friendsofcortemaderacreek.org for events that are scheduled later in the summer and for agendas and Zoom links for Board meetings. .

Our habitat restoration projects still need care. Please contact us to schedule volunteer opportunities.