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Giving something back

By Barry Eberling

FAIRFIELD - Al Duran in early December 2005 pounded a willow cutting into a dry creekbed that runs along the oak-covered plateau of Rockville Hills Park.

That creek wasn't much to look at, just a depression of cow-trampled mud. But Duran and eight or so other volunteers on this Saturday planted willows, Santa Barbara sedge and other native plants there.

A creekbed recovery job is under way, an effort to turn back the clock. In a few years, the creek should have thriving native vegetation that supports native wildlife.

"This sounded like a worthwhile project," Duran said, adding he wanted to give back to the community.

Volunteers such as Duran are the backbone of many local habitat restoration and trail maintenance efforts. Citizens putting in a few hours on their weekends helps the Fairfield-owned Rockville Hills Park and the open space owned by the Solano Land Trust in the hills between Fairfield and Vallejo.

"Since there is one park ranger, we're very dependent on volunteer groups," Fairfield ranger Teri Geiger said.

Ken Poerner, the land steward for the nonprofit Solano Land Trust, agreed. He's one man overseeing 10,000 acres of open space.

"You can't do it without volunteers," Poerner said.

Duran did different types of volunteer work when he was with the Air Force and still has the urge now that he's retired. But the Vacaville resident had never been in Rockville Hills Park before the creekbed restoration session.

"It's beautiful," he said after he walked up the steep hill to the natural park's main plateau, high above Green Valley and Suisun Valley.

Geiger is not looking for environmental restoration experts, she's just looking for people who are willing to help.

"You don't need any great experience," she said. "We'll teach you what you need to know."

John Zentner of the Restoration Trust instructed volunteers how to plant the willows, sedges and other native plants. He showed them how to pound the willow cuttings into

the ground with a hammer. Someday, he said, there will be willows all along the creekbed.

Nor will the volunteers have to wait long to see results. He showed a stretch of creek that got planted a year ago. Already, plants are growing and willow cuttings have sprouted a few feet high.

"It can be very quick," Zentner said. "Two to five years, things will look very different."

A different type of project is under way at the Solano Land Trust's Lynch Canyon. Volunteers have helped with a Solano Resource Conservation District research project to find the best ways to plant oaks in cow-trampled pastures.

Four students from Rodriguez High School - Robbie Dittmer, Matt Boughtin, Ryan Loney and Luisa Cortes - were among the 20 or so volunteers in early December 2005. That Saturday morning was sunny, with a cold wind stirring the grasses and the leaves on shrubs.

Volunteers dug holes, lined them with a metal mesh and planted acorns protected by tubes.

"I'm already interested in the environment and trying to make sure nothing worse happens to it and trying to restore it," Boughtin said.

Dittmer comes from a local ranch family. He didn't mind the work.

"Being outside digging holes is probably the best thing you can do," he said.

A Rodriguez High School advanced placement environmental science class and Dixon High School students also do habitat restoration work in Lynch Canyon on weekdays. This is part of a program sponsored by the Center for Land-Based Learning and SLEWS, two groups that get Central Valley students involved with farming and the environment.

Rodriguez teacher John Salerno-White sees advantages to having the pupils do hands-on work in Lynch Canyon.

"It's really an outdoor classroom for the students," he said.

Salerno-White can envision his students returning to the restoration areas years from now. Perhaps they'll have a picnic with their children under an oak they planted, he said.

Duran plans to return in future years to the Rockville Hills Park creekbed he and his 19-year-old son Adrian helped plant.

"Absolutely," he said.

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