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Wagner Ranch Nature Area is gearing up, welcoming students back

By Sora O'Doherty



Toris Jaeger feeds ducks at the Wagner Ranch Nature Area. Photos Sora O'Doherty

Excitement is building at Wagner Ranch Nature Area, a site for outdoor learning next to Wagner Ranch Elementary School in Orinda, where OUSD students have come back to outdoor learning at reduced numbers and some interesting projects are taking shape. There will be six weeks of summer camps, and a new project is hoped to provide revenue for the nature area.

The nature area is staffed by teacher and naturalist Toris Jaeger and many volunteers who come each Sunday to work in the garden. Volunteers may be children or adults, and come from groups such as the Boys Team Charity, the National Charity League, Others First Middle School and the Miramonte Environmental Club. For many years Eagle Scouts have built projects at the nature area, such as bridges and bat boxes, which were found to house many bats last year when a controlled burn of the meadow at the nature area was undertaken. Boy Scouts recently enjoyed an overnight at the nature area.

Starting earlier this year, the nature area has been offering abbreviated versions of its usual programs, including Animal Camp, Rancho Days, and Pioneer Days to all students in the Orinda Union School District area four days per week. Limited to 14 students at a time, the programs have been running on an alternating Monday/Wednesday, Tuesday/Thursday schedule.

Dr. Reg Barrett, a professor emeritus at UC Berkeley and a board member of the Friends of the Nature Area, has just begun conducting a year-long wildlife study project using motion sensitive cameras with about 12 high school students from four schools. The nature area is home to birds of prey, songbirds, ducks, bats, turtles, red-legged frogs, lizards, snakes, coyotes, opossums, brush rabbits and raccoons.

Another board member of the Friends, Jane Voll has been putting together richly detailed focus folders, starting with redwood trees, for teachers and interested visitors to the nature area. Another folder on oak trees is under development.

Arman Marchiel, an alumnus of the nature area who is now at UC Berkeley is preparing the olive grove for harvesting as an academic project. It is hoped that the grove will produce oil that can be sold to increase revenues devoted to the nature area.

Volunteers have been busy planting seeds, and seedlings are filling the greenhouse at the nature area, soon to be planted out into the carefully tended beds. Jaeger is on hand to teach volunteers, many of whom are children, about the plants. For example, the three sisters refers to the indigenous crops corn, beans and squash. The three sisters not only help us, but they help each other. Corn supports the beans, and squash plants shade the roots of the others.

Jaeger loves working with young people. She believes that they are going to lead, "they have the passion." There are three high school students, sometimes four, on the board of the Friends, who are very dedicated, and come every Sunday to volunteer, Jaeger says. Two of the students attend Miramonte, one attends Monte Vista in Danville. Mallika Dandamundi, represents Miramonte and Talia Sandher represents Monte Vista. Another young volunteer is Brett Morici, who isn't on the board, but her mother, Yvonne Morici, works and teaches with Jaeger. Morici built all the wire covers on the raised beds in the garden.

All fourth-grade students in the district recently concluded Native Studies at the nature area.

Third-graders are taking Animal Camp. Pioneer Days for fifth-graders ended in March.

The nature area will now be offering after school programs. While the nature area will not provide lunch, the children bring their lunches. They maintain 3 feet of separation with masks on, 6 feet with masks off to eat their lunches.

The Summer Camp program will begin on June 7, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. every day for children ages 5 to 12. Another session is scheduled for three weeks in July beginning July 12. Currently the nature area is limited to 14 children at a time, but Jaeger is hopeful that the number will be increased soon, perhaps to 20. In the future there are plans for an open house at the end of September, but more details will be made public later.

The natural area is supported in part by the Friends of the Wagner Ranch Nature Area, as well as the Orinda Union School District. More info can be located on the Friends of the Wagner Ranch Nature Area website, www.fwrna.org



The Three Sisters who help each other. Corn, beans and squash help each other grow and help you when you eat them! Photos Sora O'Doherty

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