

Conservation in Action

Spring 2025



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Education – the heart of our work

Environmental education is synonymous with Audubon Canyon Ranch – it is in our DNA and, in one way or another, we have been educating for our entire 63-year history. I am proud of this.

At a time when very few organizations were providing environmental education, the volunteer-run Audubon Canyon Ranch was leading the way. Our earliest educators knew that the environment was threatened and recognized that helping young people discover and understand nature was a critical way to build a society that cares for our planet.

Today, “why” we educate is not so different. We are aware that people have the capacity to care for what they love, yet not everyone has the chance to learn to love the natural world that sustains us.

In many ways, “how” we do the work is similar. We value small participant groups allowing for more individualized attention, and we rely on amazing volunteers to deliver the experience.

In other ways, our approach has evolved to match decades of research on what is most effective and needed. Our model includes:

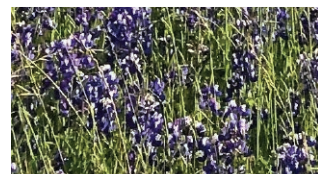
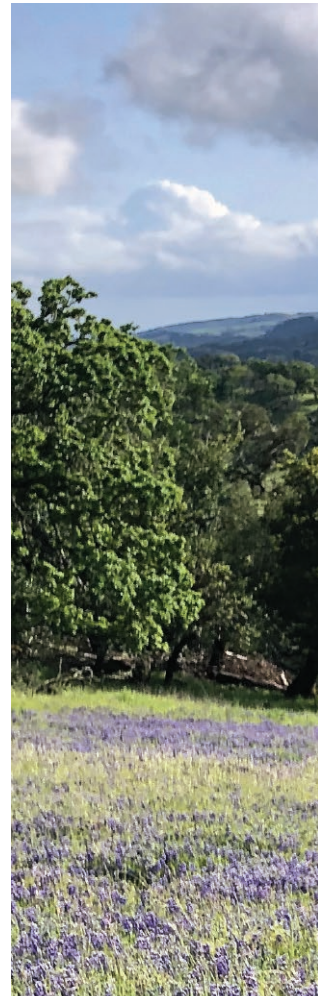
- We are committed to quality over quantity, pouring intention into the design and delivery of every experience we offer.
- Our work is inclusive and student-centered, prioritizing their development, being flexible in the moment, and valuing life skills alongside scientific knowledge.
- We cultivate social-emotional awareness of oneself and in relation to nature to nurture deep feelings that empower action.
- Our work is community-oriented and seeks to foster lasting relationships.

We appreciate everyone who has and continues to support our education programs, in so many ways. Our volunteers in particular pour their hearts into the work, and we are grateful to them.

Thank you all.



Tom Gardali, CEO



Education docents, trainees, and staff gather for a seasonal ‘refresher’ training at Martin Griffin Preserve, Stinson Beach. Photo: Catie Clune



A prescribed burn conducted last fall on this southwest-facing slope shared by Bouverie Preserve and Sonoma County Regional Parks may have provided just the right conditions for wildflowers to overtake non-native annual grasses by mid-March, thrilling visitors and staff alike. Photo: Wendy Coy



Resilient Lands and Waters: Good Fire

Jane Anderson & Tess Ayers: Ambassadors for tending Marin grassland with good fire

by Erika Lutz, Prescribed Fire Information Coordinator

Jane Anderson and Tess Ayers have called their ranch along the Nicasio Reservoir “home” since 1995. Over the years, they watched the surrounding grasslands become thick with coyote brush and thatch. When an opportunity to purchase the neighboring land arose, they leapt.

“We have this incredible piece of land. We saw that it was overgrown and needed managing,” recalls Anderson. After learning selective grazing would require fencing, water, and an onsite animal caretaker, a friend suggested using fire. “I was like... fire?! I’m not so sure. But I looked up your website and was impressed with the rigor and the care in work that you do, so I applied.”

A turning point on the ranch

In October 2024, 40 fire practitioners gathered to burn the first 14 acres under a plan developed by our Fire Forward team. Supporting agencies included Marin Fire Department and Nicasio Volunteer Fire Department as well as volunteers from the Good Fire Alliance.

“It surprised me how truly controlled it felt. There was never a moment when I thought, ‘Uh oh, something bad is going to happen,’” Ayers reflects about their experience. Anderson offers, “Maybe that comes from how you move. You know the dance of it, how to choreograph people and fire. It just felt like, ‘This isn’t scary, it’s actually really beautiful.’”

Fire-adapted species unveil botanical richness

Black has turned to green after a winter of heavy rains. The couple inspects areas where they sowed native grass and wild-flower seed after the burn.

“Did we see this before?” Ayers asks. “No, and it wasn’t in the seed mix,” replies Anderson, referencing the poppies and yarrow that have also come up. “I walk here all the time and I’ve never seen irises before. This is bunch grass coming up over here. But this... what is this??” Anderson points to fragrant fritillary (*Fritillaria liliacea*), a rare and endangered lily endemic to coastal grasslands in the San Francisco Bay Area.

“You get rid of what was crowding it out and you see there’s a lot of rich stuff buried down there.” Fire plays an important role in supporting the survival of fragrant fritillary and grassland biodiversity as a whole. “Fritillary...” Anderson marvels. “That’s just fantastic.”

Making strides for stewardship in Marin’s coastal community

The experience deeply inspired the couple, sparking plans to host a community gathering and post-fire walk with neighbors and land managers in West Marin.

At right, aerial photography of the prescribed burn captured by Jane Anderson’s brother, Tom.



Seeing is believing on post-burn fire walks

"Seeing the difference between what fire touched and where the land was overgrazed is a good lesson. What happened is so inspiring, you really have to see it to believe it."

– Jane Anderson & Tess Ayers

Clockwise from top: Jane Anderson and Tess Ayres with unmanaged land on left and land managed with fire on right; Ayers holds a fragrant fritillary blossom; Anderson plucks thistle from burn area with her dog Olive; footprints of spring (*Sanicula arctopoides*), a native perennial in the carrot family; a deer antler amongst sprouting bunch grass signals the presence of wildlife. Photos by Erika Lutz.



Meet your neighbors: Mountain lion ambassadors bring science and inspiration to the classroom

by Anne C. Mitchell, Communications Specialist

“How high can a mountain lion jump?”

Sherry Wright, mountain lion ambassador, asks this question to a room of 30 third graders at Liberty Elementary School in Petaluma.

A sea of hands shoots up. “Alright, it looks like you ALL know the answer,” says Wright. “Say it together!”

Wright waves her hands like a conductor as the students exclaim, “15 FEET!”

Wright’s fellow ambassador, Barbara Madick, pulls out a 40-foot length of rope, which the classroom teacher, Mrs. Tunzi, and Madick drape across the classroom, demonstrating the real-life distance a lion can leap when running.

Eager and excited for science

Through Audubon Canyon Ranch’s Our Wild Neighbors program, science is coming alive in Sonoma County classrooms. In 2024, lion ambassadors visited 46

classes and reached a total of 1,100 elementary and middle school students with multi-media slideshows, demonstrations, and hands-on activities to teach mountain lion research techniques and conservation.

At Liberty Elementary School, the students are eager and ready for the presentation. Wright noted afterward that the kids had excellent vocabulary, understanding terms and concepts like “cache” and “habitat.” They were geared up because Tunzi prepped them ahead of time with curriculum from Audubon Canyon Ranch.

Before the presentation, Tunzi received mountain lion educational materials from Liz Martins, school programs manager, and accessed accompanying videos from the Audubon Canyon Ranch website. Tunzi used “Meet Luna the Puma,” a 16-page activity book written from the perspective of a female mountain lion to teach mountain lion life history and ecology.

Wright also noted that Tunzi’s students were engaged during the presentation, which she called “typical” of



Left: In 2024, lion ambassadors visited 46 classrooms in Sonoma, Napa, and Marin counties; Center: Mountain lion ambassadors Barbara Madick and Sherry Wright.; Right: a mountain lion skull is featured in pre-visit activity booklet available in English and Spanish. Photos: Anne C. Mitchell.



classes that learn the preparation curriculum. During this presentation, all eyes are focused on the ambassadors and the room is awash with excitedly raised hands.

Finding solutions to relevant issues

The ambassadors introduce students to data collection techniques, teaching students to read maps with GPS data points from actual North Bay mountain lion tracking coordinates used for analyzing territory and behavior. Ambassadors also teach about the critical role of female lions in raising cubs, which elicits a chorus of “awwws” as the students watch trail camera footage of fluffy, spotted kittens.

One lesson that hits home for the students is the importance and responsibility of protecting livestock and pets, and how this also protects mountain lions. This lesson is especially relevant because Liberty Elementary School serves a rural population in Petaluma with families more likely to have livestock and outdoor pets. “I think it’s important for the students to understand that they may be living in a mountain lion’s home site,” said Madick. “It’s our responsibility to take care of our domesticated animals and keep them safe.”

Above: Madick shares with students her first-hand account of a mountain lion being collared on her land.

Editor’s note: Readers may be asking why no children are shown in this article. We are careful to obtain permission from people featured in our stories; in this case the school did not allow photos of their students.



Mountain lion skull

Conservation grazing aids in bringing back grasslands and the species that depend on them

by Wendy Coy, Director of Communications

Just after first light on Cypress Grove Preserve, Jim Jensen is making his morning rounds, managing a flock of sheep who are helping us care for the land. The sheep have nibbled through the shrubland within their temporary enclosure and have their sights on what is just out of reach.

At Jensen's arrival, a few of the veterans start to bellow. He moves the electric netting, then with a few whistles, the sheep race to the new plot, crunching through the brush and trampling the dense vegetation.

Jensen, who is land steward of our Tomales Bay preserves, has been looking for ways to bring back native grasslands on the coastal properties. He believes the sheep may be part of the solution.

California's coastal prairies are the most species-rich grassland types in North America. Over 250 species of wildflowers and grassland-dependent mammals,

birds, insects, and reptiles rely on coastal prairie, yet less than 1% of historic native coastal grasslands remain.

Moving from “protected” to “disturbed” to save coastal grasslands

“These prairies are sustained by disturbances that knock down encroachment by shrubs and trees,” explains Jensen. “Historically, herds of elk and deer were grazing up and down the coast and burrowing animals provided more disturbance. Coast Miwok were likely using fire to maintain open areas and regenerate plant communities they relied upon.”

But a prevailing mindset that nature should be left alone on protected lands like Cypress Grove Preserve removed the cycle of disturbance, giving way to trees, shrubs, and non-native vegetation.



Sheep from True Grass Farms graze on non-native annual grasses and coyote brush at Cypress Grove Preserve on the eastern shore of Tomales Bay. Photos: Nils Warnock



"The raptors and sparrows are moving in for easy hunting and seeds left behind, the quail are dusting themselves in newly bare areas, and cottontail rabbits are bounding in for the tender clovers."

— Jim Jensen, Tomales Bay Land Steward & Preserve Manager



Photo: Elizabeth Hollis

A multi-year case study

Jensen's years of experience grazing sheep and cattle in West Marin led him to develop a multi-year case study for restoring an area of the preserve that converted from hayfields to coyote brush over the past 50 years.

"We think that grazing may help us provide space and sunlight for long dormant native grasses and wildflowers," Jensen offers.

The herd spends 2-3 months on the preserve in the late summer-early fall. They are thinning coyote brush and reducing decades of potentially flammable thatch under power lines. Along with the much-needed disturbance, they leave behind rich manure and open areas for wildlife.

Throughout the study, True Grass Farms has supplied the sheep. Fibershed provided funds for the fencing and Point Blue Conservation Science helped Jensen set up a system to track changes in the soil and plant conditions.

Where the herd leads, wildlife and insights follow

"Much of this trial project is observation," says Jensen. He's seeing an uptick in the number of birds using the area, finding seeds in the exposed soil. Hawks and owls perch above the newly opened fields, bobcats and coyotes on the hunt also have easier access to below-ground prey, like California voles and pocket gophers.

Future strategies are surfacing as well. For example, switching the timing to late spring may help to reduce bolting annual grasses and make room for later arriving native perennial grasses.

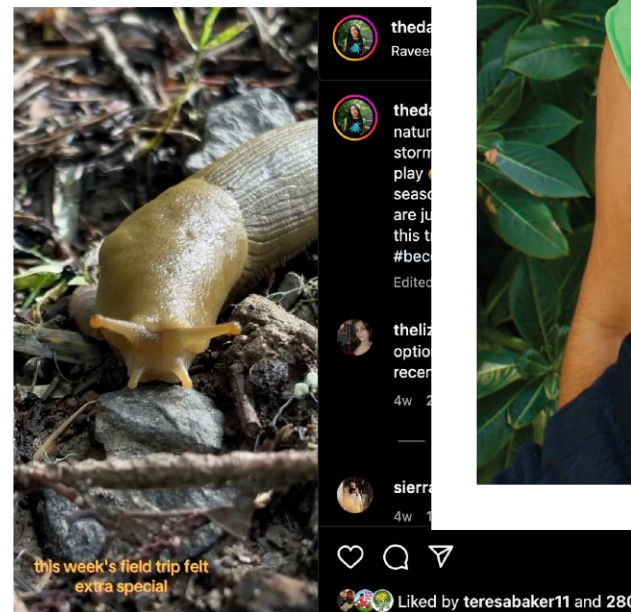
By noon the flock have gathered in a shady spot, ruminating. That leaves Jensen time to reflect as well.

"If we hadn't acted, the coyote brush would continue to take over and wildfire fuels would continue to increase, year after year."



We all have a role to play: Reflections from the California Naturalist program

by Anne C. Mitchell, Communications Specialist



Left: Audubon Canyon Ranch's 2025 class of California Naturalists gather at Duxbury Reef for a day of exploration. Photo: Catie Clune for CalNat; Right: Daisy Prado has chronicled the experience on her Instagram account, @thedaisypado.

Daisy Prado, San Francisco resident and community advocate, had a dream of studying marine biology. Instead, her studies took her to Arizona State, where she received a scholarship in journalism and mass communications. She shared, "As a first generation, low-income kid, you kind of think out of a scarcity mindset. Why not go for the free public education?"

Her passion for natural sciences didn't wane. "There's always been a part of me that wondered, 'What if,'" Prado added.

The question of "what if" followed Prado to the Bay Area after college. In 2023, Prado found herself at Audubon Canyon Ranch's Martin Griffin Preserve at her first group campout called "We Got Us," an annual retreat organized by a collective of diverse outdoors advocates.

"It was a welcoming environment," said Prado. "Ever since then, if there's anything going on at Audubon Canyon Ranch and I can get there, I will do it."

An inclusive and rewarding educational experience

When the California Naturalist application opened, Prado was curious. Not only was there a childhood dream still tugging at her interests, but she had confidence in Audubon Canyon Ranch's programs. "I trust the Audubon Canyon Ranch team to create an inclusive, comprehensive program where I would not only learn, but I also feel like it was a safe educational space for me to learn and to show up as my authentic self."

Now, three months into the program Prado shared that it has "been one of the most rewarding experiences of my adulthood so far."

The field trips have been moments for Prado to slow down, focus on nature, and connect with childhood wonder. Prado has been sharing her educational journey through videos on social media, showcasing close-ups



of amphibians, capturing the beauty of landscapes, cataloguing colorful discoveries, and chronicling her joy.

Supporting the next generation of leaders in the outdoors

Joy is not the only thing that Prado will be taking away from the program. Prado runs a project called City Gurlz Hike, an urban hike and community collective for Black, Latina, and Indigenous women and nonbinary people to enjoy the outdoors. On these hiking trips with up to 60 hikers, Prado feels better equipped as an outdoor educator.

For Prado, becoming a naturalist is not a destination but a lifetime of curiosity and advocacy for access to nature. She sees her learning as benefitting not only her own interests, but “showing other folks how to be better stewards, especially right now when our public lands are under attack.”

“There isn’t a better time than today, than right now, to deepen your connection with the land, with your community, and with your backyard, whatever it may be, wherever it is. We all have a role to play in this movement to protect our collective home.”

others

Find your joy in nature!

To get out into nature on a City Gurlz Hike, visit Instagram [@CityGurlzHike](#) →

To become a certified California Naturalist or Climate Steward, enroll in a 40+ hour course with an organization in a region near you. https://calnat.ucanr.edu/Take_a_class/ →

Find hikes, tours, volunteer opportunities, and member events on our website, [Egret.org/event-calendar](https://egret.org/event-calendar) →

Check out seasonal treks and trainings from
Sonoma Land Trust →
LandPaths →
Pepperwood →

“There is a role for all of us to play. Find your role, find your community, and plug in because there really isn’t a better time than now to do it.”

— Daisy Prado, City Gurlz Hike





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Photo above: Yuval Helfman,
below: Sashwa Burrous

Sixth Annual Last House Writing Contest

Call for Entries!

Writers of all ages are invited to submit original, unpublished essays or short stories that explore the theme of WATER, an essential element for life.

Over 70% of Earth's surface is covered by water, mostly saltwater, with a very small percentage that is fresh and available for use by plants, insects, wildlife, and humans.

No fee to enter. First, Second, and Third Place winners will be featured in Audubon Canyon Ranch publications. \$500.00 will be awarded to one grand prize winner.

Deadline to enter: May 19. <https://bit.ly/LHwritingcontest> →

We're hiring

Applications being accepted for Director of Prescribed Fire

Audubon Canyon Ranch seeks an experienced prescribed fire professional to lead a team and a movement aimed at stewarding ecosystems, reducing fuel loads, and building community. This role is an exceptional opportunity to advance the use of prescribed fire in the North Bay, California, and beyond.

See job details at egret.org/work-with-us →



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