



# THE ACORN

American River Natural History Association Members' Magazine – Fall 2019



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# Yellow Starthistle: A Prickly Menace

The nasty plant that scratches your ankles as you walk down the trail is most likely yellow starthistle, *Centaurea solstitialis*, an invasive weed in the sunflower family. It was also the plant targeted by mowing that may have sparked this summer's fire.



Native to the Mediterranean region, yellow starthistle was introduced into California in the 1800s, possibly as a crop seed contaminant. Although its initial spread was slow, by the last half of the 20th Century starthistle had become a very serious weed. It now infests up to 15 million California acres, mostly in disturbed sites such as pastures, rangeland and natural areas. It outcompetes native plants, depletes soil moisture, and is a rapid colonizer. Its spines are a nuisance for hikers and it is poisonous to horses.



Yellow starthistle bud in spiny stage (left); full bloom and seed dispersal stages (right).

Photos by Jack Kelly Clark

In spring, along the Effie Yeaw trails and elsewhere, yellow starthistle plants are nowhere to be seen. Grasses and beautiful wildflowers dominate the spring landscape. But by early July, spiny yellow starthistle plants are visible everywhere in the sunny areas of our nature preserve. At first the plants are gray-green and feature spiny buds and cheery yellow flowers, but by late summer, the flowers have dried into tan seed heads and stems have lost their green color. Each flower produces an average of 30 white-plumed seeds and a single plant may yield thousands.

The secret to yellow starthistle's success is its strategic growth habit. Seeds germinate in fall and winter after the rainy season begins. For the first 3 to 5 months plants grow (often unnoticed) as a low rosette of leaves at the soil surface putting all their early effort into developing a very deep root system. As a result, starthistle roots grow much deeper (3 to 4 feet or more) than other annual species and this allows starthistle to access water later in the summer so it can outcompete other plants and take over large swaths of the landscape.

Stems and flower stalks bolt up out of the rosette in late May or June after other plants have started to shrivel. Over the course of 6 to 10 weeks flower buds develop spines, flower, form seeds and dry out. Flowers of various stages may be found on a single plant.



Starthistle grows as a low rosette developing its deep roots for most of winter and spring.

Photo by Joseph M. DiThomaso

Yellow starthistle is very difficult to manage. Mowing can reduce infestations if carried out when 2-5% of plants have started to flower, but proper timing is critical. Mowing too early may stimulate regrowth and harm other competitive plants and mowing too late may spread the seed. Mowing is also difficult on uneven land or land with a lot of rocks and may spark wildfires in dry areas.

A more labor-intensive method is to remove starthistle plants by hand just as plants are bolting and before the spiny flower buds have developed. This method has been used with some success at Effie Yeaw with groups of volunteers moving through an infested area pulling up plants.



Grazing sheep, goats and cattle can reduce infestations, but only if properly timed to target plants just as they are bolting. Short duration, high intensity grazing is best. Burning can kill starthistle and its seeds. However, it also kills potentially competitive desirable alternative plants, and starthistle tends to reestablish itself after a few years. Mowing and/or burning used in combination with herbicides can be more effective, but is not an appropriate strategy for our nature study area.

Several insects and a rust disease that attack yellow starthistle have been imported from areas in the Mediterranean region and released in California to help with control. The insects include 3 weevils and several flies, all of which feed on buds or seeds in their larval stages. These insects are established in the Sacramento area and at least some are present at Effie Yeaw. I have seen their injury on seed heads. Unfortunately, while they can reduce seed production by up to 60%, this isn't enough to reduce infestations below undesirable levels in most locations. USDA scientists are now working with a new biological control agent that attacks roots and stems. If this species becomes available it may be enough to reduce starthistle to more acceptable levels.

The Effie Yeaw staff continue to evaluate protocols for reducing yellow starthistle that will protect native plants and animals and avoid fires on the preserve.



Left: The peacock fly is one of several small flies imported to help control starthistle. This one is laying an egg on a spiny bud. The larvae of this fly will feed inside the flower head and prevent it from setting seed.



Right: The yellow starthistle hairy weevil was imported from Greece and is now widespread in our area. Its larvae can destroy up to 100% of seeds in seed heads.

Photos by Jack Kelly Clark

## Quick Action Thwarts July Fire

Mary Louise Flint

At about 10 AM on July 3, a mower being used to control yellow starthistle sparked a fire at the intersection of the Main and Natoma trails at Effie Yeaw.

Quick thinking by staff and volunteers prevented injury to visitors and wildlife and a speedy response from the Sacramento Metro Fire Department kept the fire from spreading beyond about an acre.



July fire on the Main Trail. Photo by Kristen Angelini.

Fire crews arrived within 10 minutes of the 911 call, sending three fire engines and ground crews as well as a helicopter that scooped buckets of water from the river to dump on the flames. Fire fighters also tapped into Effie Yeaw's fire suppression system of pipes within the Nature Study Area.

The animal care staff and volunteers moved Effie Yeaw's animals (about 30 in all including birds, amphibians and reptiles) out of the Nature Center and into the parking lot. Birds rested in enclosures in an air conditioned car while other animals remained in the shade on rolling carts in their carriers in case they needed to be moved further. Even Natoma the rattlesnake was evacuated.

The fire was contained within an hour and visitors were allowed back into the reserve by early afternoon after fire fighters cleared the hot spots.

The fire burned grass, starthistle and other herbaceous plants over about an acre. Several oak trees suffered injury, but none appear to have been killed. I checked in with staff a couple of days after the fire about possible impact



to wildlife. Hours after the fire, Volunteer Coordinator and Bird-Nerd Rachael Cowan saw tree swallows and an ash-throated flycatcher rummaging in their nesting cavities in two of the burned trees. Lead Naturalist Brena Seck spotted a ground squirrel poking its head out of a burrow in the burned zone—just checking out its territory. These stories are anecdotal, but it appears the fire's impact on wildlife was probably minimal.

We were lucky this fire didn't cause more damage. The fire was spotted almost immediately, there was no wind, the Nature Center was open and had many volunteers and staff at hand to help, and the fire department responded very quickly. However, the fire also demonstrated the preparedness of Effie Yeaw Center with staff and volunteers quickly kicking into high gear to follow existing fire protocols.

The fire has stimulated staff to consider how the Center's emergency response plans can be improved in the future. Staff are working closely with Metro Fire on this effort. They are also looking at safer ways to manage the yellow starthistle problem (see yellow starthistle article). And Effie Yeaw Naturalists are very interested in following the fire's impact on the plants in the burned area. Perhaps we will see new or more wildflowers and less starthistle in that area next year?



Sacramento Metro Fire sent a helicopter and several engines to battle the blaze. Photo by Kristen Angelini.

## President's Message, Fall 2019

Happy Fall to everyone! This will be my last message to you as the president of ARNHA/Effie Yeaw Nature Center. It has been an honor to serve the organization as president for the past three years and I look forward to continuing to serve in other ways in the coming year. The Nature Study Area is always an amazing place, but it is one place in the Sacramento region that really has the feel of fall. The colors are more muted and tend toward the browns, reds and golds and the young animals born in spring are looking a little more grown up. The heat of summer backs off a bit and evening comes sooner.

School programs start up again in full force, bringing in young people who may be experiencing nature up close for the first time. NatureFest, on September 22nd, is one of the largest events we host. It brings organizations and companies that are connected to the environment together in one place. Children and adults can learn about our local treasures and services through direct contact and hands on activities.

The Annual Holiday Sale will be a bit earlier this year. November 23rd is the magic date. The new date aligns our sale with the beginning of the holiday shopping season and avoids conflicting with other events in the area that you might want to attend. The opportunity to purchase unique, nature related gifts for young and not so young, shouldn't be missed.

As the frenzy of summer calms and we begin our own process of nesting for the winter, there are many ways you can support the wonderful work here at the Effie Yeaw Nature Center. One way is the gift of time. We have an amazing cadre of volunteers without whom we couldn't stay open, but there is always room for more. Rachael, our Volunteer Coordinator can help you find something that fits you. Another way, if you haven't done it already, is to become a Sustaining Member through a regular monthly gift. Having money coming in regularly through the year is a game changer for a nonprofit organization. Consider including ARNHA/Effie Yeaw Nature Center in your legacy planning. And, share how great we are with all your friends, relatives and coworkers. It has been said that you can't love what you don't know and we want everyone to love us!

I wish everyone the best. Serving as president has been such a rewarding experience. I will see you on the trail, in the museum and along the river.

*Autumn is a second spring when every leaf is a flower.* -Albert Camus



# Leadership Transition at the Nature Center

Joey Johnson

I would like to introduce our new Interim Executive Director of the Effie Yeaw Nature Center, Heather Gabel. Heather has worked at the nature center since 2015, starting as a naturalist and moving into animal care and development. Prior to taking on this position, she was Director of Animal Care and Assistant Development Coordinator.

Torey Byington, former Executive Director, resigned and will be pursuing the next chapter in her life. We wish her well in all of her endeavors.



## Nancy Opersal and Margaret Rogers-Featured Volunteers

Nancy Opersal and Margaret Rogers are Docents at Effie Yeaw Nature Center. Together they have an amazing 100 years teaching experience. Nancy was at the dedication for the Nature Center in 1976 and was still teaching. She began volunteering part time on weekends. In 1996 when she retired, she took the Docent Training. Also Nancy knew Effie Yeaw personally and greatly admired her.

Margaret worked in elementary education and eventually became a school administrator. In 2004 Margaret retired and soon after took her Docent training. Nancy and Margaret had not known each other prior to meeting at Effie Yeaw. However, they soon realized they had several mutual friends and common interests, especially teaching young children.



Margaret Rogers (left) and Nancy Opersal (right).

In 2014 Margaret was taking the first Naturalist class given at Effie Yeaw Nature Center, also with Rachel Cowan, the current Volunteer Coordinator. There had been a reorganization in the past few years at the Nature Center. Children ages 6-11 were offered classes on nature topics. Margaret realized that 5 year olds could get value from learning about nature. As a Capstone project to the Naturalist program, Margaret developed the Camp 5 curriculum. When she was considering who would teach it with her, Nancy was the first person who came to mind.

Camp 5 is presented with general content to engage 5 year olds. The topics include: animals, plants, water, earth and sky. Nancy and Margaret read stories, sing songs, take nature hikes and present fun activities. They totally capture the hearts of their young students. The objective is to provide 5 year olds positive experiences about nature away from parents in a safe, nurturing environment. Camp 5 is offered as a one day camp during the school year vacations and a weeklong camp in the summer. The camps for children 6-11 are about specific nature topics. It is hoped that Camp 5 will be a springboard for budding young naturalists. So far it certainly seems to be.

The first Camp 5 was given in the Fall of 2014, so this year in November, Camp 5 will celebrate being 5 years old! Margaret and

Nancy said they are planning a birthday celebration and will sing the birthday song.

Nancy mentioned that Effie Yeaw had a "glow" around her. There is no doubt that Margaret and Nancy have that same "glow" and passion for inspiring young nature enthusiasts.

Thank you Margaret and Nancy for all your great work and the wonderful Camp 5!



# Effie Yeaw Collaborates with Rio Americano High School

Joey Johnson

It all started last December when Matt Cole, a metalworking teacher at Rio Americano High School (just down the river from EYNC) stopped by for the second time and spoke with Margaret Leavitt, who was at the reception desk, to offer the assistance of his metalworking classes with any projects EYNC might have. His classes have done projects for the last four years at the Folsom Zoo, including building perches and other structures for animal habitats. He has a detailed design, engineering and fabrication process that the students follow to complete their projects. All the labor (students!) and the materials are free he has quite an inventory of metals, and he wanted to partner with an organization that is closer to the school than Folsom Zoo.

After kicking around several ideas of how to take advantage of this offer, the projects settled on were benches for the museum, some shelving, a donation box and a metal sculpture for the outside of the Main Building. Matt brought his class to EYNC for a tour and to give them a visual of where their work was going to be placed. The students plan these projects from start to finish. They went to work and created these wonderful additions to our Nature Center. A couple of students returned to see how everything looked installed.

What an amazing project for both the students and for the Effie Yeaw Nature Center. We thank Matt Cole and his talented students for enhancing our Nature Center.



# 10th Annual Spring Gala & Auction

Tova Fleming

The 10th Annual Spring Gala and Auction held June 8, 2019 left guests, artists, volunteers, and staff smiling after an evening of art, food, and good company under the trees at the Nature Center. The Gala helps provide essential funding that allows the Nature Center to continue to provide high-quality environmental and cultural education programs to schools (including Title 1 and other special needs students) and to the public.

"The event had an earthiness you rarely experience at fundraisers. Held on the grounds of Effie Yeaw, we snacked, dined buffet-style and imbibed at tables perched on uneven ground, under leafy trees and an almost-summer twilight sky," wrote honorary Gala Chair Ed Goldman in his article in Sacramento Business Journal.

This year's Gala was a tremendous success and raised more than any other year. Between live and silent auctions a total of 59 pieces of art and 18 experiences were sold.

In addition to unique art featuring the region's natural environment, this year's event stood out with an increase in experiences such as a vacation to Rocky Mountain National Park with a local guide, tickets to a 49ers game, and a private Sonoma Safari at Safari West.

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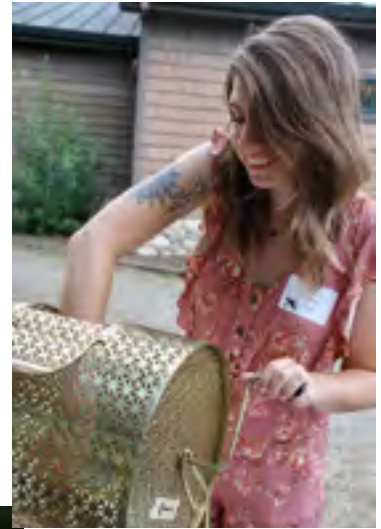
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OUR 10TH ANNUAL  
*Spring Gala & Auction*  
EFFIE YEAW NATURE CENTER





# Life-Long Journalist Uses His Brilliant Pen to Bring ARNHA-EYNC to a Larger Community

Peggy Kennedy



American River Natural History Association (ARNHA) and Effie Yeaw Nature Center volunteers and staff are celebrating the long-time contributor Peter J. Hayes, who died peacefully at the age of 93 on August 30.

Peter was a life member of ARNHA, a volunteer of over 2,000 hours, and a member of the Oak Leaf Legacy Circle. He authored ARNHA books *An American River Journal* and *An American River Almanac*. He co-edited recent editions of *The Outdoor World of the Sacramento Region* and *Biking and Hiking the American River Parkway*, and edited and expanded the 2005 Edition of *The Lower American River – Prehistory to Parkway* and the newest version of *Wild Neighbors: a Child's Activity Book*. For that we celebrate Peter J Hayes.

He served on the ARNHA Board from 2002 until 2006, most of that time as Vice-President of Publications, on the Associate Board from 2006 to 2019, and on the Publications Committee from 2001 until 2019. He wrote many lead articles and many, many other articles for *The Acorn* when it was a printed newsletter of ARNHA, expanded marketing of ARNHA books, was the first coordinator of Forum speakers, and was the first chair of ARNHA's part of the Great American River Clean-up which began in 2004. For that we celebrate Peter J. Hayes.

In 2009, the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors recognized him as County Parks Volunteer of the Year. "Peter has enriched the quality of life for children, students, teachers, nature lovers of all kinds by providing insight into the beauty and necessity of being in nature and protecting our American River Parkway," one part of the proclamation says. For that we celebrate Peter J. Hayes.

Many of you knew him personally and worked with him. Maybe, you shared a moment of gentle humor or observation of nature with him. Maybe, he interviewed you for an article in *The Acorn*. Maybe, his writings brought you closer to nature.

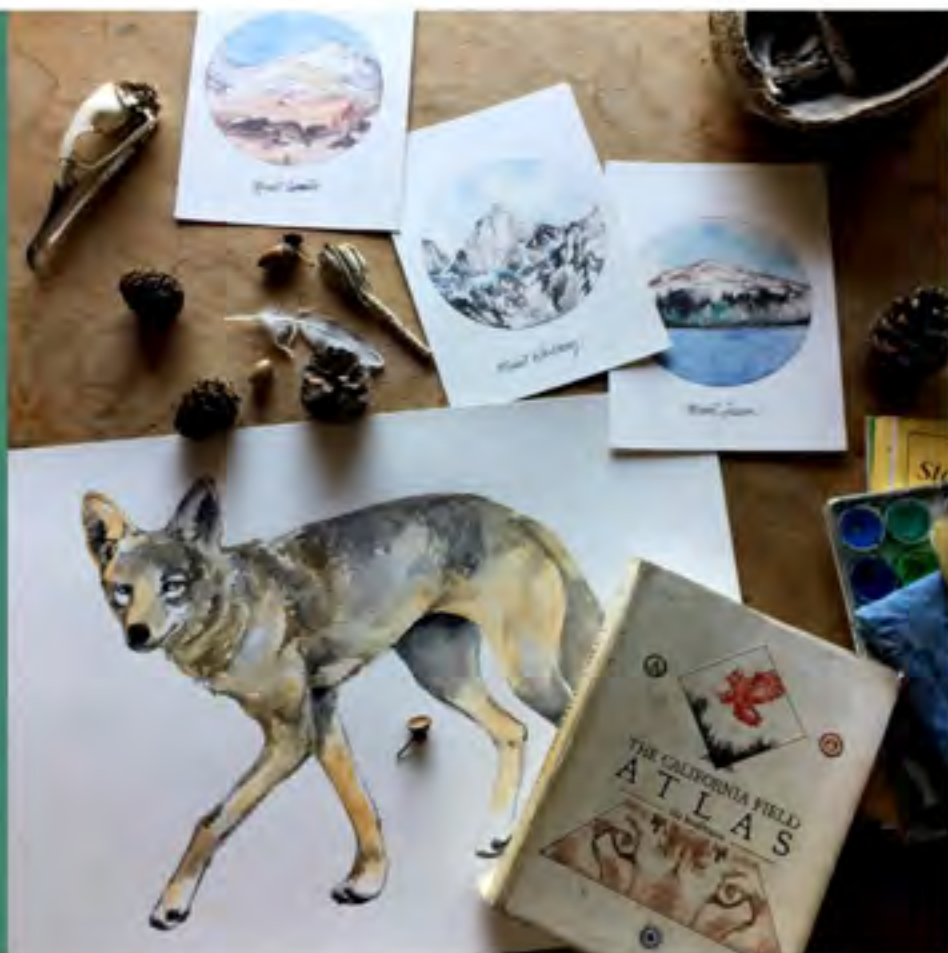
Relatives and friends and are invited to attend a memorial service on Saturday, September 21, at 1pm at Arden Christian Church, 4300 Las Cruces Way, Sacramento, Ca 95864. Cards can be sent to Peter's daughter at the following address: Debbie Kenngott; 2360 Rainbow Ave; Sacramento, CA 95821. Memorial Donations may be made to the American River Natural History Association, 2850 San Lorenzo Way Carmichael, CA 95608.



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**6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.**

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- Sheila Jacobs
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- Evan Johnson
- Joey & Kathleen Johnson
- Deidre Johnson
- Cecilia Johnston In Honor of Sara Tabatabai
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- Harry & Carol Jones
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- Anka Petricevic
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- Lanna Seuret in honor of Charlie Klinger
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- Kathy Sheehan
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  - Barb Atorthy
  - Ann Marie Byington
  - Charles Davis
  - Katherine Jurs
  - Kim Langworthy
  - Dan Mcguire
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  - Roger Ward
- In honor of Serena Caldeira's Birthday
  - Brandon Abell
  - Serena Caldeira
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