



The Long View

Building habitat along agricultural edges. By Jane Braxton Little



PETER HUNTER KNEELS beside a clump of young willows clinging to the edge of Dry Creek. The slender shoots are leafless but supple, a faint tinge of red promising spring growth. On the bank above him, Hunter eyes hundreds of seedlings—cottonwoods, redbud, and other shrubs pushing up through protective plastic tubes into the pale winter sun. Native grass seeds rest under a layer of mulch, waiting for the rains to release them.

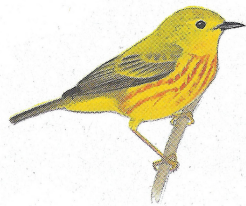
This may not look like great bird habitat, says Hunter, a genial, ruggedly built farmer with a thick shock of white hair. But he can envision a multilayered hedgerow in just a few seasons—a place where warbling vireos will forage in the canopy and a resident bobcat can find cover in the undergrowth.

“We take a long-term view,” says Hunter, who grows olives and prunes full time. “You’re not going to get gratification in the first years. That’s at least five to 10 years out.”

He and his wife, Debbie, established this border of vegetation along Dry Creek as part of an Audubon California project designed to reconnect these and adjacent farmlands with the streams that flow east out of the Coast Range, the rounded mountains that form the western edge of Califor-

nia’s Sacramento Valley. These seasonal creeks, riparian ribbons of buckeye and oak, host a rich diversity of wildlife. More than 200 bird species depend on them. Today less than five percent of this habitat remains in California, says Miles DaPrato, a habitat restoration manager for Audubon’s Landowner Stewardship Program, which works with farmers and ranchers to conserve and restore wildlife habitat in a way that’s compatible with a healthy agricultural operation.

For Peter, who grew up on



Yellow Warbler

Setophaga petechia

Range and habitat: Widespread as a breeder, from northern Alaska to the Caribbean, Mexico, northern Central America, and the Galápagos. Winters in tropical parts of its range. Habitats vary, often willows near water.

Status: Still very common in parts of its range, but populations in interior valleys of California and the West have shown serious declines, along with other streamside birds.

Outlook: Western populations should rebound if enough riparian habitat can be restored.—K.K.

this family farm near Davis, the loss of these creek corridors is just part of the relentless threat urbanization poses here in one of the world’s great breadbaskets. With development gobbling up 40,000 acres of California agricultural lands every year, he’s passionate about protecting “what I hold so close to my heart.”

The Audubon project is helping to reverse the losses. The Hunters are among 16 landowners on Dry Creek who, collectively, have devoted more than 300 acres along the edges of their farms to wildlife habitat. Audubon works with local, state, and federal partners to provide the expertise. The farmers provide the land and a commitment to nurture the plantings. The border habitat the Hunters created two years ago is between their 25-acre olive grove and Dry Creek, a seasonal stream that, at high water, would flood three marginal acres of the Hunters’ prune orchard. They were happy to contribute that acreage to vegetation that flourishes under such conditions.

Both educated as scientists, they have been restoring vegetation to their Longview Ranch since they took over management of the 136-acre farm Peter’s father bought as a cattle ranch in 1950. As a boy Peter remembers a bare expanse, with few native trees or shrubs. When Debbie joined him in 1988, she says, the place was “blasting hot.” So they planted: blue and valley oaks around the house, Satsuma mandarins and pistachios along the driveway, and cover crops in the prune orchard.

“We’re always looking at how we can make this place better, not just for our own livelihood but for the land and everything that uses it,” says Peter, an active board member and past president of the Yolo Land Trust.

Working with farmers like the Hunters who have an intuitive conservation ethic has expanded opportunities for Audubon, says Dan Taylor, Audubon California’s executive director. “Their deep experience with the land and their strong sense of stewardship enriches us as a movement while it enriches the habitat itself.”

The results are tangible, here and on farmlands throughout the

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Sacramento Valley. Hedgerows are helping to improve water quality by holding back sediment and chemicals that would eventually flow into the Sacramento River, which hosts endangered salmon, says DaPrato. The Hunters see an increase of beneficial insects that improve pollination and reduce the costs of controlling pests and weeds. And wildlife is thriving. A flock of 50 turkeys roams Longview Ranch by day, roosting in a Coulter pine at night. Coveys of quail nest in ceanothus and coffee berry bushes. A cougar often sneaks down from the mountains through the creek bed, headed for the abundant prey downstream along Putah Creek. Recently the Hunters watched a merlin land in an oak tree, their first sight of this pigeon-sized falcon.

Last summer a female yellow warbler foraged for insects in the Hunters’ toyon bushes. This summer they are hoping she will build a nest. ■

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