

A place to escape

by Mark Freeman Mail Tribune
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Russ Stauff, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Rogue Watershed manager, and Linda Marr walk on the bank of the Rogue River at the future site of The Mace Family Watchable Wildlife Area. Mail Tribune / Jamie Lusch

WHITE CITY — Tucked away in a corner of the Mace family's homesteaded property, amid the gravel pits and cattle pastures, lies a special sliver of land where the hardscrabble Agate Desert surrenders to the Rogue River.

Massive cottonwoods and Oregon ash rise along the river's edge, deflecting the sun's harsh rays to form a private oasis where Linda Marr found solitude and solace as a young Mace girl and would later take her children for picnics.

"This is my favorite part of the whole property," Marr says. "It's where I came to escape."

This area and the rest of the Bob and Phyllis Mace family's 165 acres will in time become a very public place for Southern Oregonians to enjoy the outdoors and interact with wildlife in a project that will pay homage to the visions of the Mace family patriarch.

The Mace Family Watchable Wildlife Area over time will become the legacy of Bob Mace, Marr's father, who was the former Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife leader who coined the phrase Watchable Wildlife to give just credence to critters that crawl, bound or fly.

Marr's old oasis will become a day-use area for picnickers, birders, anglers and others escaping regular life along the Rogue Valley floor, and the nearby Whetstone Creek will be restored as a habitat anchor for the wildlife species Mace championed in his work and his life.

Along with river frontage nearly the length of six football fields, perhaps its biggest draw will be a 125-acre lake carved into the property's vast commercial gravel expanses, providing fishing and other water recreation opportunities currently not offered along the valley floor. **(Correction: The size of the lake has been corrected in this story.)**

"Dad was a visionary, and he was always looking to the future so future generations can get off the couch and get into nature," Marr says. "This is something he would be very proud of."

Now owned by a private trust, the land eventually will be deeded to the ODFW and managed as an extension of the agency's Denman Wildlife Area under a unique agreement that could take decades to play out.

"We're talking about your grandkids here," says Russ Stauff, the ODFW's Rogue Watershed manager and a player in the area's property's development. "It could be 20 to 30 years out before we realize it. When it does, it has the potential to be ODFW's greatest site and rival anything state parks has, frankly."

"This is all about making Bob and Phyllis' vision happen, and it's a killer one," he says.

When Bob Mace died in November 2006, part of his estate went to create the Bob and Phyllis Mace Memorial Watchable Wildlife Pavilion at the Jackson County Expo. The property, including the gravel operation, went into a trust fund managed by the Oregon Community Foundation with Marr, Stauff and former neighbor and friend Bill Leavens as trustees.

The trustees sold the excavation rights to nearby Knife River Materials, which plans to begin gravel extraction as early as this summer, Stauff says. Royalties for the excavated gravel will go to the trust, which he says should grow "into the millions of dollars" as Knife River excavates as much as 130 acres over the decades.

Once abandoned, the quarry will fill with groundwater as others in the High Banks Road area have. Eventually it will create a roughly 125-acre lake with a maximum depth of 60 feet ready to be stocked with rainbow trout and perhaps other fish species for visiting anglers.

The building of flush toilets and other facilities at the Watchable Wildlife Area would be paid for from earnings on the trust, which is also designed to fund other watchable wildlife projects and activities on the valley floor, Stauff says.

Eventually, the land will be deeded to the ODFW to manage the site for recreation and watchable wildlife in perpetuity, Stauff says.

There is no timetable for when the trustees deed the land to the agency, but Marr says she

plans to see it through "in my lifetime."

Already, the Watchable Wildlife Area is taking shape.

Blackberry bushes that had a near-death grip on Marr's favorite riparian area along what's called the High Banks stretch have been stripped clean and replaced by native plants helped along by an irrigation system.

"It makes me feel like we're making some progress," Marr says.

A team of local birders also has begun creating baseline data for the aerial fauna of the land.

While still in its infancy, the Watchable Wildlife Area is a very tangible thing to Marr, and it becomes even more so each time she walks the cool banks of the Rogue in her old family picnic grounds that one day will host countless other valley families watching the nearby great blue heron rookery and other wildlife.

"I envision this being a wonderful, wonderful place for people to come and enjoy," Marr says. "It's good to see."

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