

Connecting with Nature on Fiscalini Ranch Preserve: Beyond Poison Oak



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Last October, Friends of the Fiscalini Ranch Preserve (FFRP) was awarded a grant from the Orange County Community Foundation to support study of the Ranch's forest. The goal of the project, Beyond Poison Oak, was to examine the understory: the plants that grow beneath the canopy of Monterey pine (*Pinus radiata*) and coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia* var. *agrifolia*). We all know poison oak grows on the Ranch, but what else is there and in what abundance?

FFRP proposed this project to Cal Poly's Master of Science program in Environmental Sciences & Management and it was accepted. Graduate student Natalie Neméth chose the project for her thesis. Ms. Neméth worked under the direction of Dr. Samantha Gill at Cal Poly.

Thirty-eight 0.1-acre plots were surveyed by Ms. Neméth with some help. Altogether, FFRP volunteers Walt Andrus, Teresa Borstelmann, Duffy Burns, Gil Eastman, Mark Meeks, Mike Mollohan, Brian Morgan, John Nixon, and Charlie Price put in more than 220 hours on the project. Their contribution was essential to the project's success. (See picture!)

The plots were located in a grid pattern in the West Ranch forest south of the Creek to Ridge Trail. Plants were identified in each plot and the percent cover estimated. This created a list of 69 species and determined their relative abundance in the study plots.

In addition, a review of the literature conducted by volunteer Terry Young provided information about the historical composition of Monterey pine forest understory for comparison.

Grasses, considered all together, were the most abundant plants. Some plots had only grass cover while many had a large grass component. The most common grasses found were California brome (*Bromus carinatus*), rattlesnake grass (*Briza maxima*), and slender wild oat (*Avena barbata*).



Of the non-grass species, poison oak (*Rhus diversifolia*) did come in number one appearing in 24 of the 38 plots and covering nearly 30% of the area. Next in line was California blackberry (*Rubus ursinus*) which grew in 30 of the plots but was less abundant at 19% cover. Rounding out the top five were coffeeberry (*Frangula californica* ssp. *californica*), coast morning glory (*Calystegia macrostegia* ssp. *cyclostegia*), and coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis* ssp. *consanguinea*).

Comparing current results with the historical literature, what is surprising is the relative scarcity of certain species. Plants often mentioned as plentiful in Cambria's Monterey pine forest were either uncommon or not found at all. Chief among these are sticky monkey flower (*Mimulus aurantiacus* var. *aurantiacus*), pink flowering current (*Ribes sanguineum* var. *glutinosum*), fuchsia-flowered gooseberry (*Ribes speciosum*), and toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*). All are important habitat plants for monarch butterflies and other pollinators.

This baseline information will guide restoration and monitoring of the Ranch forest. A seed grant from the Reid Fund of the Ernest Leiblich Foundation is supporting restoration while we seek funds to construct a shade house nursery.