

FIELD TRIP REPORT

HAMMOND TRAIL

24 February 2008

by Carol Ralph

The forecast was for high winds and heavy rain, but five of us put on our raingear and enjoyed a delightful morning walking the Hammond Trail in McKinleyville from Hiller Park north to the end of Letz Rd. The trail was sheltered, and the rain didn't start until noon. We confirmed that what matters is the weather right here right now, and that everyone should have clothing to deal with all weather, because it is *so* good to go out.

We also confirmed that botanizing in winter can be rewarding. Without deciduous leaves interfering, thickets are transparent, revealing what is in the middle or even on the other side. Instead of leaves, trees and shrubs show off their branch patterns, textures, twig colors, and bud sizes and shapes. We noted the pointed, brown buds of cascara *Rhamnus purshiana*. Different species leaf out at different times, so each week different species are conspicuous. We saw fresh, new leaves emerging from buds on red-flowering currant *Ribes sanguineum*, canyon gooseberry *Ribes menziesii*, and twinberry *Lonicera involucrata*. The tired, green fronds of spreading wood fern *Dryopteris expansa* caught our eye because the similar fronds of lady fern *Athyrium felix-femina* were dead.

The trail had four sections. Along Hiller Park and the sewage ponds it was lined by Sitka spruce *Picea sitchensis* and red alder *Alnus rubra*, with plenty of coastal willow *Salix hookeriana*, twinberry, and cascara, and a smattering of other trees and shrubs. Dark pink dangles of red-flowering currant and erupting white heads of coltsfoot *Petasites frigidus* assured us that spring was starting.

As the trail crossed a small creek by the sewage ponds, it entered a spruce-y tunnel with walls of salal *Gaultheria shalon*, ferns (lady and sword *Polystichum munitum*), blackberry *Rubus ursinus*, and English ivy *Hedera helix*. This section was once the bed of a railroad, dug out about 5 ft. below grade. Wet ditches along each side offered possibilities for wetland plants. We appreciated a few cheery, yellow blooms of redwood violet *Viola sempervirens*.

After the trail crossed Knox Cove Dr. (of castle fame), it entered coastal scrub, as it cut along the steep bank overlooking the current mouth of the Mad River. Gardeners wanting to stabilize sunny banks should study this dense, wind-pruned mix of coyote brush *Baccharis pilularis*, coast silk tassel *Garrya elliptica*, evergreen huckleberry *Vaccinium ovatum*, blueblossom *Ceanothus thyrsiflorus*, salal, twinberry, wax myrtle *Myrica californica*, salmonberry *Rubus spectabilis*, cow parsnip *Heracleum lanatum*, sword fern, bee plant *Scrophularia californica*, etc. In full bloom, the silk tassel were decked with either long, floppy male catkins or shorter, stiff female catkins.

The trail continued past the foot of Murray Rd. and turned up the bank to the level of the houses, passed a stand of pine, and then offered the option of turning left down steep steps to Widow White Creek. Redwood Community Action Agency, with various other groups, has totally

remodeled the creek here to be fish-friendly, cut and graded the path, fenced it, and installed an enormous, metal, prison-like bridge, making it possible to walk through here. We are grateful. Along the steep steps down was a thriving patch of milkmaids *Cardamine californica*, sporting fresh, pinky white flowers, one of our early spring favorites. The prize of this path was the grove of spruce above the creek, where no fence separated us from the vegetation. In this open grove we spotted five species of fern (sword, lady, spreading wood, leather *Polypodium scolieri*, bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*) and three of *Ribes* (red-flowering currant, canyon gooseberry, and trailing black currant *R. laxiflorum*). The *R. laxiflorum* was a snarl of snaky, woody stems around the base of an alder. Its leaf buds were just opening. This species is uncommon.

The Hammond Trail is maintained by Humboldt County. It was wide and clean, recently trimmed by an arm-mower. The trail right-of-way was therefore fairly clear of invasive species. Just off the trail, however, on private property, where County can not go, was a scary assortment of non-native species known to spread into wildlands. Some, such as fuchsia, escallonia, crocosmia, and Himalaya knotweed *Polygonum polystachyum* have obviously jumped, crept, or been thrown out of people's yards. Others, such as Himalayan blackberry *Rubus discolor*, pampas grass *Cortaderia jubata*, and English ivy, are rampant in our area, dispersed widely by birds or wind. English ivy was swamping vegetation along most of the trail. Himalaya blackberry was abundant at the Hiller Park end. These species only get bigger; they don't shrink. The sooner they are controlled, the easier it will be. This is also true of Cape (or German) ivy *Senecio mikanioides*. We saw one of this bright green vine, scrambling in a large thicket of native blackberry, now dark maroon in winter colors. Given the severity of Cape ivy infestations along the California coast and the difficulty of removing this species, it should be high priority to remove this one now. But who will? Who owns the land? Do they know or care what a threat they harbor? Here is a dire need for public education. CNPS is trying to be part of the solution.

We recommend this section of the Hammond Trail for a local, easy walk and a review of common trees and shrubs.