

A photograph of a man and a woman walking away from the camera on a dirt path. The path is flanked by tall grass and leads towards a large, leafy tree on the right. In the background, there are rolling green hills under a cloudy sky. The overall mood is peaceful and scenic.

THE GREAT

Cronan Ranch

OUTDOORS


American River Conservancy

BY THEA MARIE ROOD | PHOTOS BY CHARLENE LANE

You could take a long road trip to Yellowstone, Yosemite or Mendocino this summer. But what if you could also travel under a canopy of trees, drink in wildflower-covered hills, spot occasional blue-water and snow-capped-mountain views, and hike miles of well-maintained trails—right in your own backyard? The good news is you can. The South Fork American River Trail is just 30 minutes outside El Dorado Hills.

The 25-mile, 2600-acre trail area was opened to the public in 2010, and is the work of the American River Conservancy (ARC), a nonprofit community organization that has been protecting rivers and other natural habitats since 1989. The nearest trailhead for EDH residents is on Salmon Falls Road; another sits just down the road on Highway 49 at Coloma. From either entrance, hikers, equestrians and mountain bikers can explore oak-studded woodlands, rolling hills and the river front. “There are really some spectacular canyon vistas,” says Alan Ehrgott, executive director of the ARC. “You can bring your dog; it’s a great family outing. And it’s free.”

The trail system also encompasses two former family ranches: Cronan Ranch and Magnolia Ranch. Both offer trail “loops” with varying degrees of difficulty, so you can choose a leisurely stroll or a more ambitious challenge. Experts recommend Cronan for hikes in cooler weather (open areas can get hot), and (shadier) Magnolia all year round. “It’s really an incredibly beautiful place—and it’s just a hop, skip and a jump from [EDH],” says Vicky Vail, a 15-year ARC volunteer. “It’s a real gift to the community. And ARC did that.”

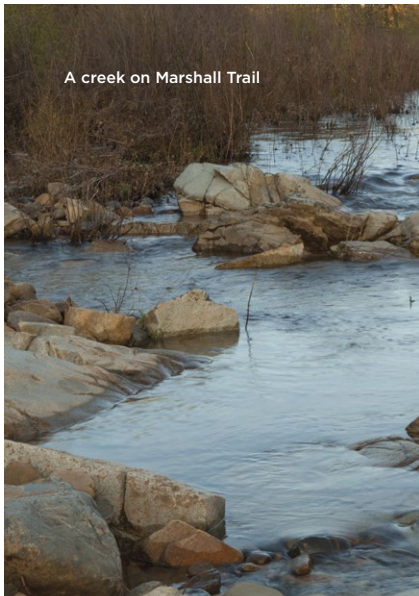


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Marshall Trail

Last August, the organization closed escrow on its largest land acquisition to date: 10,000 acres of Sierra Nevada forest. Known as the American River Headwaters Project (at the North and Middle Forks), it was an “overnight success” 14 years in the making. “Well, let me put it this way: It took us 13 years to get them to sign over the land, and a little over a year to finalize it,” says Ehrgott with a laugh. It preserves an important watershed, but this enormous parcel also will serve as a “living laboratory,” allowing scientists to study forest restoration techniques that lower the risk of megafires. The land also connects the river to the Granite Chief Wilderness, “allowing animals a better chance to adapt to changing environmental conditions,” says Ehrgott.

Another important ARC project is the Wakamatsu Farm, a 272-acre site near Lotus that was the first Japanese colony in North America. But Wakamatsu is not just historically rich; its farming soil is considered “prime” and of “statewide importance” by the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and two young farmers currently work the land in ways that are “gentle to nature,” says Ehrgott. Part of the ARC’s goal at Wakamatsu, in fact, is to help farmers interested in sustainable, organic techniques learn to make a go of it. “They need help with marketing—being able to sell for \$1 or \$2 instead of 10 cents,” says Ehrgott. He adds that the ARC plans to open an event center and onsite restaurant to provide solid retail for Wakamatsu farmers.



A creek on Marshall Trail



The ARC is always intent on education. Visitors are encouraged to visit its office in Coloma, a charming yellow cottage called The American River Nature Center. Families can study maps, peer into microscopes, learn how much water they use at home, and meet Caddyshack and George—a gopher snake and a California tiger salamander, respectively. But Ehr Gott and his team believe that getting people outdoors is the best way to turn them into land preservationists. “We offer 80 to 100 public hikes and workshops for families,” says Ehr Gott. “And we also have a variety of school programs.” These include the now-20-year-old Nature Bowl competition, fall/spring field trip and grant opportunities, and

an annual summer camp. This year’s camp is themed “Discover Science,” designed for ages 6 to 8 and 9 to 11. The camp also employs volunteer counselors, ages 12 to 19.

In fact, all of ARC’s efforts need volunteer support, which can take nearly any form, from trail-building to gardening to stuffing envelopes. “We are always looking for volunteers,” says Vail, who adds that it’s a good activity for Scouts, families (including children), and high schoolers needing public service hours. And beginning this summer, there are new volunteer opportunities at both the Wakamatsu Farm and the American River Headwaters Project. “Come out and work!” encourages Vail. “We welcome all ages and any level of activity.”



Parasailing at Cronan Ranch

For summer/fall public hikes, workshops and volunteering details, see the activities and events calendar on the ARC website: arconservancy.org