

The Riparian Corridor

RIPARIAN HABITAT: the area adjacent to a stream together with the plant and animal community it supports



The riparian corridor is the area adjacent to the stream that supports a plant and animal community adapted to flooding and wet conditions. Riparian corridors help to protect stream habitat from human use in the watershed. Protecting riparian areas protects our stream habitat.

In Santa Cruz County, common riparian tree species include willows, alders, cottonwoods, sycamores and redwoods. All of these plant species contribute to bank stability, shade, undercut banks, and woody material within the stream. Understory plants, such as ferns and native blackberry, are also important components of the riparian ecosystem.



Riparian and Stream Ecosystems Are Inter-connected

Riparian plants not only provide critical wildlife habitat, they also directly affect living conditions in the stream itself. They provide shade that keeps water temperatures cool and create hiding cover for fish and other animals. Leaves and insects dropping from nearby trees and shrubs supply food for many aquatic animals, while plant roots stabilize the bank, preventing erosion.

A healthy riparian corridor filters out sediments and nutrients before they reach the stream. To be an effective filter, the corridor of vegetation must be sufficiently wide, and the shrubs, vines, and grasses of the understory, not just the trees, must be present.



PHOTOS, TOP LEFT TO BOTTOM LEFT:
RIPARIAN CORRIDOR AT CORRALITOS CREEK
REDWOODS IN THE RIPARIAN CORRIDOR
THE RIPARIAN CORRIDOR IN WINTER ALONG THE SAN LORENZO RIVER
LEAVES PROVIDE FUEL FOR THE STREAM FOOD WEB



THE RIPARIAN CORRIDOR IS A PROTECTED HABITAT WITHIN THE COUNTY OF SANTA CRUZ



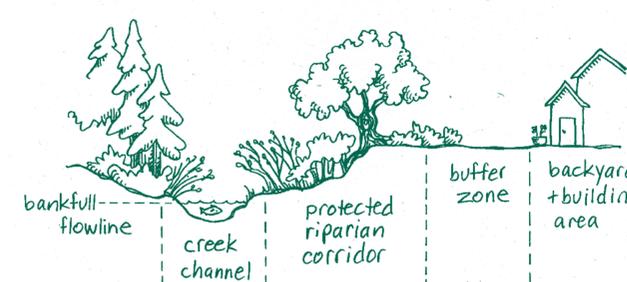
RIPARIAN TREE ROOTS HOLD STREAM BANKS

Streambank Erosion

Streambank erosion is a natural stream process—but extensive bank erosion degrades stream habitat and contributes to downstream flooding. The best defense against erosion is a streambank vegetated with native plants. Native plants provide erosion protection at high flows, and recover quickly when floodwaters subside. The roots of riparian trees, especially willows, stabilize streambanks by holding the soil together with their strong roots.

Riparian Corridor and Wetlands Protection Ordinance

Within the County of Santa Cruz, the riparian corridor is a protected habitat as defined by the Riparian Corridor and Wetlands Protection Ordinance. For properties on perennial streams, the protected riparian corridor is 50' from the bankfull flowline or the extent of riparian woodland (see the Stream Care Guide or ask for a copy of the Riparian Corridor Protection Ordinance at the Planning Department's General Information Desk). Within the protected riparian corridor, the ordinance prohibits any development including tree cutting, vegetation removal, grading or construction without a Riparian Exception permit from the Planning Department.



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Photography: Patricia McQuade (dancer, turtle); Tom Grey (heron, hawks, kingfisher); Gary Kittleson (red-legged frogs); Kristen Kittleson (yellow-legged frogs, riparian corridors and streams)
Drawing by Lisa Krieshok



RIPARIAN WILDLIFE

DANCER DAMSELFLY

In California, riparian forests support the greatest diversity and abundance of wildlife species. Because of the available water and the complex vegetation structure, insects, birds, reptiles, mammals and amphibians use the riparian forest for nesting, food, shelter, and as corridors for movement. Protecting and restoring riparian habitat is one of the most effective ways you can help wildlife.

Riparian Wildlife Species

- Allen's Hummingbird
- American Dipper
- Belted Kingfisher
- Black-headed Grosbeak
- Common Merganser
- Downy Woodpecker
- Green Heron
- Pacific-slope Flycatcher
- Red-shouldered Hawk
- Swainson's Thrush
- Song Sparrow
- Spotted Towhee
- Warbling Vireo
- Wilson's Warbler
- Wood Duck
- Yellow Warbler



GREEN HERON

- California Newt
- California Red-legged Frog
- Foothill Yellow-legged Frog
- Pacific Giant Salamander
- Western Pond Turtle

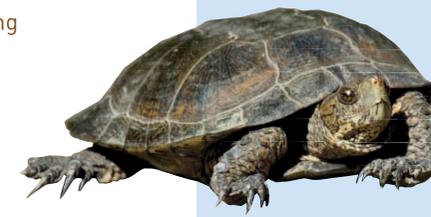


PAIR OF RED SHOULDER HAWKS

- Raccoon
- San Francisco Dusky-footed Woodrat



FOOTHILL YELLOW-LEGGED FROG



WESTERN POND TURTLE



BELTED KINGFISHER

CALIFORNIA RED-LEGGED FROGS

