

# MADERA COUNTY



Charles Webber © California Academy of Sciences

## COUNTY INFORMATION

**Size:** 2,153 sq. miles (5,176 sq. kilometers)

**Population:** 123,138

**Location:** South-West Sierra

**Official Website:** [www.madera-county.com](http://www.madera-county.com)

## CONSERVATION STORY

**Sierra Foothill Conservancy and Land-Owners Conserve Habitat**

*Special thanks to the Sierra Foothill Conservancy for contributing this article.*

Fine Gold Creek begins in Eastern Madera County amid a jumble of giant granite boulders, some as big as small houses. After passing through these rock caverns, the creek levels off and widens out. This stretch of the creek is lined with willows and alders, with an occasional cottonwood and valley oak mixed in. Farther down, piles of rock and sand testify to extensive placer mining in the 1850's or 1860's. Working with pick and shovel, the miners dug out and put many tons of sand and gravel through sluice boxes to capture the fine gold for which the creek is named.



Standing on the hill above Fine Gold Creek, it is difficult to see the water unless the creek is running very high. If you come down to creek level (or better yet) climb out onto the rocks, you can hear the water rushing below you.

To some, the gurgling creek may not signify much, but for the past four years our staff at the Sierra Foothill Conservancy (SFC) has worked to protect the creek from development and pollution. Beginning in 2003 we organized a purchase of the land with the help of the Trust for Public Land, Pacific Gas and Electric, and a forward-thinking landowner named Ben Ewell. Now Fine Gold Creek runs through an over 700 acre preserve called the Austin and Mary Ewell Preserve, after the family who owned it.

The Conservancy has also worked for four years so that their staff, members, and the general public can explore the creek. Younger people just becoming aware of the Sierra are signing up for the hikes, as well as older Sierra residents who know the region thoroughly. As a mitigation site the preserve is not open to the public in the same way a public park is. This is to protect the preserve's ecological integrity. Interested hikers are encouraged to contact the Sierra Foothill Conservancy, since we hold frequent and fun tours and hikes of the preserve.

If you are fortunate, you might happen on a western pond turtle leaving the creek to find a dry, sunny place to dig a burrow and lay her eggs. Birds you might see include mergansers, wood ducks, black phoebes and kingfishers. A close inspection of the sand and gravel at the edge of the creek could turn up the half-inch shells of freshwater clams. The creek is also home to the Elderberry Beetle, which is listed as both a state and federal endangered species.



Like most foothill creeks, Fine Gold does not flow all year long. But, twelve months out of the year, potholes fill with water and remain vital to the new preserve's wildlife. In the summer, species that use this water leave their tracks along Fine Gold Creek's sandy, wet banks.

One of the main reasons SFC protected the creek was because of its riparian zone, an area where land, flora, and fauna are significantly influenced by an aquatic ecosystem. Riparian zones filter sediment, hold water, provide habitat, and provide bank stability.

Long before its current preserved and protected state, this area of Fine Gold Creek was owned by numerous people. In the 1960's it was split into small parcels that were sold as part of a land speculation scheme. Most of the parcels were sold to Navy personnel at Lemoore Naval Air Station. Over the years the buyers spread out over the world, married, got divorced, died, and passed on the almost worthless parcels to their heirs. Then someone gave several parcels to the Boy Scout Council, which tracked down other owners and got them to donate. When they had assembled a large percentage of the parcels, the Council sold their interest to a Mr. Ben Ewell.

The Sierra Foothill Conservancy first saw this portion of Fine Gold Creek in 2002. Members of SFC's land committee decided that it was an area that should be protected because of its important riparian status. SFC enlisted the help of The Trust for Public Land and together we approached Mr. Ewell. Ben agreed to let SFC buy a portion of the property for permanent protection as a wildlife preserve. Without Ben's patience and generosity we could never have completed this project. Not only did he extend our option several times while TPL and SFC were putting together the funds for the purchase, but Ben and his family sold the property to us at a price far below market value. In return for the Ewell family's generosity, the preserve is named after Ben's parents, Austin and Mary Ewell.

The Trust for Public Land also provided the SFC with expertise, contacts and interim funding and TPL project manager Robin Park worked with SFC staff.

The project was different from other title fee purchases in that it involved three separate sources of funds. Each funder had different reasons for preserving the land. The largest financial contribution came from the Ewell family themselves. The second largest contribution came from the Pacific Gas and Electric Company. PG&E was interested in



helping to buy the site as mitigation for unavoidable impacts on Valley Elderberry bushes and the endangered Valley Elderberry Longhorn Beetle during its normal operations. PG&E staff biologist Peter Beesley worked many hours on this project and SFC owes both Beesley and PG&E many thanks. The third essential funder was the

Bureau of Reclamation through its Central Valley Project Conservation Plan.

Furthermore, the California Department of Fish and Game helped fund the project through the Wildlife Conservation Board and retains the right to use the preserve for biological studies, which is something SFC welcomes.

In the end everyone worked together to make it happen and if any one of them had dropped out the preserve would not exist today.

Without the steady and generous support of the SFC Board, staff, and members we would not have the resources to complete projects like this. We hope that all our members will pat themselves on the back. They deserve it.

If you would like to volunteer with, become a member of, donate to, or find out more information about the Sierra Foothill Conservancy please see their information in the groups listed below and visit [www.sierrafoothillconservancy.org](http://www.sierrafoothillconservancy.org).

## **ORGANIZATIONS**

### **Central Sierra Watershed Committee**

**Contact:** Jeannie Habben

**Address:** Post Office Box 1061, Coarsegold, CA 93614

**Phone:** 559-642-3263

**Email:** [info@cfwatershed.org](mailto:info@cfwatershed.org)

**Website URL:** [www.cred.org](http://www.cred.org) and [www.cfwatershed.org](http://www.cfwatershed.org)

**Counties of Activity:** Fresno, Madera, Mariposa

**Issue Focus:** all

**Group Type:** volunteer, county officials, state officials, state and federal agencies, tribes, concerned citizens

**Public Events:** education through publications: “Sierra Smarts – Information for the Private Well Owners Living in California’s Fractured Hard Rock Groundwater Areas,” Property Owners Brochure for Foothill Residents, and assistance with others. We give quarterly community workshops dealing with environmental issues in our areas and participate in community events such as Earth Day, Youth Workshops, etc.

**Volunteer Opportunities:** volunteers are needed for graphic work on brochures, community events, assistance with workshops; participate in other projects as they are brought to the committee

**Accepts Donations:** no

**Description:** The Central Sierra Watershed Committee (CSWC) began in 1997 to develop a cooperative effort to improve and protect our area’s watersheds and other

resources. There is an average of 15 to 20 attendees per meeting with over 50 participants total on the list serve and mailing list who attend when they are able.

The CSWC develops common ground solutions for improving watershed and local habitat. Through the monthly meetings the CSWC members air their differences while working together to provide solutions to watershed issues. The CSWC has played a key role in a long-term watershed effort for three counties, involving more than 30 public, tribal, and private representatives participating in a consensus building effort.

Committee management includes a facilitator, ground rules, a code of ethics, and is solution oriented. The CSWC success has been rooted in its ability to bring all those involved in watershed issues to the table and focus on capacity building, while the members/partners focus on the implementation of projects, the education of the communities in the watersheds, and the distribution of information. Many of the CSWC members did not communicate with each other before participating; now they sit side by side at meetings and work together to resolve the watershed's issues. Our mission is to promote the quality, quantity, and aesthetic values of our water resources through the conservation and restoration of our watersheds.

### **Chowchilla/Fresno River Watershed Council**

**Contact:** Jack Fry – Chair, Jeannie Habben - Coordinator

**Address:** Post Office Box 1061, Coarsegold, CA 93614

**Phone:** 559-642-3263

**Email:** info@cfwatershed.org

**Website URL:** www.cfwatershed.org

**Counties of Activity:** Fresno, Madera, Mariposa

**Issue Focus:** land use, transportation, water supply, watershed quality

**Group Type:** volunteer, projects and coordinator – grant funded

**Public Events:** outreach workshops to dairies, farmers, and ranchers, youth workshops, Earth Day events, Creek Stewardship Day, restoration projects, watershed assessments

**Volunteer Opportunities:** workshop assistance, collect data for the assessments, work during river clean-up or planting days

**Accepts Donations:** no

**Description:** In June 2004, the Watershed Coordinator started the Watershed Council for the Upper Chowchilla-Upper Fresno/Middle San Joaquin-Lower Chowchilla Watersheds funded by a grant from CalFed. In our watershed, as in many places in California populations are expanding and resources are dwindling. Environmental impacts are intensifying as fuel loads grow, noxious weeds spread, and pollution permeates watersheds. Many of these issues can only be addressed if competing groups work together and develop solutions on a comprehensive, collaborative basis. We strive to develop a comprehensive watershed approach as an improvement on the fragmented

approach that has been used in this area in the past. The watershed approach is advantageous because it considers all activities within a landscape that affect watershed health while leveraging resources and improving collaboration and information sharing among diverse partners.

### **Oakhurst River Parkway**

**Contact:** Sierra Tel

**Mailing Address:** Post Office Box 974, Oakhurst, CA 93644

**Phone:** 559-642-0220

**Email:** [sandyb@stcg.net](mailto:sandyb@stcg.net)

**Website URL:** [www.orptrails.org](http://www.orptrails.org)

**Counties of Activity:** Fresno, Madera

**Issue Focus:** land use, watershed quality, water supply

**Public Events:** the Oakhurst River Parkway is continually open to the public

**Volunteer Opportunities:** Yes

**Accepts Donations:** Yes

**Description:** In 1992 the Oakhurst River Parkway was a dream of a small group of citizens who wanted to preserve and restore the natural resources environment of our community. These citizens sought support from the Eastern Madera County Chamber of Commerce and the Madera County Board of Supervisors and have been successful in receiving several grants to develop and construct the Oakhurst River Parkway. These grants along with countless hours by volunteers have transformed the dream into a beautiful three mile nature trail in the center of one of the most thriving mountain communities in the Sierra Nevada Range: that of Oakhurst, California. Along with the trail, the Oakhurst River Parkway has restored river banks and improved water quality in the Fresno River. Involvement in the Oakhurst Area Plan has produced an area plan land designation called the “River Front Mixed Use” that has guidelines established for future development along the Fresno River in Oakhurst. Preservation of these areas has been the goal of the Oakhurst River Parkway. The Eastern Madera County Foundation has been established to help meet that goal.

## **PUBLIC OFFICIALS AND AGENCIES**

### **Madera County Board of Supervisors**

**Address:** 200 West 4th Street

Madera, California 93637

**Telephone:** (559) 675-7700

**Fax:** (559) 673-3302

**Email:** [supervisors@madera-county.com](mailto:supervisors@madera-county.com)

**URL:** <http://www.madera-county.com/supervisors/>

**Senate Representative – 14<sup>th</sup> District:**

**Counties Represented:** Mariposa, Madera, San Joaquin, Fresno, Tuolumne and Stanislaus

**Website:** <http://republican.sen.ca.gov/web/14/>

**Assembly Representative – 25<sup>th</sup> District**

**Counties Represented:** Calaveras, Tuolumne, Mariposa, Madera, Mono

**Website:** <http://republican.assembly.ca.gov/members/a25/index.aspx>