

DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Tony Mellor's home, which burned down in the Trabing Fire five years ago, once stood on the lot behind him surrounded by tall trees. Now he has a spectacular view of the Summit and plants and animals are coming back.

Life bounces back 5 years after wildfire

County received wake-up call during 2008 fire season

Fire & Fire Protection

By DONNA JONES

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WATSONVILLE — From the empty space where the two-story barn Tony Mellor called home once stood on Grizzly Oaks Lane, the eye roams across Larkin Valley to the hills to the east, sweeping from the golden summit of Loma Prieta to the dark pyramid of Fremont Peak.

"It's an astounding view," Mellor said. "We only had glimpses of the hills before."

Before June 20, 2008, that is, before the Trabing Fire.

Five years ago, on a Friday afternoon when temperatures soared into triple digits and hot, dry winds scoured South County, a spark from vehicle exhaust on Highway 1 ignited the wildfire.

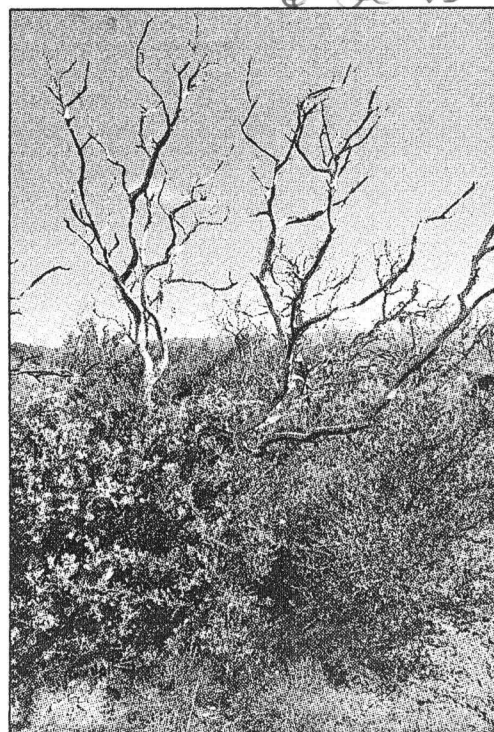


DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Grizzly Oaks Lane resident Tony Mellor says the rabbits are back in more abundance than before the fire.

In six short hours, the blaze ravaged more than 600 acres and destroyed 26 homes and dozens of outbuildings in an area off Buena Vista Road, between Highway 1 and Larkin Valley Road. More

SEE FIRE ON A2

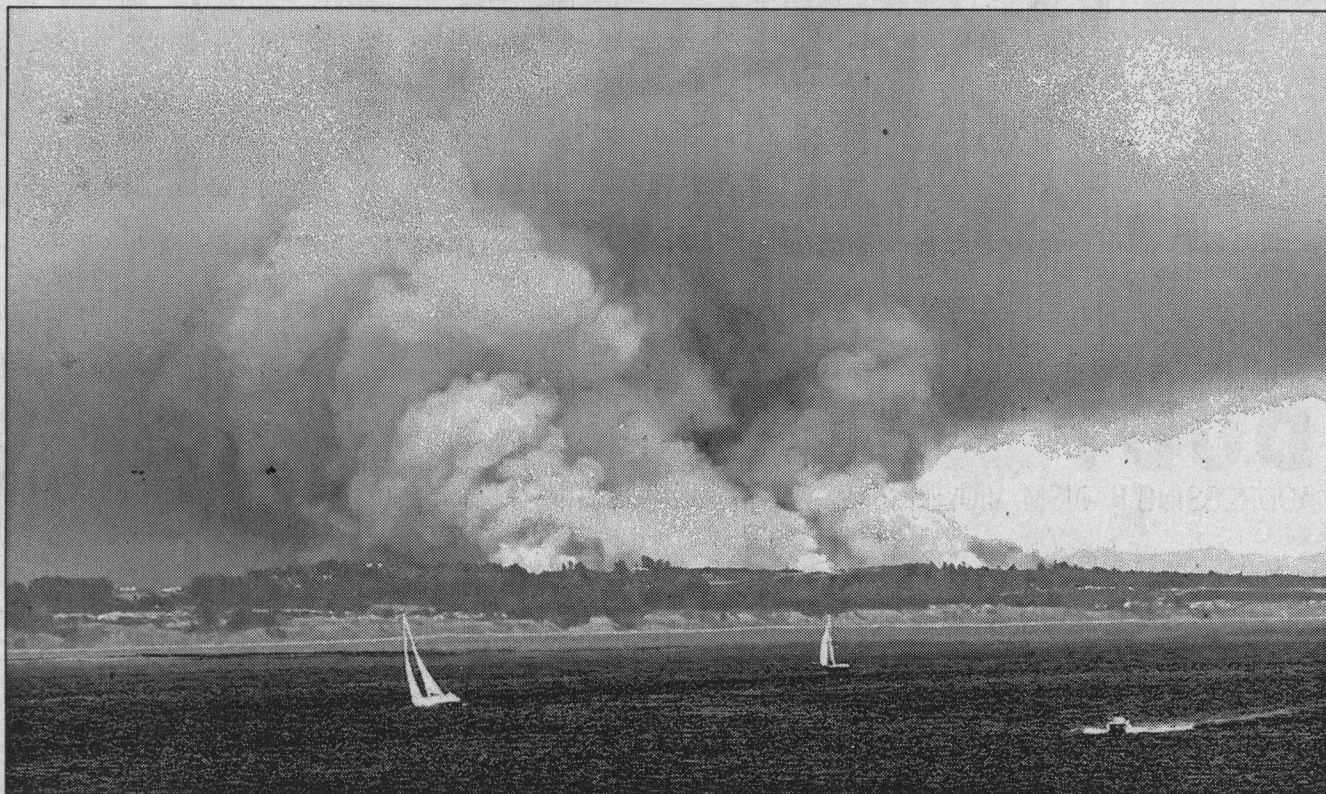


DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

New manzanita shrubs are growing from the base of those scorched in the Trabing Fire five years ago.

ON THE NET

- To view slide shows from the 2008 South County Trabing Fire, see this story on the Sentinel website.
- To view fire safety tips and information about fire resources, visit santacruzsentinel.com/fire



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL FILE

Smoke billows thousands of feet into the atmosphere from the 500-acre Trabing Fire in 2008.

FIRE

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than 40 animals, including six horses, died in the fire.

It was Santa Cruz County's third devastating wildfire in a month, and the fire season was just starting.

"I felt that summer was never going to end," said Cal Fire Battalion Chief Jake Hess, who responded to both Trabing and the Summit Fire, which torched more than 4,000 acres and 63 homes above Corralitos in May.

During the Trabing Fire, the barn Mellor had rented and lived in for 10 years burned to the ground, so did much of the vegetation that blocked the panoramic view. What was left, including massive eucalyptus trees, was cleared afterward.

On Wednesday, Mellor flipped through photographs taken after the fire. The earliest show a scorched landscape, deep in ash.

"It looked like snow," he said.

ON THE REBOUND

But Mellor charted the beginning of a renewal, as well. Within weeks, new growth appeared at the base of charred manzanita. Ferns sprouted from blackened soil. Ceanothus, commonly known as California lilac, thrived. As residents rebuilt lost homes, nature

AT A GLANCE

TRABING FIRE

ACRES BURNED: 630

STARTED: June 20, 2008, at 1:58 p.m.

CONTAINED: June 22, 2008, at 8 p.m.

LOCATION: East of Highway 1 near Trabing and Buena Vista roads, north of Watsonville.

CAUSE: Hot embers expelled from vehicle exhaust ignited dry grasses on the side of the highway.

STRUCTURES

DESTROYED: 26 homes and 49 outbuildings.

ON THE NET

■ View a breakdown of major Santa Cruz County wildfires by clicking on this story on www.santacruzsentinel.com.

rebounded.

Today, Mellor enjoys the view from the porch of the cottage he helped build on the property and moved into around Christmas in 2009. As he told his story, a pair of rabbits grazed where the barn once stood. Two warblers with pale green breasts landed in a nearby birdbath. Quail scuttled through the underbrush.

It took two or three years, but the coyotes came back along with bobcats and deer

as food sources were re-established, Mellor said. He's seeing garter and gopher snakes on the property for the first time in years.

The eucalyptus, blamed for the explosive nature of the fire, are flourishing as well. For months after the fire, the most common sound was the chain saw, Mellor said. He's chopped down his share of the Australian import, and poisoned the stumps to be rid of them once and for all.

But eucalyptus trees are notoriously hard to kill, and they've evolved to regenerate after fire. New growth, sprouting from the roots, crawls up bare trunks of trees as tall as 200 feet. Hedges of young trees, 10- to 15-feet high with pale green trunks, have sprung up. The litter of dead leaves and peeling bark is piling up again in the groves. Mellor worries about the potential for another eucalyptus-fueled fire, and chips away at the fast-growing problem year after year.

The eucalyptus made the Trabing Fire unique among the three blazes that year, Hess of Cal Fire said. Oily and highly flammable, the dense groves helped the fire spread quickly. A friend, who served as air tactical supervisor on the fire, later told him pieces of burning eucalyptus were bouncing off the windshield of his plane and he had to climb another 500 feet to avoid the embers.

"He said, 'In 25 years he had never seen a fire so explosive. It looked like a nuclear bomb,'" Hess said.

CONDITIONS COUNT

But under the right conditions, anything will burn. For years, Cal Fire friends from other parts of the state labeled Santa Cruz "asbestos county," thinking its redwood forests offered security from fire, he said. The Summit Fire proved otherwise.

Hess said wind was a major factor in all three fires in 2008. Today, in redwood-covered slopes and ravines of the area where the Summit Fire burned, the vegetation is drier than it was back then, he said. But there haven't been the 50 to 70 mph winds that whipped that blaze, and kept air tankers that would have helped to fight it on the ground.

The community is different, too. Hess, who is stationed in Corralitos, said after the 2008 season, a generation who had grown up without experiencing a major wildfire woke to the danger and to the necessity of creating a defensible space around their homes.

The summer of 2008 "pretty much put our game face on this county," Hess said. "We're no longer that asbestos county."

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