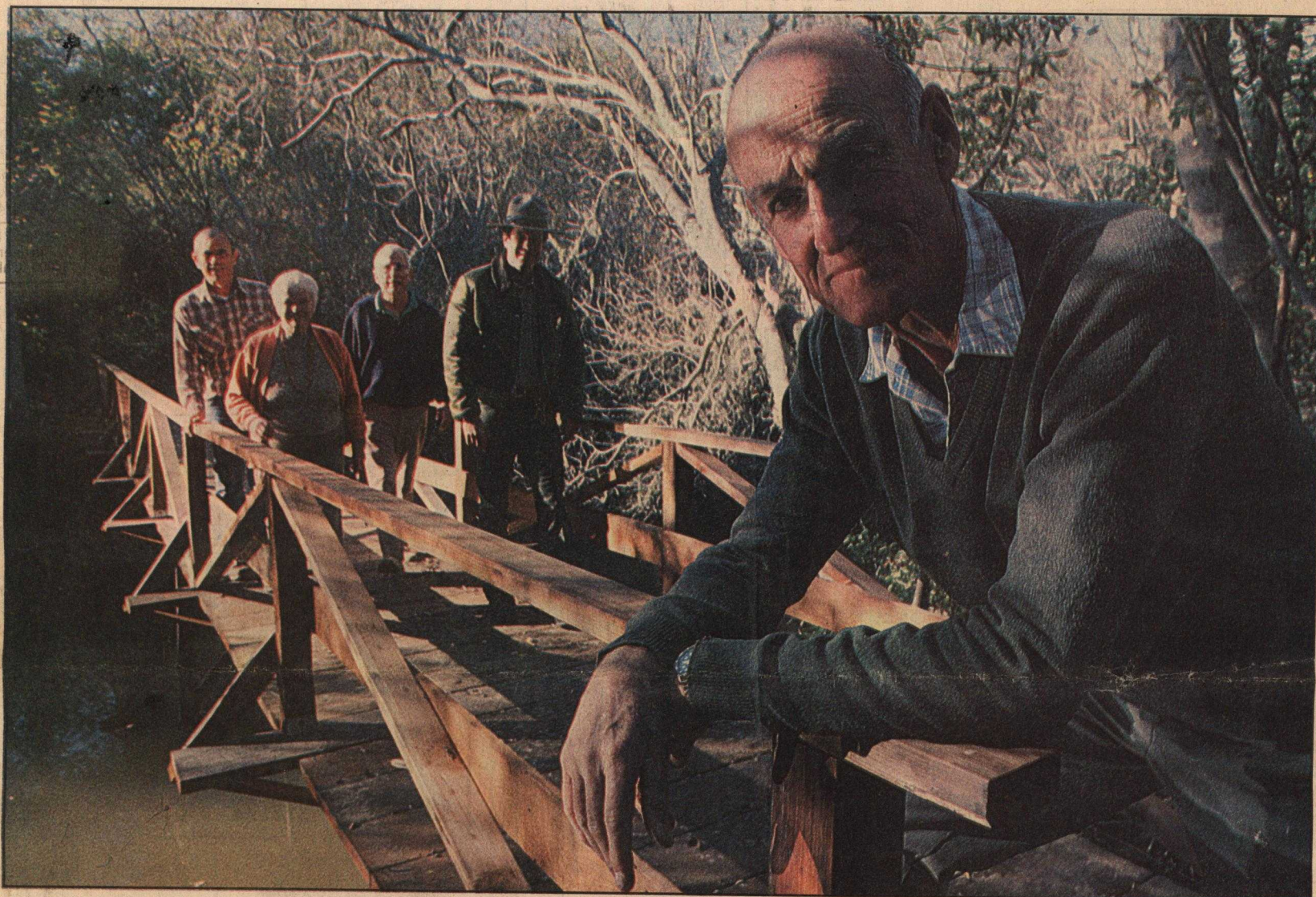


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Kirk Smith of the Waddell Creek Association is pleased with the new trail.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

A walk in the woods

By ROBERT MITTENDORF
Sentinel staff writer

A MARSH HAWK, its wings outstretched and distinctive tail flared, zooms low across the swamp, effortlessly pivots on its wingtips, and lands in a bush lupine.

About 50 yards away, a half-dozen people watch this aerial ballet from a new trail through the marshland. The mile-long trail recently connected the Rancho del Oso nature and history center with the rest of Big Basin Redwoods State Park and its popular Skyline-to-the-Sea Trail.

Without the new trail, these people would be trespassing. Their clumsy human presence could harm the delicate ecological balance of the marsh.

"This marsh habitat is extremely sensitive and can't stand a lot of public use," said John Mott, a State Parks ranger and head of the Santa Cruz Mountains sector that includes Big Basin and Butano parks.

"That's why this trail is so important," Mott said. "(Visitors) can enter the area without having a negative impact. Marshes are perhaps the most productive of ecosystems. That's why we want the visitors to respect the trail."

Equally important is that the new trail allows hikers to cut directly across the marsh as they go from Big Basin to the nature center, which offers

wildlife displays, nature programs and interpretive walks.

"The nature center is isolated from the main body of the park," said Kirk Smith, president of the non-profit Waddell Creek Association which operates the center.

"The only way to get to the park legally was by crossing Highway 1, which wasn't too safe. With this trail connecting now, the nature center will be a more cohesive part of the park. Hopefully, that will expose us more to the public."

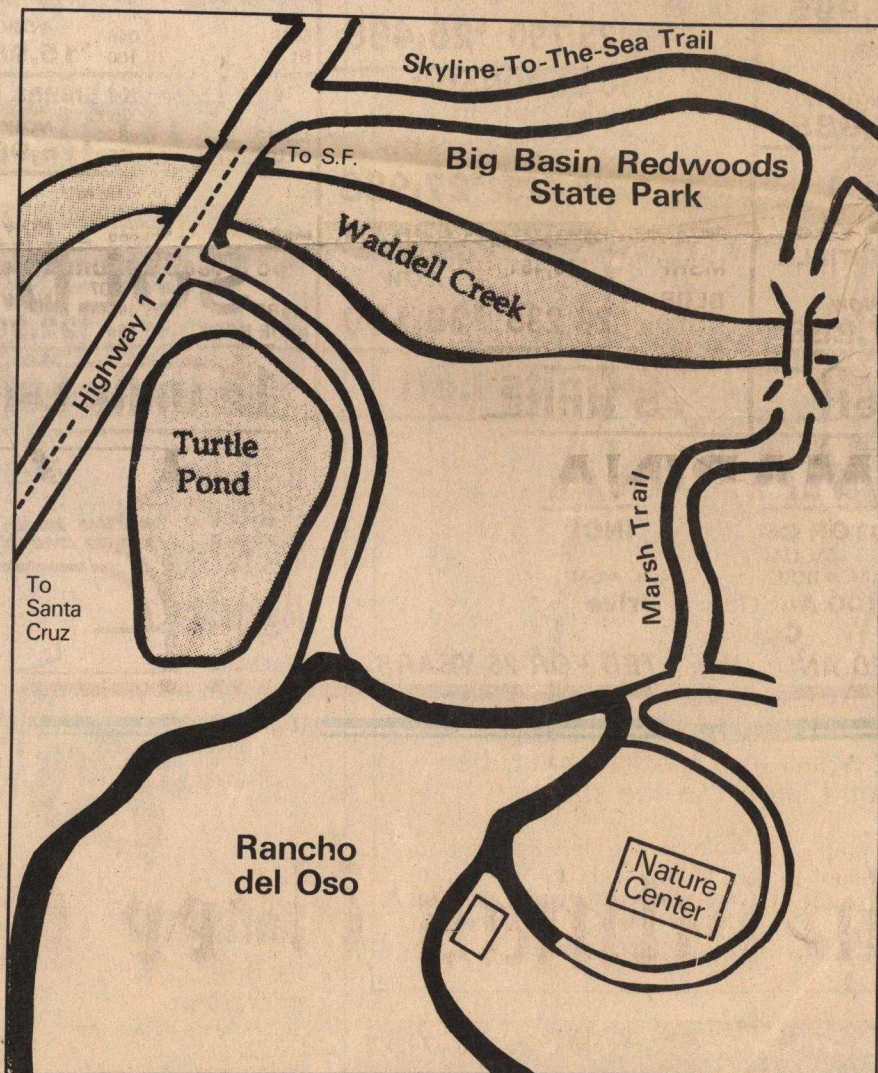
The trail begins near the nature center and winds through the marsh past native grasses, rushes, teasel, water hemlock and sedge. Several wooden boardwalks cross soggy depressions and washes, enabling hikers to stay relatively dry while at the same time minimizing the effects of erosion.

After a few hundred feet, the trail enters a swale of alder, cottonwood and willow. The strangely fresh scent of decaying organic matter permeates the air. Vines of stinging nettle and wild blackberry form an endless thicket.

Soon, the trail reaches Waddell Creek, where a new redwood log and plank bridge was built in a weekend by Lud McCrary, co-owner of Big Creek Lumber Co.; his wife, Barbara; and Bob and Anne Briggs.

Anne Briggs is a niece of Hul-

Please see TRAIL —D2



Trail

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da Hoover McLean, daughter of Theodore Hoover, who was brother of President Herbert Hoover. In 1914, Theodore Hoover established the coastal homestead now known as Rancho del Oso. In 1978, the state bought 1,663 acres of land near the Hoover Ranch. The remaining 50 acres, which includes land surrounding the nature center, was purchased by the Sempervirens Fund in 1985.

'Land where the new nature trail is located was granted as an easement by the McCrarys and by Hulda Hoover McLean.

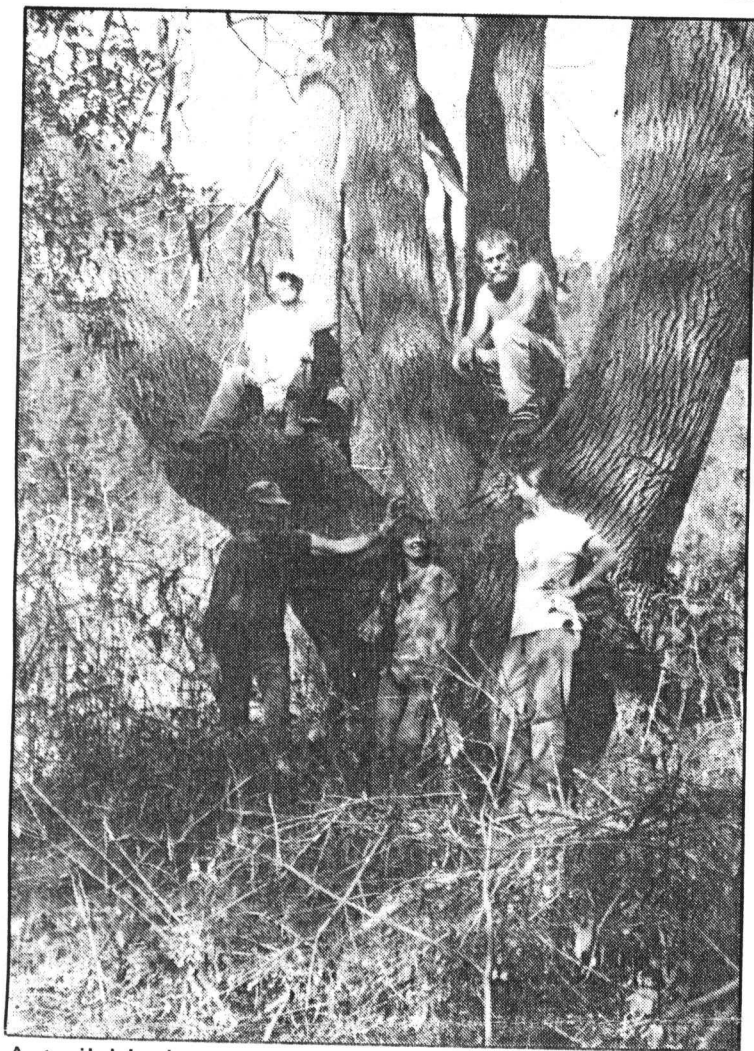
Bob and Anne Briggs designed the trail itself. Along with the McCrarys, they provided of the physical effort to build the trail.

After crossing Waddell creek, a murky stream where tules run wild, the trail begins a gradual ascent to the Big Basin entrance. Taller alders grow here, along with an abundance of non-native poison hemlock, "the kind Socrates drank," Mott said.

Along the way, Mott points out natural curiosities such as coyote dung and bobcat scat, cottonwoods riddled with the harmless pecking of sapsuckers, and a majestic 200-year-old California black walnut tree.

At 18½ feet in circumference, it is believed to be the second-biggest black walnut in the state.

"They didn't even know it was here until they built the trail," Mott said. "Projects like this wouldn't have been possible without the cooperation of people like Hulda and the McCrarys," Mott said. He esti-



A trail-blazing crew poses in a black walnut, believed to be the second largest in the state.

imated that their efforts to build the trail saved the state about \$7,000 in labor equipment and materials.

"Because of the tight fiscal

situation, the state has been increasingly relying on volunteers. We're extremely grateful. Without them, the trail would not have been made."