

# Heart of Conservation

Star Creek Ranch protects wildlife and water, buffers urban and rural environments



MATTHEW HINTZ/SENTINEL

Calah Pasley and Maddie Tyler, employees of the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, explore Star Creek Ranch on April 19. Star Creek Ranch is the latest acquisition in what the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County hopes will be a series of land easements leading to a greenbelt buffer between the Pajaro Valley and the Highway 101 corridor.

Conservation

By DONNA JONES

djones@santacruzsentinel.com

WATSONVILLE — Calah Pasley followed the twisting path of a narrow dirt road at Star Creek Ranch. To the right, branches and twigs scraped the sides of the 12-year-old Toyota Land Cruiser. To the left, the road edged a sheer drop into a deep ravine filled with redwood.

The road ended on a grassy hilltop, where a massive oak stretched its limbs across a meadow speckled with the bright orange of California poppies and the purple of vetch.

On a previous trip, Pasley said as she came over the crest, she spotted a mountain lion near the big tree.

"It looked back at us for about 10 seconds. He just stared as we approached and then he spooked and ran down the hill," said Pasley, development and outreach manager for the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County. "It was quite a moment."

Preserving habitat for mountain lions and oth-

SEE RANCH ON A2



MATTHEW HINTZ/SENTINEL

Maddie Tyler, left, and Calah Pasley survey a section of Star Creek Ranch on April 19. Star Creek Ranch is the latest land acquisition by the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County.

# RANCH

Continued from A1

er wildlife is one of the reasons the Land Trust acquired the 1,200-acre ranch at the southern edge of the Santa Cruz Mountains in December.

One day, the conservation group hopes to secure the necessary easements from surrounding property owners to grant public access to the ranch for hiking and other outdoor recreation. On a recent sunny afternoon, the Sentinel got an early peek at the property during a tour with Pasley.

## KEY PROPERTY

The conservation group has dubbed the 20,000-acre region "the Pajaro Hills." A decade ago, the group negotiated a conservation easement on the Circle P Ranch to the west of Star Creek, protecting nearly 700 acres from development.

But the purchase of the ranch was the first outright acquisition of land in an area the group considers crucial to creating a buffer between the rural Pajaro Valley and urban development along the High-

way 101 corridor to the east.

From a ranch peak, the white dome of Lick Observatory can be seen atop Mount Hamilton in the Diablo Range. To the southeast, Fremont Peak pokes up from the Gabilan Mountains, Holister close by its flanks. On another summit, a glance to the west brings the Monterey Bay into view.

The location is key to the importance of the ranch, Pasley said. Star Creek not only sits at the confluence of three mountain ranges and four counties — Santa Cruz, Santa Clara, San Benito and Monterey — it's at the center of five of the eight major ranches in the region.

"Star Creek Ranch is at the heart of all this," Pasley said. "It's a crucial connection between the mountain ranges and the wildlife corridor along the Pescadero Creek."

## HOME ON THE RANCH

The year-round creek, one of seven streams and springs on the property, gathers water from an 8,000-acre watershed and delivers it to the Pajaro River.

It benefits Pajaro Valley's overdrawn aquifer and the wildlife that flourish at Star Creek, Pasley said. As she

drove, quail skittered into the brush at the side of the road. Hawks flew overhead. She's seen bobcats and wild turkeys, too. Not far from the front gate, there's a badger den, she said. Steelhead spawn in the creek.

Along its 24 miles of ranch roads and trails are the remnants of human occupation, as well, including a crumbling cabin, two rusting spring beds taking up nearly the whole of its interior. A shallow concrete pool with metal ladders leading to the empty bottom is all

## AT A GLANCE

### STAR CREEK RANCH

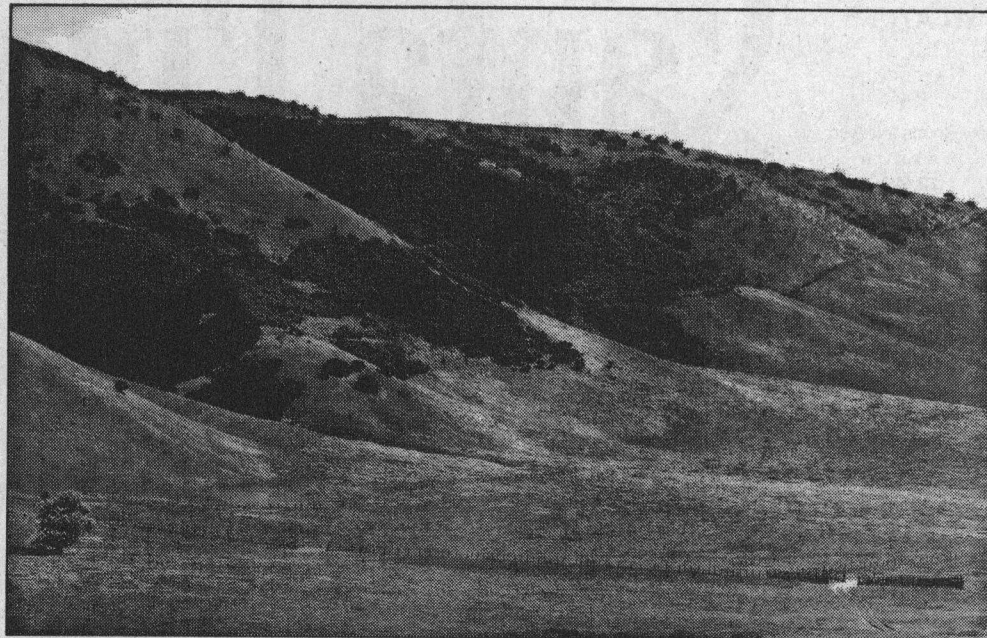
**WHAT:** 1,200-acre property permanently protected from development

**WHY:** Rich in water and timber resources, provides key wildlife habitat

**WHO:** Owned by Land Trust of Santa Cruz County

**WHERE:** Straddles ridge between Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties above the Pajaro Valley

**DETAILS:** [www.landtrustsantacruz.org](http://www.landtrustsantacruz.org)



MATTHEW HINTZ/SENTINEL

Star Creek Ranch is the latest acquisition by the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County.

that remains of a 1950s Girl Scouts camp. In the 1930s, a family named Dodge owned the land and rented campsites for 25 cents a night.

Pasley pointed out flat spots that would make good sites for future campers. But, she added, the recreational opportunities will come later.

For now, the wildlife roam largely undisturbed across

green meadows, up hill-sides thick with redwoods, and through chaparral with stands of native oak, bay laurel and buckeye.

The Land Trust plans to work to acquire other properties or easements in the region, Pasley said. It has a \$4 million opportunity fund in case anything comes along. But the group estimates it would take four times that

much to permanently protect the entire Pajaro Hills, and will seek government and foundation grants to help make it happen.

The group also plans sustainable harvests of redwood at Star Creek to help pay for the upkeep of the property.

Follow Sentinel reporter  
Donna Jones on Twitter  
at [Twitter.com/DonnaJonesSCS](https://twitter.com/DonnaJonesSCS)