

Land trust saves large swath of rare sandhills

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Nearly 200 acres of rare sandy-bottom forest, once ocean floor lifted high into the Santa Cruz Mountains, has been put out of reach of developers and will be preserved as wilderness.

The Land Trust of Santa Cruz County announced Monday that it has completed purchase of the old Geyer Quarry and the adjacent wildlands off Mount Hermon Road, between Scotts Valley and Felton.

The \$4.1 million sale completes a yearlong fund-raising campaign to protect what ecologists say was the largest privately-owned, undeveloped swath of sandhills — a unique environment that's home to seven plants and animals found nowhere else on earth.

"This is a fabulous achievement," said Jodi McGraw, an ecologist who has consulted with the land trust. "But it's sort of the beginning, too."

Much of the sandhills, and its wildlife, has suffered from historical uses on the property, which include sand mining, storage of construction

vehicle fleets and motorcycle off-roading.

The land trust plans to restore the land to its natural state, but that's expected to take years. In the meantime, the area will remain closed to the public and open on a limited basis to school groups and researchers.

"We're still working out the details and grasping the complexity of owning this property," said Stephen Slade, of the land trust.

The property was previously owned by PCO Inc., a private mitigation bank that said it had surplus land to unload.

At one point, a housing development had been proposed on the Mount Hermon property.

The total sandhills habitat is thought to be limited to 3,600 acres in the Santa Cruz Mountains, between Scotts Valley and Bonny Doon. The area, which was pushed up from the ocean floor by geological processes millions of years ago, is distinguished by its tall ponderosa pine and stark white soils.

More than two-thirds of the total sandhills remain in private ownership.

"It's worth protecting," said Debbie Townsend, an assistant director at the state Wildlife Conservation Board, which contributed \$2 million to the purchase of the Mount Hermon parcel.

Townsend noted that the wildlife unique to the sandhills, in addition to the forest and streams on the property, made its protection one of the state's priorities.

State Parks bought 307 acres of sandhills near Henry Cowell Redwoods, in a separate deal, last year.

The wildlife found exclusively in this area include the Mount Hermon June beetle, Zayante band-winged grasshopper, Santa Cruz kangaroo rat, Ben Lomond spineflower, Santa Cruz wallflower, silverleaf manzanita and Ben Lomond buckwheat.

In addition to the Wildlife Conservation Board, money for the acquisition came from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, David and Lucille Packard Foundation, Robert Stephens and Julie Packard and others.

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Ecologist Jodi McGraw walks through the sandhills off of Lockhart Gulch that the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County has bought.

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