

BAY NATURE

January-March 2005

By the Water's Edge: A Chronicle of Two Creeks

By Gordy Slack



The lush habitat in and along Bay Area creeks—like this shady stretch of Wildcat Creek—is home to myriad insects, fish, amphibians, and other creatures. Photo by Galen Rowell/Mountain Light.

This fecund terrain, known as riparian habitat, is one of the richest and most diverse habitat types in California. It provides a moist, nourishing, and relatively cool summer sanctuary for many of the East Bay's plants and animals. Creeks and the riparian habitat that lines them also act as circulatory and nervous systems connecting distant portions of the landscape into a living whole and facilitating the transport of nutrients, seeds, water, and animals throughout the watershed.

There are 44 East Bay watersheds that feed into the Bay, but the majority of the sizable creeks that drain them have been buried or channelized for all or most of their courses and, of course, no creek means no riparian habitat. Some creeks, however, still emerge in places, gracing lucky neighborhoods with occasional bursts of life.

A rare few East Bay creeks remain aboveground for most of their journeys from headwaters to the Bay. Even fewer have a substantial amount of intact riparian habitat left that links their heads to their souls.

From this last and rarest group, I have chosen two of my favorites to look at more closely: Alameda Creek, representing the southern portion of the East Bay, drains the region's largest watershed, an area encompassing nearly 700 square miles that includes densely populated Fremont, Livermore, Pleasanton, and San Ramon. It also courses through some of the Bay Area's wildest and most spectacular habitats....

From a few thousand feet up, there is something mesmerizing, sensual even, about the ribbons of lush green foliage encasing the creeks that drain the summer's dry and golden hills. From the sky, they look like ribbons of fur highlighting soft and rumpled folds of skin on the back of some mammoth creature. What a relief it must be for a neotropical migrant, say a rare western yellow-billed cuckoo exhausted by its flight from South America, to spot that ribbon of green and fly down into its hospitable cover.

You will find the rest of this article, and additional features, in the January-March 2005 issue of *Bay Nature*, available by [subscription](#) or at bookstores and other retailers in the Bay Area.