

Miller Lake and the Thompson Creek Irrigation Association

BY BARBARA CHASTEEN

On a cool summer morning in July, 16 members and friends of the Thompson Creek Irrigation Association (TCIA), plus one good ranch dog, met at the trailhead to Miller Lake and hiked up through tall trees for the biannual cleaning of the dam. Miller Lake lies in a forested bowl 2,000 feet below Grayback Mountain. The lake's outlet, Miller Creek, runs down into Sturgis Fork and, through the Sturgis and O'Brien ditches, has contributed extra water to Thompson Creek for over a century. (See the *Applegater* Spring 2019 issue for early TCIA history.)

Fed by the rain and snow that fall on Grayback, this peaceful, natural lake, just five acres in size, has been part of local ranchers' lives for a century and a half. Walter Miller, an early Applegate Valley rancher for whom the lake is named, prized it as his base for hunting trips. From the late 1800s, Thompson Creek ranchers knew it as a reliable source of extra irrigation water for their hayfields and pastures.

During the 1930s, Oliver Matthews, a freelance botanist who roamed the Siskiyou forests, put Miller Lake at the center of his "Magic Circle" of conifers: the forests surrounding the lake contain half of the 35 cone-bearing species in Oregon. Some are world-class size.

Beavers added their own dam to the outlet and were diligent in plugging up holes created by ranchers trying to maintain flow for irrigation. They seemed to enjoy swimming close to the bank and slapping their tails and diving as ranch dogs ran barking along the shore. In the early 1960s, high school students drove up the extended Sturgis Fork road to play football on the ice.

Today, hikers pass the lake on their way to awesome views of the Siskiyou from the rocky ridges above. Native plant lovers walk to the lake through a hillside of wild rhododendrons and Washington lilies, half a dozen varieties of white wildflowers, and lush wild ginger. On a quiet morning the mirrored surface of the lake is splashed by feeding brook trout, an angler's favorite, planted by the US Forest Service (USFS).

In the later 1800s, a ditch began bringing water 3.5 miles from Sturgis Fork to join the 1.5-mile-long O'Brien Creek ditch and cross over a low divide into Thompson Creek. Ranchers' rights to use the waters of Miller Lake, Sturgis Fork, and O'Brien Creek for irrigation were recognized in a 1907 agreement with the USFS. The TCIA has retained these rights since it was created in 1919, through the USFS land-use permitting process.

Since 1919 the population along Thompson Creek has grown, and the



TCIA members at Miller Lake for the biannual cleaning of the dam. Photo: Barbara Chasteen.

economy has shifted from growing hay and pasturing livestock to include orchards and vegetable farms, lavender fields and vineyards, hemp and marijuana, country homes and equestrian centers. Irrigation water flows into 15 ditches now serving 67 shareholders.

As our climate becomes drier and warmer and the number of irrigators (both legal and not) continues to grow, demand on the stream water is increasing. In a 2009 report, a biologist noted that snowmelt was arriving about 15 days earlier than before. How do we know this? The US Soil Conservation Service established one of its earliest "snow courses" on Grayback Mountain around 1939, due to the importance of the Thompson Creek watershed to southern Oregon agriculture.

Today, maintaining the ditches that bring extra water to Thompson Creek is more important than ever. In 1980, construction of the Applegate Dam closed off other tributaries that used to host heavy runs of spawning coho and Chinook salmon and steelhead and cutthroat trout. Thompson Creek continues to be a key spawning area. Individual irrigation ditches have "fish wheels" installed to help keep these anadromous (seagoing) fish safely in the stream.

In 1967, the TCIA built a modern earthen dam at Miller Lake's outlet, which raises the natural level of the lake by 20 feet. Under its agreement with the USFS, TCIA is responsible for maintaining the dam. Every two years, members clear brush from the dam and the emergency spillway. Because the lake lies within a roadless area, the work is done with hand tools. This year's crew included cheerful volunteers of every age, from grandchild to grandparent, continuing a long tradition of gathering in service to the Thompson Creek community.

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Native plant exploration and conservation in the Siskiyou

BY SUZIE SAVOIE



Attendees of the July NPSO Annual Meeting on a Lichens & Bryophytes field trip on the Siskiyou Crest, in the Observation Peak Botanical Area, led by botanist Scot Loring. Photo: Suzie Savoie.

In July the Native Plant Society of Oregon (NPSO) welcomed 150 people to explore the botanical diversity of the Applegate Siskiyou at our Annual Meeting. Our local Siskiyou Chapter NPSO organized the gathering, which was based out of Pacifica: A Garden in the Siskiyou, in Williams. Over the course of three days the event featured 23 separate field trips into various habitats and botanical hot spots throughout the Applegate River watershed, with a few in the Illinois River watershed. As part of the gathering we also enjoyed a banquet, with excellent food catered by Chef Kristen of Jefferson Farm Kitchen, and outstanding presentations about the region's botanical diversity. The Applegate's own retired US Forest Service botanist, Barbara Mumblo, was one of two recipients of the NPSO Fellows Award for her long-time dedication to native plant conservation.

Our field trips were a huge success, and everyone came away with a deeper appreciation for the Applegate Siskiyou. Knowledgeable botanists and naturalists led field trips to special places, including Cedar Log Flat Research Natural Area, Whisky Creek, Chrome Ridge, Dutchman Peak, Big Red Mountain, Bigelow Lakes Basin, Observation Peak, TJ Howell Botanical Drive and Babyfoot Lake, Cook and Green Pass, Elk Meadow, Frog Pond, Grayback Mountain, Big Sugarloaf Peak, Miller Lake, Free and Easy Creek, Silver Fork Basin, and Whisky Peak.

Additionally there was a field trip to learn grass species along the Enchanted Forest Trail, a roadside botany trip along Road 20 on the Siskiyou Crest, Plein Air painting at Jackson Gap on the Siskiyou Crest, a tour of riparian restoration along the Applegate River at Red Lily Vineyards, a field trip to learn lichens and bryophytes, and a field trip along the trails at Pacifica.

Each location offered participants an opportunity to learn about the botanical diversity in our region. People also saw many rare, endemic, or otherwise unusual species, such as Siskiyou willowherb, split-hair paintbrush, Baker cypress, Siskiyou lewisia, Henderson's horkelia, white rushlily, Brewer spruce, California cobra lily, Sadler's oak, Lee's lewisia, Wiggins' lily, Siskiyou milk vetch, California bog asphodel, Jayne's canyon buckwheat, and Siskiyou beardtongue, to name just a few.

The Applegate River watershed has 11 officially designated botanical areas. Compared to other regions, this is a particularly high concentration. These botanical areas were designated to protect

some of our most important native plant habitats and rare plant populations. During the NPSO Annual Meeting field trips to many of these botanical areas, participants were impressed by the region's rare plant species and botanical diversity. Many who came to the gathering from outside the area were excited to return in the future to explore more of the Applegate, while southern Oregon participants learned new destinations to botanize.

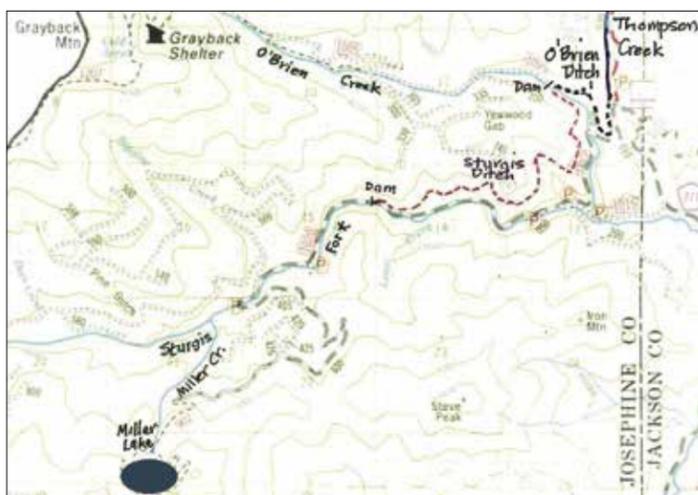
The Siskiyou Chapter NPSO works to conserve and protect the native plant communities throughout southwest Oregon, including the 11 botanical areas found in the Applegate watershed. Botanical areas are extremely important for the protection of rare and endemic plant species—some that are found nowhere else on earth. However, some of these special places are suffering extensive ecological damage from unauthorized, illegal off-road vehicle use.

Currently, the Siskiyou Chapter NPSO is concerned about three of the Applegate's botanical areas on the Siskiyou Crest: Big Red Mountain Botanical Area, Dutchman Peak Botanical Area, and Observation Peak Botanical Area. Unfortunately, each of these amazing places is experiencing severe impacts to botanical values because people are driving off-road with motorcycles, ATVs, and full-sized trucks through lush meadows, old-growth forests, and unusual rocky serpentine wildflower habitat.

When people drive off-road through wildflowers growing on rocky serpentine soil, they churn up and kill rare plants under their tires. When people do donuts in a wet meadow, they not only immediately kill rare plants, but they can also severely compact soils, alter the hydrological function of the meadow's wetland or stream, create irreparable damage, and lead to long-term botanical impacts. The Siskiyou Chapter NPSO will continue working to stop unauthorized off-road vehicle damage in our spectacular botanical areas. We are urging the US Forest Service to shut down the ecologically damaging off-trail routes in order to protect botanical areas from further degradation or the extirpation of rare plant species.

The Siskiyou Chapter NPSO was thrilled to host this year's Annual Meeting in the Applegate Siskiyou. We hope it inspires people to conserve and protect Applegate wildlands and botanical areas.

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Map showing location of Miller Lake provided by Barbara Chasteen.