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J-Hook Braided Log, Truckee River, Mustang, NV, 2015. Photographer: Mary A O'Brien

Nature Unleashed

Mary O'Brien

You've been to this place before, probably at this exact spot listening to the river, waiting for the sun to drop below the cottonwoods, waiting for the golden leaves to shimmer. But it was different then. The trees were old and some were dying, dropping their massive limbs, like they were shedding skin. The trail was rough, casual at best. Sometimes downed wood blocked the way for months. And if the path was clear of debris, the weeds were massive making a trip out to the lower Truckee River on the edge of Nevada's Humboldt Sink a journey for the bold and adventurous.

It was always quiet, too quiet. For being so far away from the city and so close to the mountains there were strangely few sounds of birds, and seldom did you see animal tracks. The noise of the freeway above was the constant. Even in spring the high water of the river was difficult to hear so far below the floodplain. This was a dying river. At the river's edge, a deep, eroded sandy cliff led down to the water. You could get there, but unless you were with others to help, the slippery climb back up was hardly worth it.

Recently, you've seen others work this land. Some individuals seemed well knowing on how to plant native bushes and trees. They were a conservation crew. But others, big groups of

volunteers some well-dressed, others in T-shirts printed with “earth day”-type slogans, still others from jobs at Casinos, warehouses and outdoor gear stores. All sorts of people—not trained, just engaged. And there, guiding them were a couple of people showing them how to weave willows and wood and fill the weavings with freshly cut willow sticks that teams were busy harvesting.

Then, at an intersection of two trails, you spot something you’ve not seen before. It’s both familiar and startling at the same time.

What you see could be a sculpture, but it is growing. Dead wood and live willows are woven together to create a protected habitat, too narrow for a human encampment. It appears taken over by myriad animals. Frogs inhabit a cavity created at the pond’s edge. A kingsnake darts quickly out of site as you approach. A yellow-headed blackbird screeches consistently, sounding more like a rusty hinge than anything avian. His secret weapon in a competitive world. A redwing blackbird dominates a perch that emerges from the middle of the weaving. Is this what the others are making?

The changes here are noticeable, easily spotted from the interstate freeway that drones on adjacent to and above the river. Small tree saplings are everywhere. Groves of cottonwood cover the lowlands. Willows line the riverbank. The river course undulates and winds through these clumps of vegetation as if slowed and distracted on its way. Is it higher or is the river’s edge lower? You can’t quite figure it out, but all you know is that you can walk to the river’s edge now, hear its ripples, feel its coolness, wade into its waters easily. Overflow ponds dot the landscape and are full of life. Frogs’ choruses fill the air even when you get near. Birds hidden in the thick willow stands sing out warnings as you approach. There are more of them than humans in this place on this day, and they are undisturbed by your presence. You are hidden among the wildness of this place.

This place. It is a destination, a location where it once was just a view along the 70 mph drive above. The trails are open, and wind their way along with the river through all sorts of wildlife passages and habitats. And there is shade. In some places thick clumps of tall straight willows grow just tall enough to block the noonday sun. In others, where the land is low, small forests of cottonwood make a play maze for the adventurous. At sunset the light jumps stick to stick between the tall straight trunks of cottonwoods, growing impossibly dense, until they merge into a small forest. Their tiny cottony seeds drifted here on the rising waters of spring snowmelt. And there are bushes, wild roses, rabbitbrush and waist-high sagebrush everywhere, outlining the trails, defining the path of the river, growing into the highlands until they meet the dark basalt and ancient lava formations where big horn sheep like to hide in the mid-day heat.

Getting here today was easy, but no so several years ago. You pride yourself in knowing the wild places that surround Reno, but in the past the railroad tracks dominated the straight and expedient path that only skirted the river occasionally. Dry, dusty, full of tumbleweed and foreboding you hardly ever visited. It was someone else's land. Now it belongs to those who know about it and those who care for it. A park? No, just land set aside and cared for by The Nature Conservancy and those who appreciate it.

Your friend from Frisbee golf brought you here today, to volunteer with two artists who have spent their careers working on lands such as this. They make sculptures near the water on lands that have been compromised by human activity. Their art helps more of those places turn into rich habitats for the animals and plants that are supposed to be there. This team calls themselves Watershed Sculpture, and from them you learn how this river came to be lost to the natural world. You learn plant identification by genus and species names. You gain an appreciation for the smallest scientific details, such as the songs of the Willow Flycatcher which are innate, not learned like those of most other songbirds. And you discover you are building a habitat for that very bird, once dominant in this landscape, now prized for its rarity.



Avian Resource Habitat, Truckee River, Patrick, NV, 2015. Photographer: Mary A O'Brien

You discover techniques for maintaining the land that were forgotten by communities once before, during the Dust Bowl era. You understand that some human-made problems can be changed with simple efforts. At least that's what the artist believe. But more important, you learn how people are bringing the river back. Working with these artists you learn the connections between the plants in this place and the animals that seek them out, and the animals that need those animals for survival. You've come to gain an appreciation of the systems and the forces at play in this geographic range.

You stay until sunset, longer than you had planned. On the way back you see a few knowing fishermen. Bats start to fly. A bobcat leaps to another branch from her perch high in a legacy cottonwood. This is now your place, and that of so many more. This is restored open space. The earth in all its strengths, despite what generations have done to alter it. This is nature unleashed.

Mary O'Brien is a sculptor who collaborates on environmental installations with her partner Daniel McCormick in their practice, *Watershed Sculpture*. These works are founded on the principle that artists, in collaboration with other disciplines, can create works that encourage sustainability and citizen stewardship. See: watershedsculpture.com.

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