15 Putah Creek Access Parks

15.1 Existing Conditions

15.1.1 Description

The five access locations that collectively make up the Putah Creek Fishing Access Parks are located on approximately 150 acres, along a 3.25-mile stretch of Putah Creek and State Highway 128, seven miles west of the town of Winters. There is an onsite park host at Access 3. A $4.00 day use fee is required at these locations.

The sites are operated and maintained by the County under an Operating Agreement with the State of California, Wildlife Conservation Board, which owns these sites. The Operating Agreement with the State indicates that two primary uses of the site are public access and wildlife habitat.

15.1.2 Improvements

Improvements at the five Putah Creek Access Parks consist primarily of seven parking areas. Foot trails have developed over time; there are some picnic tables and barbecues, and Sites 1 and 3 are equipped with portable restrooms. "Iron rangers" are provided for visitors to deposit the required day-use fees. There is existing onsite electrical power and telephone service at Access Site 3, which is also developed with a rudimentary water system that pumps water out of the creek; the park host, however, uses bottled water.

15.1.3 Current Uses & Activities

Sites 4 and 5 are currently closed. Recreation activities at the other access locations primarily consist of fishing and general access to the creek. The sites can also accommodate picnicking and nature study and enjoyment. Overnight camping is prohibited at these locations. Overnight camping and a boat ramp (for non-motorized craft) are available at the Lake Solano Regional Park on Pleasants Valley Road, in Solano County, just downstream from the fishing access.

15.1.4 Environmental Resources

The Putah Creek Access Parks provide substantial environmental values, although not all parts of these five facilities are equally valuable. The upper access (Number 1) includes elevated terraces that are well vegetated with a form of foothill woodland habitat type, having multiple vegetation layers and a variegated structure.

The habitat in the park is continuous in all directions with the same or similar habitat types and the site is wildlife-rich. (For example, this site is apparently included in the foraging territory of pileated woodpeckers (*Dryocopus pileatus*), the largest of the remaining American woodpecker species, which was detected immediately south of this park in State-owned land on the other side of Putah Creek.)

The five "linear" parks share a corridor of valley foothill riparian habitat along Putah Creek. Typically there is a nearly continuous fringe of sandbar willow along the creek, with additional species higher on stream banks and on low terraces near the creek channel. Some prominent plant species present include Fremont cottonwood, Pacific or black willow, Oregon ash, black walnut, blue elderberry, and button bush. Depending on disturbance history, some of the cottonwoods and willows may be quite large. Epiphytic wild grape is common to abundant. This riparian corridor, and the associated stream course itself, is an important regional biological linkage between the interior of the Coast Range and the Sacramento River.

The third or middle of the access parks is infested with a substantial stand of tree-of-heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*), an invasive, woody, exotic species, that is reducing the cover of desirable native species. This vegetation series is, however, largely located outside the extensive floodplain in this park, which provides a structurally complex riparian habitat dominated by black walnut, Fremont cottonwood, and black willow, with an herbaceous understory dominated by a tall sedge (*Carex*) species.

The two lower access sites include campground areas on an elevated terrace surface that is overrun with annual grassland dominated by yellow starthistle (*Centaurea solstitialis*). These sites also include part of the riparian corridor along Putah Creek, which is part of the continuous riparian corridor along the stream described briefly above.

Sensitive species that are described in the California Natural Diversity Data Base for the 7.5-minute USGS quad that includes the five access parks are listed in Table II-6. The occurrence record for the valley elderberry longhorn beetle (VELB) explicitly includes at least the upper three access parks. (Although not listed in the CNDDB records, the Putah Creek canyon downstream from Monticello Dam is well known to provide regular foraging opportunities for bald eagles.)

Table II-6. CNDDB Sensitive Species in the Monticello Dam 7.5-minute Quad.

Scientific Name	Common Name	Federal/ California/ DFG/CNPS
Desmocerus californicus dimorphus	Valley elderberry longhorn beetle	FT/--/--/--
Falco peregrinus anatum	Peregrine falcon	--/CE/--/--
Hesperolinon breweri	Brewer's western flax	--/--/ --/1B
Rana boylii	Foothill yellow-legged frog	--/--/SC/ --

FT Federal Threatened
CE California Endangered
FC Federal Special Concern
SC California Special Concern
CNPS 1B Plants Rare, Threatened, or Endangered in California and elsewhere

15.2 Problems & Opportunities

Although providing one of the more scenic and environmentally interesting resource areas for County residents, the Putah Creek Access Sites provide minimal facilities to accommodate visitors other than those intent on fishing. Among the problems at these sites are low rate of use fee payment and the limited use of the parking areas. County staff report that only about 10 percent of the park users pay the required day fee. Turnouts have been created along Highway 16 by Caltrans, and people park on the shoulder of the highway rather than in the park, presumably to avoid the park fees. There is also a history of some vandalism at these sites.

The linear configuration of this park resource area would well accommodate a linear type facility, such as a Class I bike trail or a pedestrian trail. A trail in this location would have potential value for interpretation and environmental education. A proposal has been initiated by the Putah Creek Discovery Corridor Cooperative and supported by Solano County Parks (a member organization) to create a dam-to-dam (Solano to Monticello) trail that would include this area. An additional advantage of the location of the creek with respect to the linear trail concept is the extensive public ownership (WCB) and undisturbed condition of the south side of the creek. This enables two corridors along the creek, one specifically for wildlife as protected habitat and the other as a public access corridor that includes a large segment of County parkland.

A management concern associated with environmental resources in the region of these five parks is the relative importance of exotic plant species, including yellow star thistle and tree-of-heaven. In addition, salt-cedar (tamarisk) and arundo are also present in this watershed and occur (though not yet at high densities) in these parks. Appropriate efforts should be dedicated to eradicating these invasive species.

A second environmental management concern is the potential for creating significant adverse impacts to the Putah Creek riparian corridor with inappropriate or unregulated public access. Trails parallel to the stream should be located outside the riparian corridor, rather than near the stream.

As an opportunity for interpreting popular culture, it should be noted that brothers Tom and John Fogerty, who lived part of their formative years in El Cerrito, enjoyed visits to Putah Creek every summer, and the creek became the inspiration for a 1969 hit song performed by their band, Creedence Clearwater Revival: “Green River.”

15.3 Preliminary Recommendations

- *Big idea: Celebrate the Green River with an expanded appreciation that matches an expanded range of uses.*

The Putah Creek Access Parks are collectively an underused outdoor recreation resource in the County. Currently this group of park sites is classified as fishing access areas; however, the management concept for these sites should be expanded to include other activities, including day use nodes and possibly camping.

The sites should also be more broadly considered as a "nearby nature" resource. In this light, it would be appropriate to preserve the key areas of "wild" riparian habitat in an undisturbed condition, with little or no public access (1).

Amenities at this site should be improved to enhance the day-use experiences, including picnic tables and supportive infrastructure, more environmental interpretation components, and better fish access facilities. Additional provisions could include the class I trail concept and overnight camping facilities located in the vicinity of Sits 4 and 5.

The existing parking areas are problematic and largely underused. Additional study is needed to recommend a course of action, including possible removal of some paved areas. Consultation with Caltrans is needed to coordinate the solution to on-highway parking. Additional recommendations for the Putah Creek Access Parks include the following:

- The County should work with and support efforts by groups such as the Putah Creek Discovery Corridor Cooperative and Solano County Parks to create a dam-to-dam (Solano to Monticello) trail in the Putah Creek corridor (1, 2, 3). The trail alignment should not be located entirely within the stream riparian zone, to minimize potentially adverse environmental effects and to retain some relatively wild, less disturbed wildlife areas (1, 3, 5).
- Work with volunteer groups to remove invasive species.
- The County should work with the University of California, Davis on recreation use and access projects of mutual benefit along lower Putah Creek.
- Establish a canopy of native trees in the vicinity of Site 4 or Site 5 as an initial step in creating a camping site for overnight use.

"...And if you get lost come on home to Green River..."

Putah Creek under dense riparian canopy, Putah Creek Fishing Access No. 3, near downstream parking area. (Photo R C Roberts)

16 Vernon A. Nichols Park

16.1 Existing Conditions

16.1.1 Description

Nichols Park is located along Cache Creek off of State Highway 16 on County Road 57, at the town of Guinda. This approximately 21-acre park site was severely altered in recent years by flood events in 1995 and 1997, which swept away the beach, upland areas in the floodplain, and stands of cottonwoods. There is a park host onsite; use fees are not charged. The park closes at dusk.

16.1.2 Improvements

Improvements at this site are not extensive but include picnic tables, barbecues, a play area, a beach area, playground equipment, and portable chemical toilets. Associated with the host site is a septic tank and leachfield. There is electrical power and phone service onsite, as well as a limited irrigation system. Parking areas are unpaved. Under consideration in October 2004 is the addition of a backstop for a softball field, parking lot improvements, and additional picnic tables, barbeques, and benches.

While not directly part of the park, there is a County bridge on Road 57 just east of the park, that is under consideration by County Public Works for replacement. The County road ends just past the bridge.

16.1.3 Current Uses & Activities

Probably the most attractive feature at Vernon A. Nichols Park is its proximity to Cache Creek, and the most popular activities in the area are water-related activities; however, these activities, which include wading and swimming, and fishing, occur to a large extent off-site. Picnicking, play structure use, and informal team sports on the open area constitute the other uses that occur at Nichols Park. Probably because of the undeveloped character of the park, public use is relatively light. Overnight camping is currently prohibited.

16.1.4 Environmental Resources

Nichols Park includes some areas with important environmental resource values, as well as other areas with limited environmental value. The changes that resulted from Cache Creek channel migration affected the natural resources at the site, including the loss of riparian vegetation. The park appears to include a substantial area of the Cache Creek floodplain, but it is uncertain whether the County's floodplain ownership is above or below the Road 57 bridge.

Much of Nichols Park is located on a terrace above Cache Creek. The terrace surface inside the park perimeter has largely been cleared of native vegetation and is vegetated with annual grasses, most of which do not remain green through the Capay Valley

summer. This terrace part of the park provides little environmental or natural resources value.

The park also includes a narrow valley foothill riparian habitat fringe along the eastern margin of the terrace, as well as a part of the Cache Creek floodplain below the terrace. The riparian habitat is mostly sandbar willow, with several Fremont cottonwoods. As with the other Yolo County parklands that include the Cache Creek channel, floodplain, and riparian habitat, these occurrences are ecologically important within the region, serving to maintain a biological linkage at a landscape scale. The floodplain adjacent to the park (south of the bridge) is mostly unvegetated sediment, but is already developing a cover of salt-cedar and arundo.

The changes caused at the park by bank erosion and channel migration changed habitat conditions. The newly created floodplain east of the creek (which may no longer be County-owned) is in early stages of developing a vegetation cover of willows and cottonwoods. The groins installed as part of the bank stabilization have also trapped sand that has developed a cover of sandbar willow and a variety of herbaceous species. (This area does have habitat value, even in its current state; during field work a rubber boa (*Charina bottae*) was observed in this sparsely vegetated habitat. This species has an affinity for rocky areas, and the rip-rap emplaced as part of the groins work may be an important habitat feature.)

Existing occurrence records for the USGS 7.5-minute quad that includes Nichols Park are listed in Table II-7. The existing records do not include the park explicitly, but the park does contain a designated Valley Elderberry (VELB) habitat mitigation area..

Table II-7. CNDDB Sensitive Species in the Guinda 7.5-minute Quad.

Scientific Name	Common Name	Federal/ California/ DFG/CNPS
Desmocerus californicus dimorphus	Valley elderberry longhorn beetle	FT/--/--/--
Riparia riparia	Bank swallow	--/CT/--/--

FT Federal Threatened
CT California Threatened

16.2 Problems & Opportunities

Given its attractive setting on a bend in Cache Creek, Nichols Park does not "work" as well as it should. One reason for this is the limited use of the park's primary resource: Cache Creek. Impacts from the flood events have removed substantial creekside lands and riparian trees, such as cottonwoods, and replaced substantial upland areas with scoured creek bed. The layout and relationship of park components does not take sufficient advantage of the inherent landscape setting and natural resource opportunities.

Given the high summer temperatures typical of the Capay Valley, much of the existing park is overexposed to sunlight for sustained summertime use and would benefit considerably from improved tree cover and shade. Mid-summer temperatures and

lack of cover is a deterrent to day use in this location in the Capay Valley. The few existing facilities are poorly sited and consist for the most part of non-durable materials. The picnic area currently is not as inviting as it might be because there is little linkage to the creek and an absence of shade cover – i.e., it should not be necessary for families to huddle beneath the bridge for shade while having a barbeque at the park. The existing caretaker/park host trailer and campsite are unnecessarily conspicuous and predominant features in the park, which detract from the park setting and visitor experience.

Environmental resource management issues at Nichols Park include a concern that the parts of the park within the Cache Creek floodplain are developing dense stands of salt-cedar and arundo. It is recommended that the County work with the Cache Creek Conservancy to eradicate these stands at the earliest possible date, in a similar fashion as has occurred at the Capay Open Space Park.

The apparent management focus for this facility appears to inherently emphasize an "urban" styles of park features and conditions (e.g., the large play area), instead of more natural and environmentally functional habitats. Emphasis on these urban uses reduces the potential for maintaining or enhancing environmental values that would seem more appropriate to this rural setting. The site offers considerable potential for environmental restoration, and natural regeneration of riparian vegetation can be assisted by actively planting native riparian species.

16.3 Preliminary Recommendations

- *Big idea: Reconnect with Cache Creek and the associated natural and cultural diversity of Yolo County.*

This park property offers an attractive setting that holds potential for a variety of uses. Enhancement of visitor experience should begin with an explicit acknowledgement of the relationship between the park and the creek, as well as the people who have made this watershed their homes.

This park should be re-created as an attractive destination for day use activities. This refocusing involves three primary components. First, it is suggested that areas be created with tree canopy for the primary day use. It may be possible to work with a commercial tree grower to implement a grove type of landscape, which would be consistent with Yolo County's agricultural tradition (5). Second, the park host campsite should be relocated to a less conspicuous location (1, 4, 5). Third, the relationship between upland areas and the creek should be emphasized by site and facility design and interpretation.

Onsite environmental and historical information could interpret the flood events that caused such dramatic changes in the landscapes, as well as the emergent riparian vegetation response to these changes. Nichols Park has been identified as ideal location to provide the public with an overview of the history of Capay Valley. Physical access to the creek should be enhanced and designed to include provisions for persons with disabilities. This park could be a model for public provision of outdoor experiences that invite the participation of people who are disabled.

Other preliminary recommendations for Nichols Park include the following:

- Additional adjacent areas should be acquired, if possible, around this park, including additional creekside areas (5), immediately downstream of the bridge on the west side, south of the current (presumed) boundary, and on both sides of the creek. (As is true for other County park properties, the current legal property boundary for this site should be determined by a professional land surveyor (5).)
- Provide environmental educational information, including signage and interpretive trails. Interpretive information should also be in Spanish (1, 2).
- In conjunction with interested non-profit organizations, remove and control invasive plants (1, 5).
- Plant additional native plants, including elderberry shrubs of environmental value (1).
- In developing interpretive material for this site, themes could focus on relationships among hydrology, fluvial processes, and riparian habitats (5) and well as the history of the entire Capay Valley area.
- A minimal day-use fee should be charged at this location (5).

A little shade cover from native tree species would go a long way toward enhancing day use at Nichols Park. (Photo R C Roberts)

17 Yolo County Historical Museum (Gibson House)

17.1 Existing Conditions

17.1.1 Description

The Yolo County Historical Museum, also known as the Gibson House, is located at 512 Gibson Road, one-half mile west of the County Fair Mall in the City of Woodland. The County acquired the Gibson House and the 2.5-acre parcel in 1975. The Gibson House was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.

The museum and grounds are open to the public on Saturdays and Sundays between 12 noon and 4 pm. On Mondays and Tuesdays between 10 am and 4 pm and closed on all major holidays. The office is open Mondays and Tuesdays between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. A $2.00 donation for each adult is requested for tours. Children 12 and under and museum members are admitted free.

17.1.2 Improvements

This County property consists of the restored historical house; maintained grounds with native and non-native trees, various gardens, lawn areas, and other landscaping; a number of outbuildings; and a parking area. Tall ionic columns, a formal pediment, and an original series of cut decorations spelling the name “Gibson” reflect some of the character of the ten-room structure. The 1850s to 1870s Classical Revival home, extensively remodeled before the turn of the century, was built by William Byas Gibson and occupied by his family until 1963. Rooms contain antiques and furnishings depicting several different styles and eras from the Victorian Period (c. 1855 to 1901) up to the 1930s.

Outbuildings and exterior areas include a smoke house, root cellar, dairy room, wash house, blacksmith shop, and a barn with farm equipment and other displays.

Over the past decades, the County has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in this museum property, in terms of water, sewer, and electrical connections, security lighting, exterior and interior cleaning and repair and restoration, heating and air conditioning, landscaping, structural work, roofing, refinishing and painting, fencing, bricks and cement work, and other improvements. An adjacent residence (508 Gibson Road) was acquired in 2002 and converted to house the museum headquarters and offices.

17.1.3 Current Uses & Activities

Volunteer docents lead tours of the museum and grounds during the times when the museum is open to the public. Tours originate at the Headquarters or immediately outside the house. Exhibits inside the museum as well as in the adjacent

outbuildings interpret various aspects of Yolo County history, including certain periods of history and the County's agricultural heritage. One upstairs area of the house is used as an archive and storage area; another room is used as a gift shop. The park grounds are open during regular museum hours for picnicking; trees provide a shade canopy over much of the property. The grounds are available, on a fee basis, for weddings, receptions, family reunions, and other group activities.

17.1.4 Natural Resources

This location is a developed and landscaped property, located in a medium-density urban neighborhood. The "natural resources" of the Yolo County Historical Museum grounds are consistent with the site's historical and educational mission. A large, valley oak specimen in front of the house is likely more than 250 years old. Introduced trees on the museum include olive trees (reminiscent of the Gibson ranch), cedar, English walnut, pecan, and coastal redwood. Among the various gardens are areas devoted to herbs and native plants.

17.2 Problems & Opportunities

The Yolo County Historical Museum is an under-appreciated and underused resource in the County, and public awareness of this resource could be heightened and improved. The museum is supported by a dedicated staff of volunteers.

Maintenance of the structure, trees, grounds, and outbuildings is an ongoing need. Directional signage to the site and the sign identifying the location could be improved. The museum should be better equipped for people with disabilities.

17.3 Preliminary Recommendations

- *Big idea: Celebrate the history of Yolo County.*

Preliminary recommendations for this site include the following:

- Continue to provide funds for necessary maintenance and renovation projects at the museum.
- Consistently refer to the site as the "Yolo County Historical Museum" in all signage, website information, brochures, and other printed materials.
- Work with the State to install historical marker signs for the museum within State rights-of-way at strategic entry points to Woodland.
- The site should be promoted as a destination stop on future commercial "agri-tours" of Yolo County.
- Use of the museum to disperse information about the Yolo County park system and other parks and open space areas.