



Figure 1. Flooded grasslands during winter 2016–17.

VISITING CALIFORNIA GRASSLANDS: *Christopher Gardner¹ Photos courtesy the author.*

City of Davis South Fork Preserve

The City of Davis South Fork Preserve is the crown jewel of the City’s Open Space Program and a fantastic resource for both people and wildlife. Sitting on 200 acres immediately adjacent to Putah Creek, the preserve is home to valuable, diverse habitat that includes riparian forest, riparian scrub/transition, and valley oak savanna with native grass understory. A recent property acquisition increased the overall preserve by 10 acres and its creek frontage by almost 2000 feet. The property is an important habitat node along a creek that is otherwise constrained by production agriculture.

California native grasses can be found throughout the preserve, but the oak savanna feature is really a showcase of these incredible plants. Dotted with swales and small ridges, the savanna supports a diverse set of annual and perennial natives. These grasses provide cover for numerous small mammals, and therefore are excellent hunting grounds for raptors, egrets, herons, coyotes, and even the occasional bobcat.

The preserve was also designed to mitigate flooding on Putah Creek, and provided that function during the very wet winter of

2016–17. The grassland feature was built to accommodate flooding and act as a relief valve for the creek, providing an area for water to spread out and slow down. This was fascinating to watch (Figure 1), as was the slow recovery of the grasses after the water receded. The long inundation period transitioned some areas of the grasslands away from bunch grasses to thick stands of creeping wildrye (*Elymus triticoides*). In the spring, these stands are the favored nesting areas for western meadowlarks.



South Fork Preserve is located just south of Davis on County Road 104 at Putah Creek. It is open to the public seven days a week, with trailheads on both sides of the county road. A small kiosk and sitting area are available, with interpretive panels that tell about the site history and resources. The city is also excited to implement a new trail construction project that will dramatically increase access for users. Funded by a grant from California State Parks, the project will take visitors close to the creek, allow for ADA access to some areas and increase the educational opportunities through updated signage. Look for new trails to open in fall 2019. For more information on the COD Open Space Program, visit <https://cityofdavis.org/city-hall/community-development-and-sustainability/open-space-program>.



Inset: Vole damage on valley oak shows grassland wildlife activity.

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