

# Audubon Canyon guide takes joy in sharing nature

By **EMILY LAVIN**  
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**F**ifth-graders from Edna Maguire Elementary School are scattered around the entrance to Audubon Canyon Ranch's Martin Griffin Preserve, ready for a hike within the 1,000-acre open space.

Bill Wells, a volunteer docent for Audubon Canyon Ranch's nature-education field trips, uses an orange flag to gather the four students assigned to his group for introductions and a few details about the day. One of the students spots a caterpillar above the door to the preserve's volunteer center.

The day's outing hasn't officially started yet, but Wells isn't one to pass up a teachable moment. While the students study the caterpillar, he whips out his phone.

## get involved

For more information about Audubon Canyon Ranch, including ways to volunteer at the Martin Griffin Preserve, visit egret.org.

Earlier that morning, the Tiburon resident had snapped photos of some tiger-moth eggs that had been laid on the post of a wooden staircase nearby. The kids crowd around the phone for a closer look.

"These eggs become those caterpillars," he tells the students, "and they're going to be moths next spring, right?"

Those kinds of impromptu lessons are a regular occurrence throughout the morning as Wells, 76, teaches the kids about various plants and animals. He's been a volunteer docent at the nature preserve for about six years — and he delights in sharing the preserve's sights and sounds with the students who visit.

"It's just a joy," Wells says.



JOCELYN KNIGHT / FOR THE ARK

**Audubon Canyon Ranch docent Bill Wells shares information about Bolinas Lagoon with Edna Maguire Elementary School fifth-graders Brady Stewart, William Youn, Cole Soto and Owen Hubbard during a hike at Martin Griffin Preserve. Wells, who lives in Tiburon, is a long-time volunteer with the ranch's nature-education field trips, leading hands-on hikes at the preserve for Bay Area students in grades 3-5.**

## Nonprofit focuses on conservation, education

Audubon Canyon Ranch is an environmental conservation and education nonprofit that oversees about 5,000 acres worth of nature preserves in Marin, Sonoma and Lake counties, including Bouverie Preserve in Glen Ellen,

Cypress Grove Preserve in Marshall and Modini Mayacamas Preserve in Healdsburg.

The Martin Griffin Preserve, located just north of Stin-

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son Beach along Bolinas Lagoon, was named after Belvedere environmentalist and conservationist Marty Griffin, who helped save the former dairy ranch from development in the 1960s.

At that time, the land was targeted to become the largest city north of the Golden Gate Bridge. There were plans for a freeway that would run across the lagoon to connect the area to the Golden Gate, as well as a marina, schools, high rises and thousands of homes.

Griffin, a doctor who was also the president of the Marin chapter of the National Audubon Society, agreed to purchase the land for \$337,000, signing the mortgage and putting \$1,000 down. He then worked with others to fundraise, paying off the mortgage within five years.

Today, the land is home to more than 25 species of mammals, more than 90 species of land birds, 13 species of reptiles and eight species of amphibians. The preserve also hosts many of the organization's education programs, which include the nature-education field trips.

Students in grades 3-5 from schools all across the Bay Area visit the preserve seasonally to participate in a three-hour hike, where docents focus on creating hands-on experiences for the kids. In addition to the field trip, the program includes a pre-hike classroom visit from a couple of docents, who prepare the kids for their trip, as well as resources to help teachers develop follow-up classroom activities.

### Appreciation of nature drives desire to volunteer

Volunteers like Wells go through about six months of rigorous classroom and field training to become docents. In the training program, held every two years, participants learn about natural history, ecology and teaching techniques from experts and experienced volunteers.

Many of the docents in the program are former teachers or people who have a background in science. Wells is neither.

He grew up in Northern Virginia and eventually made his way to California to study business at Stanford University. He spent about 15 years working in the institutional investment business and moved on to a handful of other jobs before retiring. He's a widower with two grown children, a son who lives in Tiburon and a daughter who lives in Mill Valley.

Before joining the training, Wells says, his science education consisted of one class on the subject in sixth grade and another in high school, plus a biology class he took at College of Marin about 25 years ago.

He heard about the program through some of his friends at Community Congregational Church in Tiburon who volunteered as docents and enjoyed the experience.

"A lot of my friends said, 'Gee, this is something you ought to do,'" Wells says.

The idea of being able to spend time at the preserve appealed to him.

"It's just great to be in nature where it smells good, and the babble of the brook, it's fun to hear," he says.

He was hooked early on in the training program, where he was amazed at the knowledge of those who taught the classes and at all of the different things going on at the preserve.

"These people know so much, and they want to share that," he says. "It's fascinating."

The number of hikes Wells leads depends on the season, but it's typically around six to eight each spring and fall.



Audubon Canyon Ranch docent Bill Wells and Edna Maguire Elementary School fifth-graders Cole Soto, Owen Hubbard, William Youn and Brady Stewart use binoculars to gaze out onto the Bolinas Lagoon while hiking at Audubon Canyon Ranch's Martin Griffin Preserve.

JOCELYN KNIGHT / FOR THE ARK

He has also been volunteering with one of the organization's pilot programs, in which docents lead hikes for local students who have immigrated to the U.S.

### A knack for connecting with students

When the kids from Edna Maguire visited the preserve, Wells developed a quick rapport with his group as he first led them to a small pond — pointing out a pregnant silver-backed spider sitting in some plants along the way — and then to the preserve's Clem Miller lookout, where the kids donned binoculars and learned about the ecosystem of the lagoon. At every opportunity, Wells peppered the students with questions: What would a bird use the tall reeds around the pond for? (A nest, one student offers). Why would birds visit the estuary? (To feed, another answers).

Wells' enthusiasm for nature translates to the students, says Doug Cook, another volunteer with the program. Wells served as Cook's mentor when Cook became a docent.

"He knows who he is and can get that across to the kids and gets them excited," Cook says.

The effect Wells has on the kids in his group is often most evident at the end of a field trip, says Eric Watterud, who served as Wells' mentor when Wells joined the program.

"I've seen kids cluster around him and want to spend more time with him," he says. "They don't want to get on the bus right away, they want to spend more time with Bill."

Wells says he enjoys drawing kids out of their shells and helping them become more comfortable with nature. That's particularly true with kids who haven't had a lot of exposure to the nature before visiting the preserve.

He still remembers a fifth-grader named Abdul who visited several years ago with his class.

"He was the biggest kid by far, he was the most popular kid by far and he was the most scared of being there by far," Wells says.

As they hiked, Wells was able to coax Abdul to interact with nature in ways the boy had initially refused, from holding a banana slug to letting a newt crawl on his skin.

Wells has the letter Abdul sent him after the hike; often, teachers have their students write thank-you notes to the docents.

Abdul's note says Wells helped him face his fear, noting he "mostly enjoyed" the newt, through he still wasn't crazy

about banana slugs. The program, he wrote, "made me love nature."

Abdul's letter is not the only one Wells has.

"I have saved most of them, I do look at them," he says.

Wells' passion for the program is sincere, says Gwen Heistand, the resident biologist and director of education, noting he has "a huge heart."

"I see him occasionally moved to tears by things that go on," she says.

### Commitment to program continues to grow

His commitment to the program is evident in other ways, as well, Watterud says. Wells is helping organize the current training program for the next class of docents and has shown a sincere desire to connect with the participants, Watterud says.

"We have 24 new trainees this year, and I'm sure Bill could name, recognize and say hello to every single one of them at this point, and I still look at nametags," he says.

Wells is also the first one to step up if a docent doesn't show up for scheduled volunteer shift or has a sudden conflict, he notes.

"Bill responds to those so no class goes underserved," he says.

Even after six years as a docent, Wells' enthusiasm for the preserve has not waned, Heistand says.

"I kid him about it a lot, but he's always asking questions," she says. "Every time I see him, it's, 'Is it OK if I ask you a question?' which is great. When you're working in this field and teaching people who are teaching kids, you want that."

Wells says he believes the program has a positive impact on the students.

"At the end of the hikes, they seem like they did really enjoy it," he says.

And he hopes that impact is long lasting. He often leaves the students with a message that encourages them to make another visit to the preserve: "Listen, if you have the chance to bring a parent, a grandparent, aunts and uncles, you can be the guide," he tells them. "You can come back here."

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are a disaster — and argued having a dog would make them feel guilty about the travel they looked forward to.

"She made a good case," Bob says. "So we tabled the idea for a while."

But years later, after making a memorial donation to Guide Dogs for the Blind in a friend's name and later rediscovering the thank you note they'd received for that donation, Liz got to thinking that working with guide dogs would be a great compro-

mise. The Patersons decided to become foster-care providers for the nonprofit.

"We are basically well-trained, specialized dog sitters," Liz says. "We take care of active guide dogs, dogs in training, breeders and dogs in career transition."

Guide Dogs currently has 150 foster-care providers throughout the Bay Area, all living within a 50-mile radius of the organization's San Rafael campus, where there are training facilities and a veterinary clinic.

Dogs come to stay with the Patersons for a variety of reasons — an active guide dog might come to stay if its client is sick or on

vacation; some dogs need quiet homes to prepare for or recover from surgery; and others need medical or behavioral evaluation. Frankie, a young lab who stayed with the Patersons in November, had seizures while training. She was prescribed medication and placed with the Patersons for observation. Frankie responded well to medication and eventually returned to the training program.

Dogs also come to stay during career transition. Not all dogs that train with the organization are suited to guide the sight-impaired. Those that aren't may go through

additional training to serve hearing-impaired or diabetic clients, become therapy dogs or do search and rescue. Dogs retiring from guide-dog duty also stay in foster homes before being adopted out as pets.

Whatever a dog's needs, the Patersons oblige. They take dogs to vet appointments, administer medicine, take them to training sessions and generally maintain their routines.

Rebecca Hornick, foster-care coordinator for Guide Dogs for the Blind, called the

See **PATERSONS, NEXT PAGE**