

Two Years After Fire: Watching the Regeneration of Henry W Coe State Park After the 2007 Lick Fire

By Shannon Dinis

In September 2007, the Lick fire exploded through the back country of Henry W. Coe State Park. Over eight days, fire fighters worked diligently to put out the fire that eventually burned over 47,000 acres. Fire is a common disturbance in natural environments with many species of plants requiring heat or chemicals in smoke to break seed dormancy. Other species are well adapted to fire by having underground storage organs that allow plants to sprout after fire. Fire also removes dead or infected plants, nourishing the soil with nutrient rich ash.



Photo of Willow Ridge taken September 30, 2007 by Ron Fischler and Bob Patrie

coefire2007.info/images/panos_ss.html#

Days after the Lick fire passed through, many areas looked like a moonscape with nothing but burned branches left behind. The intensity of the fire varied greatly with very intense fires leaving only burned holes where trees used to be to low intensity fires that simply burned grass and scorched trees.

A team of dedicated volunteers from the Pine Ridge Association led by Dr. Winslow Briggs saw the Lick Fire as an opportunity to monitor the regeneration of the various plant communities that burned throughout the park. As part of my Master's thesis, I established field sites in chamise chaparral that burned in both the Lick Fire and a prescription burn to evaluate the regeneration of the chaparral star lily, *Zigadenus fremontii*, over two years. During this time, I had the opportunity to watch the resiliency of nature as it bounced back from what looked to be a very devastating fire.



Photo of Willow Ridge taken May 16, 2009 by Ron Fischler and Bob Patrie

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Even as I set up my field sites in April 2008, much of the vegetation had begun to grow back. Among the burned branches of chamise were new branches sprouting from the base. Areas of blue oak savannah were only recognizable as burn sites when I looked closely at the base of the oaks. Grass was already covering the scorched earth. Even the star lily was in flower and setting seed by May 2008.

In April 2009, many of the wildflowers that compose the post-fire bloom were in bloom

again, though at much lower numbers. Many of the chaparral star lilies that had flowered in 2008 only grew leaves in 2009. Chamise and Manzanita were growing back well, with branches reaching over a foot in height. Along with resprouting shrubs, seedlings of many species had begun to emerge showing that, regardless of how intense a fire is, plants have evolved the mechanisms to bounce back. Such nutrient rich soils left behind from the fire creates the perfect environment for plants to grow.

Not only were plants coming back, but animals were as well. Each time I visited my field sites, I would be greeted by a jackrabbit and could hear the calls of birds in the trees. Regardless of how a fire starts, plants and animals will always bounce back and fill in the gaps created after fire.

Volunteers continue to evaluate and document the progress of vegetation regeneration at Henry W. Coe State Park. For more information on the Lick Fire and the Vegetation Regeneration Project and Henry W. Coe State Park, please visit: coefire2007.info/welcome.html and www.coepark.org.

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