

**Marissa DeVille, Union Mine High School**

My fondest summer memories begin with waking up to the bustling sounds of my family packing homemade lunches, filling water bottles, and cramming sunscreen, towels, and our largest picnic blanket into a reusable tote bag. The chaos of the morning always melted away as soon as our family of six, piled into the minivan and headed down the familiar winding roads. Our trips to the North Fork of the American River always promised an enjoyable and relaxing day of fresh water and warm sun. As soon as we reached our destination, my siblings and I would always play our favorite river game of hopping from rock to rock, pretending that the trout were hungry piranhas waiting to devour us if we fell in! Whenever one of us would inevitably miss a rock and slip into the crisp water we would all fall into a fit of giggles.

Some other favorite memories I have of visiting the Auburn State Recreation Area include taking in the many sights and sounds of the native flora and fauna. One day I spied a beautiful, stilt-legged bird wading along the river's edge. I quietly watched this elegant creature from behind a Dogwood tree. The bird moved through the water with such careful and calculated steps that it seemed as if time itself had slowed down. I became mesmerized by the bird's patience as it searched the water with its golden eyes. I jumped when the bird suddenly plunged its head into the water and came up with a fish between its bill. At the time, I had no idea what species of bird I had been watching but was eager to find out. This encounter with the Great Blue Heron, inspired me to become the avid bird watcher that I am today, and taught me never to return to the river without my trusty Peterson field guide.

I am a passionate advocate for all nature and wildlife, and owe so much to those who thought to preserve the areas along the American River and Canyons. My vision for improving the recreational opportunities in the Auburn State Recreation Area is to design and construct informative signs highlighting some of the plant and wildlife that visitors may encounter. Each sign could include a photograph or illustration of the species, common name, basic description, and facts relating to diet, habitat, and behavior. These signs will not only enhance the park experience by helping visitors identify the sights, they will also educate visitors about ways to protect the variety of animals and plants that call the American River and Canyons home. I firmly believe that conservation begins with education. The more people know about the native plants and wildlife, the more vested they become in protecting them. Displaying educational signs along the trails of the Auburn State Recreation Area provides endless learning opportunities for visiting families, organizations, and future bird enthusiasts, like myself.