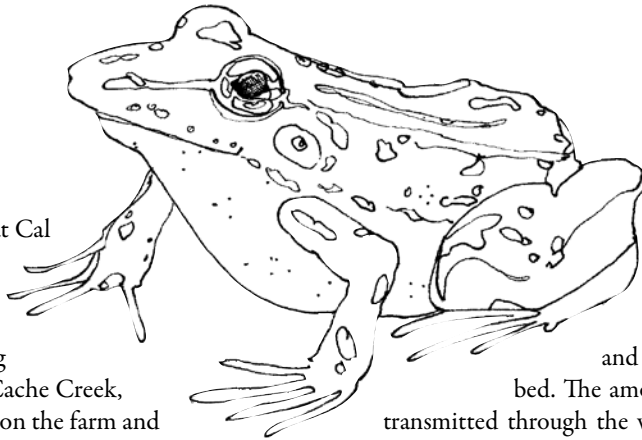


NEWS FROM CAPAY VALLEY

THE FROG HOLE

BY THADDEUS BARSOTTI



Several years ago, as I was completing my studies at Cal Poly in Agriculture Engineering, I undertook a project that was intended to determine the feasibility of capturing shallow groundwater for use in irrigating our organic fruits and vegetables during the summer. I did this by constructing a hole near Cache Creek, which is the only natural source of year-round water on the farm and a very good habitat for the farm's native plants and animals. The water table beside the creek is quite high, and sure enough, the bottom four feet of the hole yielded a small pool of water. Unfortunately, I learned that pumping water from the hole would not be feasible, and as I left college, I found that in addition to my degree, I now had a hole on the farm that always had water in it.

After college I moved back to the farm to manage the farming operations, and as the years passed I kept an eye on the hole with an interest in observing which native wetland plants would make a home there. One day I noticed that the trail down to the hole was packed with the footprints of deer, raccoons, turkeys, and numerous other little critters, all of whom had recognized that this year-round pond was a great watering hole.

One winter's day, after a particularly large storm, I was taking a walk along Cache Creek as it was roaring with water. The level of the creek

was three to four times higher than normal, and the rushing water was passing through the willow trees and grasses that border the creek bed. The amount of energy that was being transmitted through the water was amazing and it was obvious that any creature that generally lived along the creek was either washed away or was temporarily displaced until the creek settled back into its bed.

As I got closer to my hole I was met with the sounds made by dozens of frogs croaking their presence to the world. It was the first time I had heard the noises of such a concentrated frog population here. Then it all came together: The frogs had gathered into my hole because it was the only safe place to live on the farm. A hundred years ago, when the Sacramento Valley was all wetlands, the frogs had thousand of acres of marsh to live in and when the rains came these marshes got deeper but never washed everyone away. As the marshes were drained and water was managed more closely the habitat for the frogs was reduced to creeks, ponds, and mud puddles. That day I realized that without my hole those frogs would have been subjected to the torrent.

Maybe the creek is their regular home, and when the water level rose they moved to the hole for the week, or maybe they just like the hole. Whatever the reason, that hole is a safe habitat for the frogs all year long. The construction of the hole was not intended to provide a safe refuge for the frogs, but now that we know the frogs like the hole, we plan to keep it their for their use.

Thaddeus Barsotti is a second-generation organic farmer in the Capay Valley. He and his three brothers grow over 60 different fruit and vegetable varieties on their farm, Capay Organic, founded in 1976. Through their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, Farm Fresh To You, the farm delivers fresh, organic produce directly to Bay Area doorsteps. Visit farmfreshtoyou.com The farm can be reached at 800.796.6009.



Photograph courtesy of Capay Organic, illustration by JP Panter