

The CSERC Newsletter

Like a stone tossed into still water, knowledge about environmental issues can ripple outward far beyond its beginning point, and perhaps return in a wave of concern, active involvement, and greater awareness of nature in the mountains and foothills around us.



You can currently choose winter or spring for outdoor adventures!



Photo – Larry Lew

The exceptional winter season has delivered amazing amounts of snow and rain across our region. It may be hard to remember that just a few months back, we were at the tail end of a record-setting drought period. It was so dry, and water supplies were so stressed, the State was considering emergency response measures to prepare for unprecedented restrictions on agricultural irrigation and other water uses.

Now, many of us who have been shoveling snow for months are eager for at least a nice long pause in the waves of snowfall that have blanketed the mountains. Many foothill and river canyon sites already have a diversity of spring wildflowers bursting forth in scenic displays. In the mountains, some areas have a rapidly melting snowpack, but due to the tremendous depth of the snowpack at higher elevations, there may be snow covering many slopes until July or later. The options for outdoor adventures range from snowy to spring-like.

Take your pick and enjoy this lush season! Keep alert for photo opportunities to share.

COME VOLUNTEER to help with restoration projects in the region



Each year CSERC partners with the U.S. Forest Service to do restoration projects. By volunteering, you can do meaningful work that directly benefits the environment. You can also make new friends as you join with others who share a love for nature in our region.

We need volunteers to sign up – Can you help?

CSERC plans to do at least 7 or 8 restoration projects this year. How much gets accomplished depends on whether we can gather enough volunteers. Our challenge is to build a sufficient list of volunteers so that we have enough showing up for each project. Projects this year will include a wide range of work with options that will likely fit any volunteer's interest and degree of effort.

Chelsea Lewandowski is coordinating our workdays this year. To sign up as a volunteer, e-mail Chelsea at chelsea@cserc.org or call her at our office at: **(209) 586-7440.**

You can also sign up at our website: www.cserc.org by going to “How to Help” and clicking on “Volunteer Stewardship.”

Volunteers truly make a difference!

*This Spring 2023 newsletter
is a quarterly publication of the*

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CSERC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that works to protect the water, wildlife, and wild places of the Northern Yosemite region. CSERC relies entirely on grants and donations from people like you to do that important work. Thank you for your support!

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Acorn woodpeckers – also known as “oak tree clowns”



An iconic symbol of the oak-studded Sierra Nevada foothills, the colorful acorn woodpecker can be both frustrating and entertaining to people. The acorn woodpecker is industrious and highly productive when it comes to preparing its food stockpiles. Unlike other woodpeckers that feed on insects by tapping into trees, the acorn woodpecker bores holes into wood - or really any material they can hammer their beaks through - to store acorns (and other nuts) by the thousands. These acorn stockpiles are, appropriately, called granaries. The work involved in creating and maintaining the granaries is considerable. After the acorns are placed into holes that the woodpecker drilled out, the acorns can dry and shrink over time, becoming loose and possibly falling out.

The woodpecker may periodically check each acorn and even adjust its placement if needed. All this work can be a lot for a solitary woodpecker. Fortunately, acorn woodpeckers are highly social birds, living together in groups of up to 10 or more adults. They often share a single nest (usually in a tree cavity) and will share the incubation and hatchling feeding duties. The extent of the woodpeckers' communal nesting and rearing is uncommon, occurring in less than 10% of bird species. Woodpecker family groups are highly protective of their territory, actively guarding against possible granary thieves such as Steller's jays, spotted towhees, and white-breasted nuthatches.

Interesting facts:

- A group of acorn woodpeckers is called a “bushel.”
- The sex of an acorn woodpecker can be determined by observing the bird's head. Both sexes have a white forehead and red cap, but females also have a black band separating the two.
- The acorn woodpecker was the “inspiration” for the cartoon character Woody Woodpecker. Walter Lantz, Woody Woodpecker's creator, was at June Lake honeymooning when the incessant calling and hammering of an acorn woodpecker on the couple's cabin caught their attention - and Walter's ire. Not only did the woodpecker keep the couple awake at night; when it began to rain, they discovered the woodpecker had drilled holes into the cabin's roof. Walter wanted to shoot the bird, but his more reasonable wife, Grace, proposed he instead create a cartoon character based on the bird.



Both photos - courtesy of Peggy Sells

Calaveras Big Trees State Park officials discuss forest health projects including thinning and prescribed burns

On March 16th, CSERC staff joined more than thirty community members at a very informative Town Hall meeting presented by key staff at Calaveras Big Trees State Park. Led by natural resources manager Heather Reith, the majority of the presentation and discussion featured Ben Jacobs, senior environmental scientist and the Park's "burn boss." Also introduced was Jim Suero, the newly assigned and first-ever forester at the Park.

Main topics for the evening included their vision for a safer and healthier Park, recent successes and challenges, and the unveiling of a new 5-Year Plan. They also described efforts in wildlife monitoring – especially for the California spotted owl and the northern goshawk as they relate to forest work – and they championed the new partnerships formed with the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service.



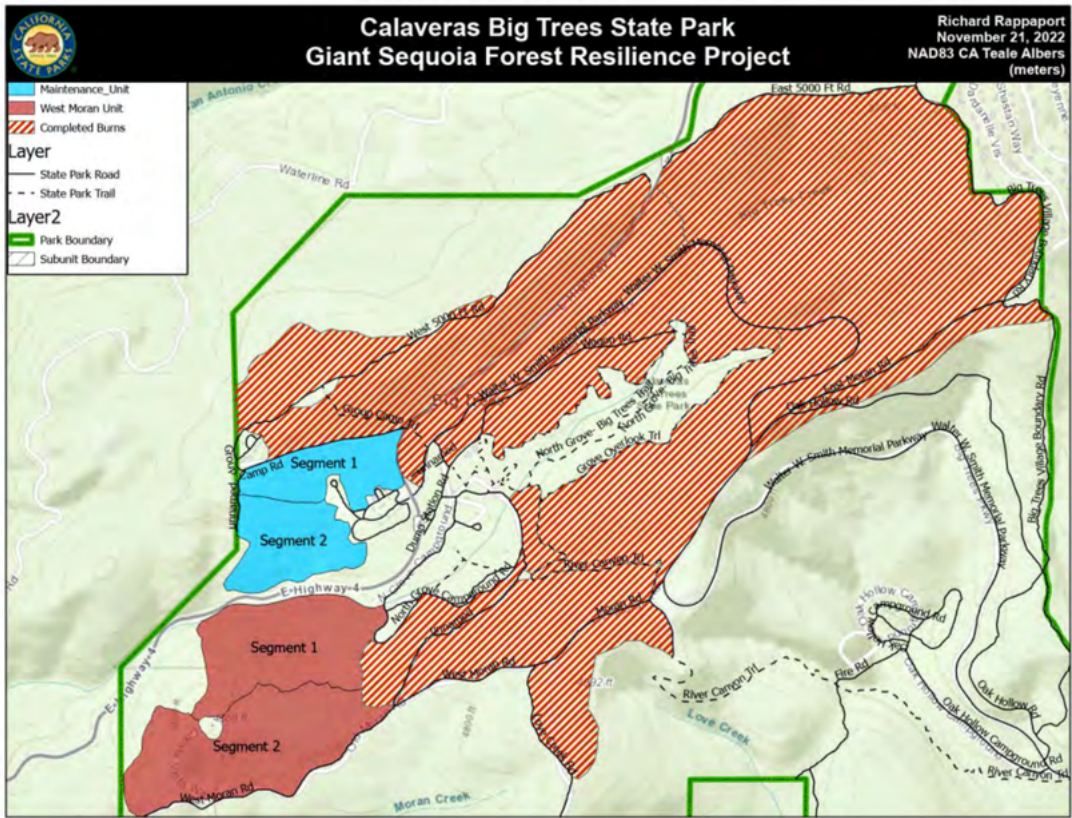
Photo credit: Calaveras Big Trees State Park

Re-establishing fire "as the dominant ecosystem process to maintain forest health and diversity" was a consistent theme in both the presentation and discussion that followed. While manual fuel reductions are an important first step in helping to provide a buffer between park resources and encroaching wildfire, returning "beneficial" fire to the ecosystem also stimulates forest habitat by consuming fine fuels, thinning shade tolerant species such as white fir and incense cedar, and by providing the necessary sunlight and bare mineral soil needed for giant sequoia regeneration.

The Park's successes in 2022 were impressive. In the spring and fall, three prescribed burns were conducted in and around the North Grove, and the staff burned an additional unit above Highway 4. This winter they lit more than 300 piles created by crews last summer. They also made progress prepping the South Grove – where more than 1,000 giant sequoias grow – for an important, future burn project; and they continue to prep around the maintenance unit where staff secures Park vehicles, tools, and equipment.

To meet staffing challenges, outside crews have been contracted through grant funding. Their work includes removing large, fallen trees, improving the Rim Road fire line around the South Grove, and even collecting and storing giant sequoia seeds for potential future use.

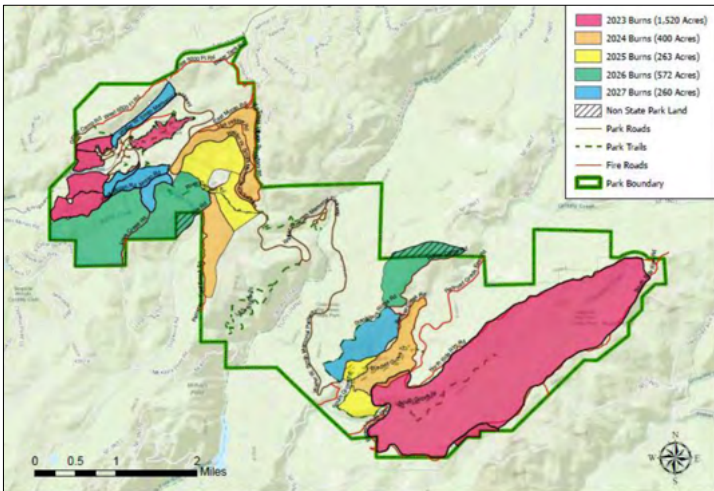
The map below illustrates the buffer that's been created to protect the North Grove and other Park resources from the threat of wildfire, especially a fire coming from the Stanislaus River Canyon. However, protecting giant sequoias isn't the Park's only goal. Fire breaks are being developed near the communities of Big Trees Village and Blue Lake Springs, and work is planned to improve safety for campers in Oak Hollow.



During the Q&A session, Park staff answered questions from the community about the use of masticators and the ongoing partnership with CAL FIRE. Mr. Jacobs detailed the complexities of the 40-to-60-page Burn Plans that must be approved before prescribed burning can commence, and Ms. Reith explained the grant funding sources necessary for their work.

The Park’s 5-Year Plan – robust in ecological restoration and wildfire safety projects – was discussed in some detail. While more than 3,000 acres are slated for treatment through 2027, a well-controlled burn in the South Grove is clearly the Park’s highest priority. And as noted by Mr. Jacobs, with the amount of preparation required for doing that work in the South Grove, it will be the most expensive project he’s ever led.

Calaveras Big Trees State Park preserves two groves of giant sequoias in the North and South Groves. Established in 1931, the park offers a mixed-conifer forest, a system of trails, and access to the Stanislaus River, Beaver Creek, ancient volcanic formations, and natural meadows.



Solid colors represent 18 planned burn units in their 5-Year Plan

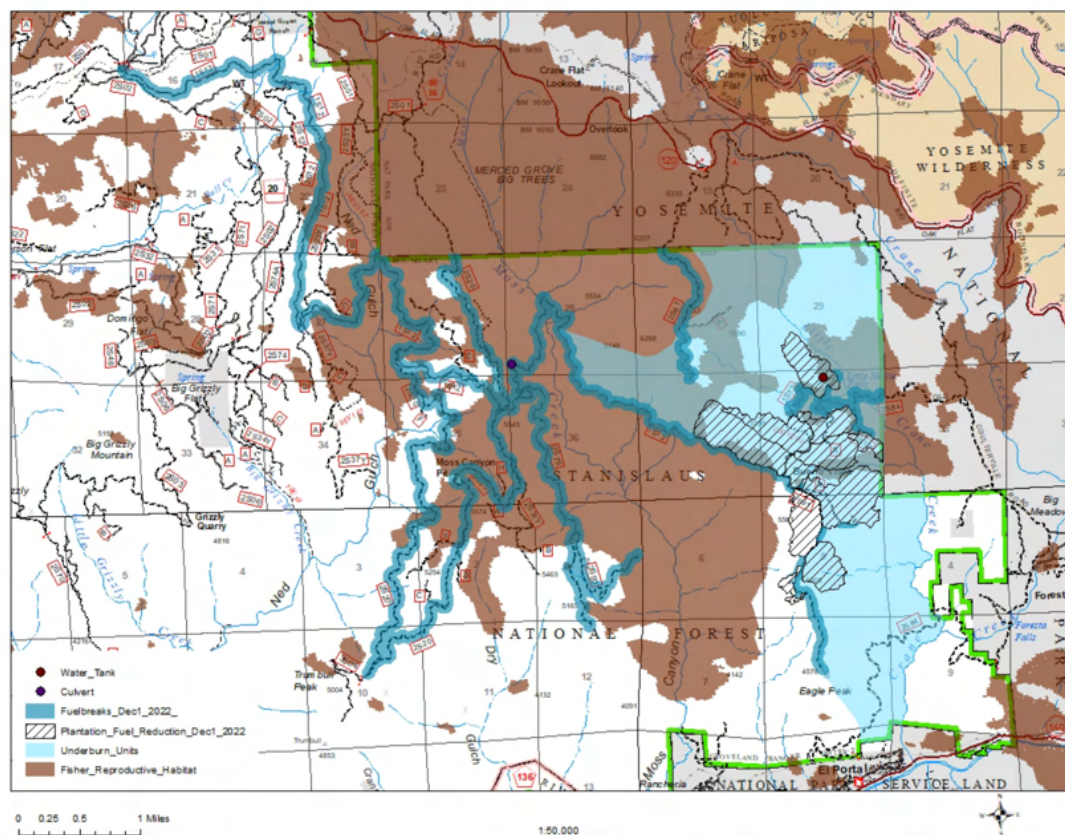
A new Forest Service plan would create miles of fuel breaks and allow two large prescribed burns in a remote corner of the forest near Yosemite Park

Few people drive out to the distant southeast portion of the Stanislaus Forest. That national forest area lies south of the Merced Grove – a highly popular destination across the forest boundary with Yosemite Park. The overall project area includes the disintegrated remains of an old lookout tower at Trumbull Peak amidst miles of dense brush fields and thickets of live oaks and small conifers that managed to survive recent fires. One key value of the area is that the remaining mixed-conifer forest habitat, despite being mostly second growth with few old growth trees, has been shown to be visited at times by the endangered Pacific fisher.

The periodic presence of the rare fisher along with the area's proximity to the Merced Grove are two reasons why the Forest Service is proposing the **El Portal Fire Recovery and Habitat Resilience project**. Three large wildfires have swept across portions of the national forest area since 1990. Highly flammable brush has replaced trees on previously forested slopes. Dry summer conditions create risk that a hot wildfire could wipe out much of the remaining forest habitat and threaten the Merced Grove. To avoid further damage to the area, **the Forest Service plans 20 miles of new fuel breaks, two major broadcast burns (of 1,361 acres and 1,814 acres), thinning logging in tree plantations, as well as invasive weed treatments and road repairs.**

Situated on south-facing slopes that during the summer are extremely hot and dry, this broad area is highly vulnerable to lightning as well as human-caused fires ignited along the highway corridor far below along the Merced River. CSERC generally supports the proposed burning and plantation thinning along with most of the planned fuel breaks. We do have concerns that this project - combined with the previously approved **North Merced Burn Project** - would result in many miles of bulldozed fire lines and varying degrees of potential watershed effects. CSERC has asked for mitigation measures to minimize the extent of soil and erosion threats, and we're seeking extra protection for the rare fisher.

APPENDIX A: PROJECT MAP



It's that time of year again - when displays of spring wildflowers across the foothill region can dazzle with their vibrant colors

As the winter storms finally fade, persistent days of sunshine will warm the oak woodlands and the deep river canyons of our region. Extremely well-watered wildflowers should not only be abundant this year, but hopefully the wet conditions will allow them to last longer than usual for the enjoyment of wildflower lovers, hikers, photographers, and artists.

Go forth... seek... discover... share... and then savor! *(And how did that hummingbird get in there?)*



The 2023 CSERC Photo Contest is Officially Open!

As one way to raise public interest in nature and to gain attention for wildlife and precious places, CSERC holds an annual Photo Contest. We know many of you take photos of wildlife and scenic, natural landscapes. Here is your opportunity to share your best photos so that others can see the amazing images you've captured, . . . maybe you can also earn a little extra spending money and some serious bragging rights!

Cash prizes will be awarded in the **Adult Category** for: (1) the best **Wildlife** photos of any wildlife species native to our region (stretching from the San Joaquin Valley to the Sierra Nevada crest) and (2) the best **Natural Landscape** photos of a scenic natural area within our region. There will also be a cash prize in the **Youth Category** for the best **Wildlife** and best **Natural Landscape** photos by photographers 16 years of age and younger.



Photo by David Hargus



Photo by Rick Kimble

PRIZES: **Adult Contest** - for both the WILDLIFE and NATURAL LANDSCAPE categories:

First Place \$150; Second Place \$75; Third Place \$50

Youth Contest – for both categories:

First Place \$100, plus there will be one Honorable Mention in both categories

The top winning photos of the contest will be publicized on our website and shared with local newspapers. Reporters often contact the prize-winning photographers for information about their photo and their interest in nature. It's a great way to gain exposure to a wider audience and promote the importance of protecting nature across our region.

HOW TO ENTER:

Email your photo(s) as a JPEG file at the highest resolution possible to chelsea@cserc.org along with your name and phone number (so we can send you your prize).



Photo by Scott Jones

HERE'S HOW TO ENTER

Contest Rules:

- Photo entries must be of a **native** species or natural area found in our region.
- **Our region** extends from the San Joaquin Valley to the crest of the Sierra Nevada.
- Each entrant is limited to a **maximum of 10 photos total** as entries.
- Photos **cannot be Photoshopped or altered** in any way.
- All photos must be original work, **taken by the contestant**.
- When submitting entries, please provide your name, email address, and phone number.
- Please submit photos as a **JPEG file at the highest resolution possible**.
- **No previously submitted photos** can be re-submitted.
- By submitting an entry, contestants grant CSERC the right to use the photo(s) for public outreach and promotional purposes including on the CSERC website and in CSERC newsletters, in school presentations, and on social media. Contestants retain all commercial rights to their photos.

The Contest closes on Monday May 15, 2023.

Winning entries will be announced on our website on May 18, 2023.

The photos displayed in this article are just a tiny sampling of some of the incredible and breath-taking photos submitted in previous CSERC photo contests.

This is your chance to inspire others with your own impressive entries.

And please encourage young people to submit their photos for a chance to win a cash prize in the Youth Category!

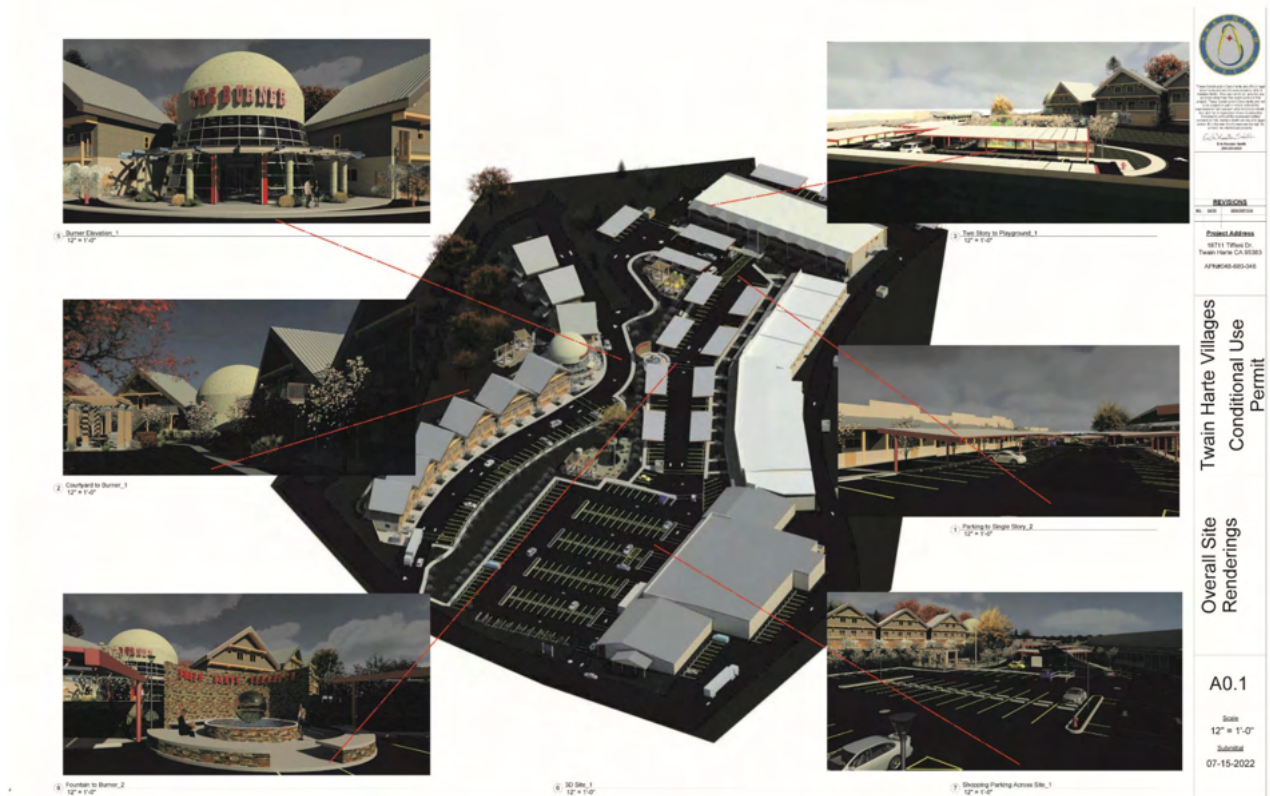


Fred Courter

Photo by Fred Courter

A plan to convert vacant shopping center buildings to apartments shows how proposals for change can spark ill-informed opposition

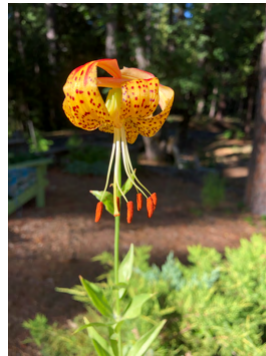
For years the majority of the retail units at the Twain Harte Village Shopping Center have been vacant. CSERC was the last remaining tenant in the two-story building at right that otherwise sat empty for years. A long row of retail units that stretches from the popular Twain Harte Market to the upper end of the shopping center has also been mostly vacant.



After years of planning, the owners of the shopping center submitted plans to Tuolumne County. They propose to convert the vacant two-story building into 21 residential apartments and convert the empty retail units into 15 more apartments. Future phases of potential development include a plan for nine new duplexes (creating 18 more residential units) along with a restaurant/retail structure, a dog park, and a playground.

It might be expected that the local community would support more housing, upgrades of buildings, and a new restaurant gathering place. Instead, a standing-room-only crowd at a recent townhall meeting mostly railed against the plan. Many misinformed speakers blasted the project for supposedly being “affordable housing” -- as if lower income residents pose some threat. Others criticized the site’s owner for not keeping retail businesses. He noted that countless businesses have closed due to online shopping.

The public outcry was a classic example of “not in my backyard” NIMBY opposition to change, even when the “change” proposes to revitalize a faded and mostly empty shopping complex. The meeting also revealed how rumors and misinformation can lead to a ripple of inaccurate fears spreading through a community. CSERC does not take positions on projects until the CEQA analysis is complete, but we did share our concern with county planning staff about how disrespectful and misinformed many speakers were at the session.



Pick a reason to support CSERC's efforts to defend water, wildlife, and wild places across the vast Northern Yosemite region.

At whatever amount you feel is right for you, your donation, combined with others, provides funding that is pivotal to our work. Thank you for partnering with us.

"Here is my tax-deductible donation towards CSERC's many efforts."

Name _____ E-mail (optional) _____

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Spring has finally arrived

Those who prayed for rain have had their prayers answered over the long winter season. The dry conditions that stressed local forests and aquatic species are long forgotten as abundant storms have soaked the region.

What a gift water is to a region that was so parched. It is a wonderful time to enjoy nature and new beginnings.

