

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

September 24, 2025

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Historic cabins from the early days of Mammoth now serve scientists and students

It was the perfect spot. An ideal place to escape the hustle of Los Angeles. It had a creek, forests, a meadow. They could make some fishing ponds, build a few cabins, and pass their summers in the Eastern Sierra. Yes, it would do nicely.

There was no way for these Southern Californian businessmen to know that their camp in the mountains would eventually become a Natural Reserve, upholding a mission of education, research and environmental preservation. Or that over 100 years later, these same summer cabins would host students, scientists and environmental stewards, enabling others to discover the wonder of the Eastern Sierra for themselves.

Education, research and environmental preservation

A variety of characters have cared for Valentine Camp Reserve and its historic cabins over the past century. Some were longtime, year-round residents, while others had a shorter tenure. The forested property at the base of Mammoth Mountain has enchanted many since its first cabin was built more than 100 years

ago. And now, as part of UC Santa Barbara's Natural Reserve System, the site sees hundreds of guests each year, from school children to researchers and tenured professors.

It's safe to say those cabins have had their fair share of visitors. To ensure that Valentine Camp can serve the needs of those who visit well into the future, the reserve team has begun to restore and upgrade the property's historic cabins. Central to those efforts is current reserve manager, Juyung Yoo. He has a unique



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Juyung Yoo recently finished repairs on the Cook Cabin behind him.

The UC Natural Reserve System (NRS) changed the trajectory of Yoo's life. "Growing up, I didn't even know that field science was a thing," he recalled. The Younger Lagoon Natural Reserve, in Santa Cruz, and Valentine Camp Natural Reserve offered

him his first foray into ecology as a third-year student, and he was hooked, he said. “I knew instantly that, after I graduated, I wanted to come back to the reserve system out here.”

Yoo returned to Valentine after earning his degree in evolution and ecology from UC Santa Cruz. For three summers, he worked on aquatic restoration and frog conservation in the High Sierra, coming back home to the reserve between assignments.

In 2024, he served as an assistant for the UC NRS-run California Ecology and Conservation course, guiding a cohort of 24 students on an 80-day experience at four UC Reserves. He saw his students experienced the same growth as he had when he visited as an undergrad. “These natural reserves provide a place where their curiosity can flourish,” Yoo said.

When he spotted an opening for a caretaker at Valentine in 2024, Yoo jumped on the opportunity to give back to a place that had given so much to him. “My experience at Valentine Camp opened my eyes to the amount of work needed to keep these reserves up and running,” he said.

A refuge in the mountains

Valentine Camp originally served as a summer retreat for a cadre of wealthy businessmen from Los Angeles, including William Valentine. The founders purchased the site in the 1910s and developed it in the ‘20s and ‘30s. Over the years the owners sold their shares to one another, and in 1966 the entire property landed in the hands of the Valentine family, from whom the reserve takes its name.

Because they bought it for recreation, the owners had no need to log the forest or graze the meadows, explained Reserve Director [Carol Blanchette](#), a faculty member at UCSB. As a result, the reserve harbors uniquely pristine habitats compared to the surrounding national forest, which is “a land of many uses,” as US Forest Service signs will inform you.

The 155-acre reserve also boasts a mosaic of habitats that support some of the highest biodiversity in the entire Sierra Nevada. This habitat diversity enables scientists to study a relatively intact ecosystem and provides an ideal classroom for school children and ecology students.



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Mammoth Creek and its riparian corridor run right through Valentine Camp Reserve.

Image



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The reserve's large wet meadow is fed by several springs.

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A sagebrush community rises just south of the meadow.

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The reserve boasts both wet and dry forests.

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- But Blanchette and Yoo feel additional responsibility to look after this place, beyond its natural and educational value. When Carol Valentine gifted the property to UCSB in 1972, she entrusted the university to continue using and caring for the site. Without that understanding, the family very well could have kept it for themselves.

“Part of our obligation is to preserve that history,” Blanchette said, “the reason why the people that purchased this land fell in love with it.” This includes the reserve’s six remaining historic cabins, which now provide a home for students and researchers working in the Eastern Sierra.

Historic yet functional

There was no way for these men to know that, over 100 years later, their summer cabins would host students, scientists and environmental stewards. “These are historic cabins built in a time when Mammoth was first being developed,” Yoo said. “Yet, here we are, using them to this day.” Maintaining them requires a careful balance between retaining their original character while ensuring modern functionality.

So far, the reserve directors, caretakers and staff have carried out most of the upkeep. Fortunately, the cabins are not complicated buildings. “They’re basically logs that are nailed and glued together,” Blanchette remarked.





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Drag the slider left and right to see the University Cabin's transformation from its early days to 2025.



Old Valentine Cabin was the first structure at the reserve. It used to serve as a ranger station nearby.

Yet despite their simplicity and age, the cabins are incredibly well built, reflecting the construction ethos of a different era. Corrugated aluminum roofs keep out the elements while solid logs of lodgepole-pine brace the buildings against wind and snow, which can be considerable at the head of the Mammoth Pass. Record snowfall immobilized the area in 2023. “All kinds of damage happened in town,” Blanchette said. “But, when we came up in the spring and dug these cabins out, they were still standing strong.”

Small details also attest to the cabins’ heritage. Many still retain string latches, rather than knobs. Mortar and hewn wood planks still fill many of the gaps between logs, often with barbed wire serving as internal support. Sturdy cast iron stoves will still turn cordwood to heat in the early spring, though the reserve staff encourages chilly residents to use the electric heaters, out of an abundance of caution. Indeed, the cabins now have all the amenities of modern living, including electricity, propane and plumbing, with water piped in from one of the property’s many springs.

Balancing restoration and renovation

The staff has substantial rehabilitation planned for the cabins in the coming years. They’ve completed major work in University Cabin, replacing water-damaged flooring in the kitchen and bathroom, as well as renovating one of the cabin’s showers. Yoo also repaired the wood floors in the Cook Cabin, temporarily arresting uneven settling.

The team is in the middle of replacing old wood slats and grout sealant with modern weatherproofing. They’d like to add slats over the new material to preserve the buildings’ original appearance, but that historical touch will depend on time and funding.

“Yoo and the reserve team have begun addressing these tasks, but we will need professionals to scale this effort to all the cabins and to carry out the expensive and

technical electrical and plumbing upgrades to ensure the cabins are around for another 100 years of research and student use,” said Conner Philson, executive director of UCSB’s Natural Reserve System.

Caring for these cabins requires working with the structures’ idiosyncrasies. “Each one has its own unique personality and unique quirks,” Yoo said. He’s currently



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Progress on the restoration effort is slow but steady.

The next major project is overhauling the reserve’s electrical system. “Users now have a wide variety of devices — computers, phones, equipment, etc. — that need power,” Blanchette said. “And the general need for power has grown significantly in the last 100 years.” Demand now exceeds the capacity of the undersized cable that supplies the reserve.

Weatherproofing, flooring, windows and roofing: The maintenance list is never short. “In the coming years we also will need to re-do all the plumbing,” Blanchette added, “and likely replace some of the ancient fixtures that are practically impossible to service, since those parts are nearly a century old.”

Blanchette and Philson hope to eventually restore the University Cabin’s original lofts, currently unserviceable, to improve the building’s capabilities and amenities. “Yes, the cabins are historic, but they’re also functional,” Blanchette said. “They were designed to be summer cabins, and that is what they are still used for.”

Valentine Camp Reserve exists today as a result of the care and forethought invested into it in the past. And it will require that same diligence and stewardship to ensure it continues serving scientists, students and the public in the future.

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