

Outdoors

in Orange County

Friends of Harbors, Beaches, & Parks Summer 2013

Melanie Schlotterbeck

Woodlands—An Important OC Ecosystem

By: Sandy DeSimone, Audubon California &

Gillian Martin, Southern California Blue Bird Society

Orange County has many diverse ecosystems that each play an important role in the health and overall function of our natural lands. As John Muir said, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.”

For our forests and woodlands, there is a network of trees, shrubs, and animals that rely on the plant communities there. Two major plant communities are oak and riparian woodlands. Oak woodland is dominated by the coast live oak, which tend to have redberry, coffeeberry, toyon, elderberry, and poison oak within the community. Coast live oak acorns develop in the first year and when this occurs, in come the western scrub-jays and California ground squirrels to disperse and cache them. Other woodland birds include acorn woodpeckers, blue-gray gnatcatchers, and oak titmice.

Riparian woodlands and forests have been reduced by 95% in California due to urbanization and agriculture. Though these woodlands are dominated in Southern California by coast live oak and western sycamore, other tree species include white alder and willow species as well as California black walnut. Understory shrubs include mulefat, redberry, poison oak, toyon, coffeeberry, and laurel sumac. Sycamore is well adapted to intermittent flooding and can attain 80+

feet in height and reach 400 years in age. Animals found in riparian woodlands and forests include rare species, some threatened or endangered, including the least Bell’s vireo and southwestern willow flycatcher, arroyo toad, arroyo chub, and the southwestern pond turtle.

One feature of forest and woodland communities that often gets overlooked are dead and dying trees, or rotting limbs of trees, otherwise called snags. Regrettably snags have been steadily vanishing from the landscape. The story of why snags are disappearing has many chapters from being seen as a liability, eye sore, even fire wood, and more.

A tree on the edge of life sustains a great deal of the living. One of the strongest and most critical associations between snags and wildlife is that of woodpeckers. In Southern California the Nuttall’s, Downy, hairy, ladder-backed, acorn, white-headed, northern flicker, and red-breasted sapsucker make this list. By excavating nest sites, transporting fungal spores, foraging for insects, and in the case of the acorn woodpecker, using snags as granaries, woodpeckers contribute greatly to the decay process in exchange for many benefits. A forest or woodland without sufficient snags impacts woodpeckers and the many secondary cavity nesters that rely on their abandoned nest sites.

Just like other Orange County habitats our woodlands are becoming endangered. Frequent wildfire converts oak woodlands to shrublands or nonnative grasslands. Pests and diseases also threaten both oaks and sycamores.

You can help woodlands by volunteering for local fire watch programs, joining a conservation organization and advocating for protection of our unique Southern Californian mosaics of woodlands, shrublands, and grasslands. Additionally, please do not collect wood, it is serving a purpose in this stage of its life—providing habitat as it decays. Also, learn more about appropriate tree trimming methods to protect cavity nesters.



Nuttall's Woodpecker

Melanie Schlotterbeck

Healthy Watersheds



Kay Heimstra

By: Ray Heimstra, Orange County Coastkeeper

Living in Southern California we get used to seeing changes in the landscape as we go from place to place. One of the most dramatic contrasts we see in Orange County is with our rivers and streams. In Orange County's suburban environment, we have created conflicting versions of our rivers and streams and how they should function. The Santa Ana River is a good example, as it takes three different forms during its trip through Orange County.

The Santa Ana River looks like what we would expect from a healthy river as it flows through upper Santa Ana Canyon. It is wide with a steady flow, and has sycamores, willows, and other plants that are common in a healthy waterway. Here the river is home to many species of birds, fish, and other wildlife and is a recreation area providing multiple benefits to the community. As the river exits the Santa Ana Canyon it enters a manmade sand maze where the river soaks into the ground and recharges our aquifer. The trees and shrubs are gone as are most of the wildlife and recreational opportunities. The river is now just a drinking water source and dries up before leaving Anaheim. Further downstream the river is fully lined in concrete, devoid of vegetation and wildlife and becomes a polluted single purpose flood control channel, devoid of all other uses.

Where our rivers and streams are allowed to host the natural diversity of plant and animal life, we get the multiple benefits of a healthy waterway. Where we transform them we may gain one benefit, but we lose the rest. We can meet our needs and still maintain healthy waterways. All we need to do is value all aspects of our waterways and ask our leaders to respect them.

What can you do? First, protect our existing natural waterways from development. Next eliminate runoff from your home to improve water quality. Runoff is what drains to the ocean and it can contain harmful pollutants which impact our waterways. These include pesticides, fertilizer, and other chemicals you may add to your landscaping. Finally, you can also help by picking up trash (individually or by signing up for a Clean Up Day) or assisting in stream restoration efforts. Any of these actions will make a big difference for your community and the environment. Remember everything upstream drains to the ocean, be it your plastic bag, your dog waste, or your fast food cup.

Healthy Beaches & Bays



Michelle Claud-Clemente

By: Michelle Claude-Clemente, City of Newport Beach

Whether it is the cobble of San Clemente, the rocky shore of Laguna and Newport Beach, the vast expanses of sand in Huntington Beach, or the mudflats of our bays, Orange County is home to some of the best beaches on Earth! Often times beaches are considered based on iconic characteristics. We all can conjure romantic visions of surfers, families, and sun worshipers. We regard our beaches for their recreation, economic, aesthetic and cultural values. However, one often overlooked role of a beach is its function as a productive ecosystem.

Healthy beaches provide valuable environmental services. Among numerous roles, beaches serve to filter water, breakdown and cycle nutrients, and provide habitat for a large number of organisms. We all know by now that clean water is very important. We also know that a large accumulation of trash is unhealthy, but it is the more subtle functions of a healthy beach that are sometimes missed.

Some would define a healthy beach based on things such as abundance of invertebrate food items, while others would say the lack of invertebrates is indicative of a healthy beach. So what is a healthy beach? Do we desire to modify the uses and attributes of a substantial ecosystem to accommodate our iconic view of a beach? Or, do we look to understand and embrace the importance of the beach ecosystem and all it produces and supports? For example, did you know that kelp provides not only important habitat, but it is also an important food resource for marine life? So if you see it washed ashore, leave it be, it is still providing important functions outside the water.

Things we all can do to promote healthy/balanced beaches:

- **Pick up trash and dispose of trash properly.** You don't need to do a beach cleanup at the beach. Because most of the litter found on the street eventually makes its way through storm drains to the beach, start on your street.
- **Do not contribute to urban runoff.** Avoid over-watering or change your garden into a native plant garden that requires less water, fertilizer, and pesticides.
- **Share the shore.** Our beaches are home to a large number of species. Be thoughtful of all the activities that could be going on at the beach—not just human activity. Learn about local species living on the beaches and get involved in conservation monitoring projects.

Healthy Backyards



Stephanie Pacheco
Joel Robinson

By: Melanie Schlotterbeck

Though you may think from a conservation standpoint that a healthy backyard starts with strictly native plants—that’s not entirely true. Backyards can provide a wide array of healthy habitats for all sort of creatures—from lizards and snakes, to butterflies and birds. That said, there are specific features that you can include to create a healthier ecosystem. These features also help improve the water quality, help bees and birds pollinate the plants, as well as nest and raise their young, among many other benefits!

Research now indicates that our pollinators are in decline. Pollinators are important because they help create and maintain habitats that many animals rely on for food and shelter. Ninety percent of the world’s flowering plants’ reproduction are facilitated by pollinators. Some of our more common pollinators include bats, hummingbirds, bees, and butterflies. With this in mind here are four simple steps you can take to help keep your backyard healthy and functioning for all sorts of creatures.

- **Be pollinator-friendly.** Choose plants that bloom at different times of the year. Select plants with different colors and shapes to attract different kinds of pollinators. Also, plant in clumps not individually, this makes it more attractive to pollinators. Use native plants where you can.
- **Create nesting areas.** Different pollinators have different needs for nesting. From bat boxes to bee nesting blocks, you can transform your backyard into a peaceful place for pollinators.
- **Use less water.** Ensure the edge of your yard angles toward your yard to keep any water or runoff from entering the storm drains. It may also be helpful to keep your watering to a bare minimum. Installing native plants will reduce your need for excessive amounts of water.
- **Go native.** The Orange County Chapter of the California Native Plant Society has a plant list for those wanting to go native. The National Wildlife Federation even offers a certification. The Federation’s Certified Wildlife Habitat program means you are providing food, creating cover, and supplying water for wildlife, as well as giving wildlife a place to raise their young.

We must maintain healthy populations of birds, bugs, bees, and other critters to ensure our plants, agriculture, and working lands get the pollen they need to reproduce.

Healthy Foothills



By: Melanie Schlotterbeck & Joel Robinson, Naturalist For You

Orange County has been blessed with diverse habitats in its mountains and foothills. In fact these habitats—from coastal sage scrub to cactus scrub, oak woodlands to chaparral—and the wildlife within them—are one of the main reasons we remain eligible for conservation funding to protect the land. Orange County and environs are one of 26 global hotspots of biodiversity (areas with many unique species threatened by development).

Our foothills and mountains also include riparian forest, rock outcrop, perennial grassland, and coniferous forest (big cone Douglas fir, Coulter pine, knobcone pine) at upper elevations. Annual grassland only occurs with human disturbances, such as frequent fires, overgrazing, grading, herbicide treatment, fuel modification (shrub removal), resource extraction, and soil compaction.

Healthy shrublands range from three to 30 feet tall (including trees) and provide the needed foraging grounds, nesting areas, and resting places for many of the species that call this region home. From mountain lions and quail to rattlesnakes and Pallid bats, from wrentits and woodrats to horned lizards and coyotes—our shrublands have incredible diversity. The wildlife can be found foraging on steep slopes, nesting on cliff faces, or sunning on a trail.

To the untrained eye some of the shrubland species can get confused with one another. But the reality is there are some key adaptations that help tell them apart. For example, look at the leaf—is it hairy? is it waxy? Does it have serrated edges? Are they taco-shaped leaves? All of these adaptations help the plants survive in our hot, dry Mediterranean ecosystem and retain as much water as possible during the hotter months.

Another key indicator for shrublands is where it is growing. According to Willis E. Pequegnat, “Chaparral is the most prevalent and intricately formed vegetational unit on the Santa Ana Mountains.” North facing slopes get more rain and therefore have more vegetation than the hotter more exposed south-facing counterpart. One misconception about our shrublands is that they need fire to survive. Not true—in fact they are burning too frequently and need between 30 and 150 years to regenerate after a fire.

To keep our shrublands healthy and productive, stay on designated trails, leave no trace in the wildlands, enjoy the wildlife from afar, and always obey all wildfire regulations.

Friends of Harbors, Beaches, and Parks (FHBP) works to protect the natural lands, waterways, and beaches of Orange County. Learn more at: www.FHBP.org



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Safe Trails Coalition



Amber Willis

By: Melanie Schlotterbeck

With more than 133,000 collective acres of wildlands in Orange County—the parks, scenery, and experiences are plentiful. However, complaints are increasing from park users as they find that more of those experiences are negative and some are downright scary. In certain areas, getting out into nature has become more of a “proceed at your own risk” experience than one to recharge the spiritual batteries or get in some good exercise.

Park personnel have reported numerous incidents that have hit a new high in terms of public safety concerns. For example, Santiago Oaks Regional Park in Orange reports that an archery range was found, evidenced by arrows in the trees. Imagine turning a sharp corner on your morning outing only to see someone aiming a bow and arrow and shooting it across the trail you are on. Not only is this a public safety hazard, but it is also an unauthorized use of public parkland. In other words, there are certain things you can do in the parks and certain things you can't do. Setting up your own personal archery range is on the “can't do” list.

Concerned by the lack of balance, a number of environmental groups—Audubon California, Sea and Sage Audubon, Sierra Club, Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks, and Laguna Canyon Foundation—founded the Safe Trails Coalition. This coalition supports all trail users who use the existing network of authorized trails, are willing to ensure native plants and wildlife and other natural resources are protected, and agree that all trail users and park visitors are entitled to a safe and enjoyable experience in the wilderness. As park advocates, we need to collaborate and work toward a sustainable future.

With more than 30 supporting organizations involved, the coalition is working bring the stakeholders together and determine appropriate next steps. Watch for more updates on this coalition and its activities on our website, Facebook page, and in future newsletters. Sign up to receive information by emailing us at: GreenVision@FHBP.org.

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A Green Vision for Orange County...

This parcel-level map is the result of an ongoing collaborative project between Friends of Harbors, Beaches, and Parks and local conservation and community organizations. It is a work in progress and intended for use as a general planning tool only.

- Acquisition Opportunities**
 - Active Conservation Project
 - Potential Conservation Land
- Other Land Designations**
 - Public Conservation Land
 - Private Conservation Land
 - Public Not Protected
 - Easement / H.O.A. Land
 - Golf Course / Cemetery
 - Landfill
 - Military Land
 - Utility Land
- Other Map Layers**
 - Nature / Education Center
 - Sacred Site
 - Watershed Boundary
 - Stream Corridor
 - County Boundary
 - Highway

Data compiled from a variety of sources including First American Title, with input from OC Parks; the California GAP Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara; the California Resources Agency - Legacy Project (2003); the Cities of Brea, Irvine, and San Juan Capistrano; and the California Protected Areas Database. © FHBP 2000-2013. All Rights Reserved.

Detailed descriptions of the categories used in this map can be obtained from the Friends of Harbors, Beaches, and Parks website at: www.FHBP.org.

Rio Santiago (Map #1)

The 110-acre Rio Santiago project is being proposed at the former Sully Miller sand and gravel site in Orange. The developer proposes 265 high-density senior units and 130 houses in the flood plain. The private recreational component has yet to be disclosed. The site, for more than 50 years, has been used as an asphalt and concrete crushing facility. It is zoned sand and gravel and has been designated open space for nearly 40 years on four adopted plans. Major General Plan amendments and zone changes

including eliminating the Orange Park Specific Plan are needed. Impacts to the rural equestrian community are significant. Orange Park Association, along with a coalition of residents, is leading the effort to stop this ill-conceived project. Learn more at: www.OrangeNeedsParks.com.



San Onofre / 241 Toll Road (Map #2)

The Transportation Corridor Agencies (TCA) reconfigured the 241 Foothill-South extension in an attempt to bypass earlier denials from the Coastal Commission and U.S. Department of Commerce. The Tesoro Extension would bring the road from its current terminus at Oso Parkway to Cow Camp Road, part of the Rancho Mission Viejo development, just north of Ortega Highway. By splitting the road into separate segments the TCA actually flies afoul of federal regulations which say that a project must be

evaluated on the merits of its entire length. In June, hundreds of people attended the standing-room only Regional Water Quality Control Board. The Board chose to deny the TCA's permit for this segment. The TCA has appealed that decision to the State Water Board. Learn more: www.SaveTrestles.org.



Great Park (Map #3)

A consensus plan for a planned wildlife corridor has emerged from negotiations between Laguna Greenbelt, Inc., representing a coalition of environmental groups; and FivePoint Communities, developer of Great Park Neighborhoods. The wildlife corridor will ultimately connect the coastal wildlands of the Laguna Greenbelt to the larger protected open space of the Santa Ana Mountains. The resulting consensus plan is for the three segments of the wildlife corridor adjacent to the Great

Park Neighborhoods development. These segments require sophisticated engineering, careful biological planning, and extensive earth moving not generally necessary for other segments. Now we must await a City of Irvine General Plan Amendment. Learn more: www.LagunaGreenbelt.org.



Fairview Park (Map #4)

The fate of the 208-acre Fairview Park is in question. Some are asking that the natural lands be converted to lighted ball fields. A Citizen's Advisory Committee is expected to recommend suggestions for the future of the Park. Ten years ago, Costa Mesa agreed, as part of the Fairview Park Master Plan, to manage the lands as habitat due to, among other reasons, rare vernal pools occupied by the endangered San Diego fairy shrimp. Meanwhile, an unapproved decomposed granite trail surfaced that covered

one of the occupied vernal pools. Federal resource agencies are investigating the situation, while the City determines how it can appropriately restore the site. Officials plan to temporarily section off the vernal pool with rope. Learn more at: www.facebook.com/FairviewNaturePark.



Coyote Hills (Map #5)

Since the people's referendum rejected the 760-house West Coyote Hills development last November, the effort to save these lands as a park and preserve has taken a positive turn. The referendum (Measure W) overwhelmingly passed with 60.8% of the vote to deny Chevron's proposed development. Since the election, Friends of Coyote Hills, Open Coyote Hills group, and Chevron-Pacific Coast Homes are now meeting in an effort to find a win-win solution to the dispute over the future of

these lands. This is an extremely optimistic step in the right direction. Former Fullerton Councilmember, now State Assemblywoman Sharon Quirk-Silva, and current Councilmember Doug Chaffee are showing strong support to protect these lands as a park. Learn more at: www.CoyoteHills.org.



Aliso Creek Restoration (Map #6)

Working with State Coastal Conservancy Proposition 84 grants and restoration funds from the Renewed Measure M Environmental Mitigation Program, Aliso Creek is slowly but surely getting a face lift. Once overrun with the non-native plants, the entire watershed is getting significant attention through a collaborative effort between OC Parks, OC Watersheds, OCTA, and Laguna Canyon Foundation. Through a series of targeted cut and spray efforts, more than 30 acres of creek are in

the process of getting restored. Hand crews from the Orange County Conservation Corps have aided in the effort significantly as has the holistic approach which tackles the entire Aliso Creek watershed instead of piecemealed efforts which are less effective. Learn more about this work: www.LagunaCanyon.org.

