

IMPROVING PARKS ... ONE PARK AT A TIME

In 2012, Lisa LaFlame stopped by Chino Hills State Park every evening during her drive home from work as a geophysicist. She was interested in the progress of the park's new Discovery Center that was being rebuilt after the destructive Freeway Complex Fire in 2008 burned over 30,000 acres in Orange County and 95 percent of Chino Hills State Park. One such evening, she saw a sign recruiting volunteers for an upcoming CSPF Earth Day project to remove trash and weeds around the site. She signed up.

After volunteering at Earth Day, Lisa decided to become a member of CSPF. She began volunteering regularly at Park Champions events around Southern California and attended Park Champions native plant and habitat restoration trainings at Rio de Los Angeles.

In the spring of 2013, Park Champions was actively looking for a new volunteer Core Leader at Chino Hills to lead trail maintenance workdays. Lisa's proactive attitude, friendly personality, interest in teaching others, and knowledge of geology and resource management made her a great fit for the job. She has since led over a dozen trail maintenance workdays.

"The trails don't maintain themselves; they need constant upkeep," says Lisa. "Chino Hills only has three or four staff people, and they don't have time to maintain the 93 miles of trails at the park. Volunteer help is critical. In addition to repairing the tread to prevent erosion and improve the safety of the trails, volunteers also remove invasive plants that encroach on the trails."

Volunteering at Chino Hills offers educational opportunities, too. "Park Champions volunteers are already interested in nature, and already invested in the well-being of the park," says Lisa. "They want to learn more about the resources that surround them and the interconnected balance between the plants, insects, birds, and animals. The park is famous for being a biodiversity hotspot, which means that while it is biologically rich it has also lost much of its original habitat."

In addition to being an important wildlife corridor—a pathway for animals to travel from one

natural area to another—Chino Hills is also home to many increasingly rare plants and animals. Removing invasive mustard plants and Russian thistle at Park Champions workdays helps protect and restore the biodiversity at the park.

Lisa explains that the park is an important place for people, too, and the trails are popular with hikers, bikers, and equestrians looking for exercise and a change of pace. It's a large natural space in an increasingly urban area. After hiking a few minutes into the park, she notes, "You don't know you're in a city. You can't see or hear the traffic." Lisa has seen a variety of animals at workdays including grey foxes, coyotes, deer, and Southern Pacific rattlesnakes.

Lisa is an active hiker and high-altitude mountaineer; last fall she spent 15 days hiking the Annapurna Circuit in the Himalayas. Volunteering with Park Champions is fun for her because she enjoys any chance to be outside, but the best part is having the opportunity to help the parks and work with others. As much as visitors need trails and fresh air, she says, "Parks need people, too. As long as there are overgrown trails, parks need volunteers."

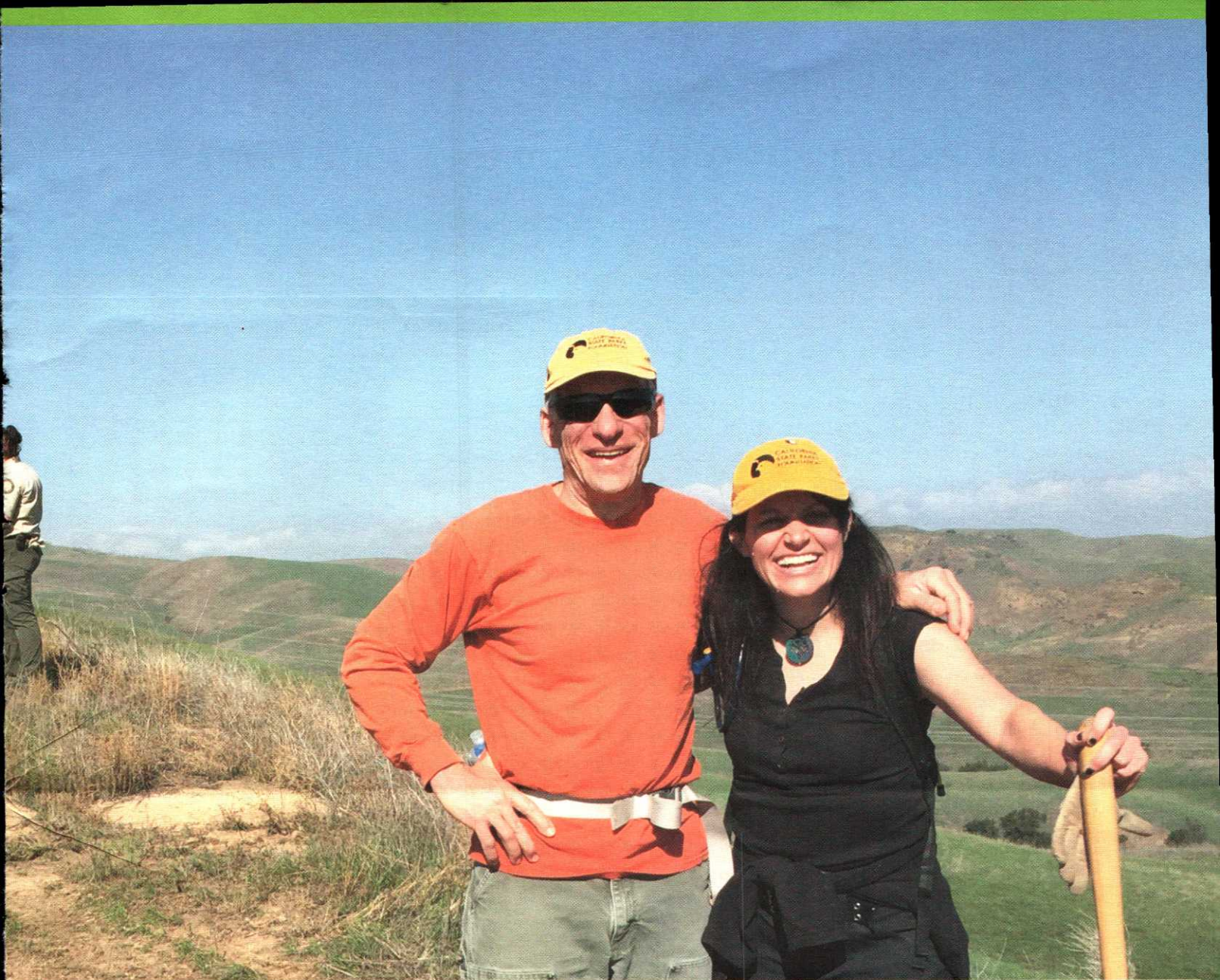
Lisa had not volunteered in a leadership capacity before becoming a Park Champion, and she appreciates the framework and support the program provides. She encourages others to participate and is actively seeking more Core Leaders at Chino Hills to help her organize and lead workdays. She remembers feeling nervous before leading her first solo events, but will tell you that this feeling passes with experience. She would love to see you at a workday soon.

In 2015, Park Champions held 160 workdays and trainings benefiting 32 parks across the state. Projects included trail repair, invasive plant removal, habitat restoration, rehabilitation of historic orchards, fence construction, boardwalk construction, and re-painting park structures. Ongoing work is made possible in part by the financial support of our sponsors Edison International, Capital Group, and REI.

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—Lisa LaFlame, Park Champions Volunteer





GET TO KNOW A PARK

Chino Hills State Park

Saved from urban sprawl in the 1970s, Chino Hills unfurls in thousands of acres of grassy swells once grazed by cattle and sheep, and includes a stellar valley-to-views trail to panoramic Gilman Peak. The 1,200 feet of elevation gain comes gradually, isn't obstructed by rocks, and offers great vistas for most of the 4-mile trek to the summit. The first few miles on the North Ridge Trail are filled with prairie hill scenery and California walnut trees. The path ascends a high ridge with huge views of snow-capped Mount Baldy and Ontario Peak as large Gilman Peak comes into sight—and is accessed via a side trail. The 1,685-foot peak, with red-tailed hawks soaring overhead, is pure panorama: Anaheim and Fullerton slope to the Pacific while Santiago Peak looms and the Santa Anas stretch to the southeast.

Getting There: The park is located 10 miles northwest of Corona. 4721 Sapphire Road; Chino Hills, CA 91709. \$5 day-use fee per vehicle. Park hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. seven days a week in the winter.

Travel tips brought to you by CSPF partner Weekend Sherpa. More tips at weekendsherpa.com.