

Hills For Everyone

Friends of the Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor



Newsletter No. 22

Winter 2009

“WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES”

The crazy smoke- and ash-filled time lingers. The devastating fires of mid-November brought disfigurement to our beautiful hillsides and devastation to many people who live near them.

Two fires in the Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor caused a calamity on November 15th and 16th. One fire started, apparently from a car spark along the 91 freeway, at about 9:00 AM near the Green River exit in Corona (Riverside County). With strong erratic Santa Ana winds blowing, the flames quickly moved into Chino Hills State Park (San Bernardino County) and up the hills where so many homes have been built next to the Park and where no buffer zone had been required by the decision makers. According to news reports, there was some understandable delay early on when all attention was



Duane Thompson

Flames amid billowing smoke consume parkland and homes in November 2008.

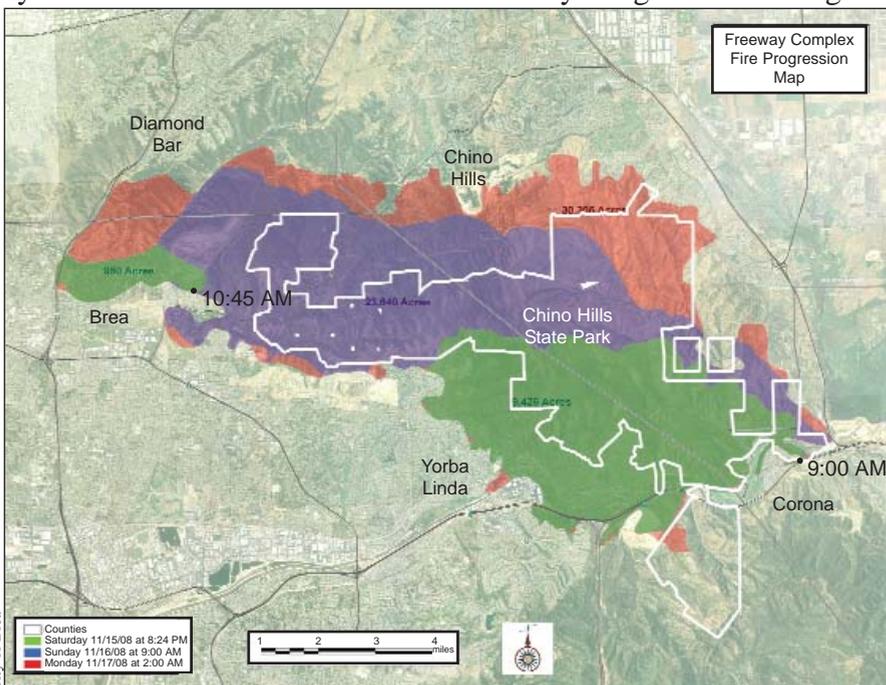
turned to saving a fire crew trapped in the flames.

Another fire, caused by arcing from inadequately maintained electric lines serving oil pumps, started 11 miles west in Brea (Orange County) at 10:45 AM near the Olinda Landfill. Because of the erratic winds, these two fires eventually merged into one big fire

in Tonner Canyon (Los Angeles County).

Those familiar with Santa Ana winds know that if initial containment of a fire fails, the flames will only stop when conditions improve on their own no matter how many resources are thrown at it.

Yet our hills have never experienced this kind of man-made disaster before. Normally fires burn a few ridges here and a few canyons there, but in this instance 30,000 acres burned in one fell swoop. Hundreds of homes were lost. Chino Hills State Park took the brunt of the damage - 95% of it burned. Only the man-made structures there were saved: the ranger house, amphitheatre, campgrounds and barn. On a ridge top in Carbon Canyon all one could see in every direction, over every ridge and in every valley were charred ruins of a once thriving wildland. The fire burned so hot in some places that trees exploded and left a



City of Brea

hole. Firefighters call it a moonscape. Natural fires usually start at ridge tops by lightning and burn more slowly downhill. Man-made fires usually start in a canyon where the roads are and rapidly race uphill.

Heartbreaking images remain etched in a cavalcade of memories for those of us who went through the fire and its aftermath - the mallard duck burned deep in the hills (what was she doing there?), the song bird stuck in a chain link fence not burned but dead, the six point buck snagged by old barbed wire fencing and unable to escape the flames. Small animals, failing



A song bird lost its way.

Duane Thompson

to outrun the racing flames, carpeted the hills - a field day for turkey vultures. An army of charred snails, now white, looked like pearls strewn across the brittle landscape.

Once Living Hills

These fire prone hills of ours are not just dirt covered with a carpet of plants walked on or flown over by wildlife. They are a delicately woven tapestry starting with the soil that, when healthy, is full of unseen microorganisms of beneficial fungus and bacteria that facilitate water and nutrients being absorbed by plant roots. If the fire burns too hot, those unseen life-givers die, making it harder for plants to recover.



Duane Thompson

Turkey vulture

Without the plants, survival is impossible for wildlife who are left with plenty of room to roam, but no place to hide and no food to eat.

A recent trip into the State Park was remarkable for two things - the absence of wildlife - there were no tracks even in the moist now-visible stream beds. It was also remarkably still - no rustling leaves, no birds calls; even the wind couldn't stir up any sounds, only whirls of ash.

Not so Natural Fire

It is too soon to tell how the hills will recover. Though most of us know fire is a natural part of our hillsides' life cycles, these frequent fires are not natural and they are changing the very nature of our landscape. The eastern side of the Wildlife Corridor has been burning nearly every five years rather than the 40 year cycle that history records.

Since fire is a natural part of the ecosystem - plant species have

ARUNDO - GOING, GOING, GONE?

One good outcome of the recent fire, is that nearly all of the nasty, invasive, stream choking, water grabbing non-native reed (*Arundo donax*) was burned to the ground. Originally brought here for erosion control, it has become a menace to natural streams when it gets a foothold. It can grow to 30 feet tall with a 25 foot underground root system. Since it contains silica (glass) wildlife cannot eat it and since it does not branch, they cannot nest in it. *Arundo* is also highly flammable.

Within days of the fire that burned through the Orange County portion of Carbon Canyon, residents for the first time saw not only a stream, but also water running in

it. And the *arundo* was already six inches tall in places.

Many agencies, groups and individuals are interested in getting rid of the 25 acres of *Arundo* once and for all. The most expensive part of its removal is getting rid of the biomass and the fire did that. Brea has committed \$25,000 from a special funding source to kill the *Arundo*. Grant applications are also being written through the Carbon Canyon Fire Safe Council and other agencies.

Typically an herbicide is sprayed four times a year for five years. Experts caution us not to be too concerned that it is now six feet tall. They say it needs to be sufficiently high and leafed out for



Claire Schlotterbeck



Claire Schlotterbeck

the leaves to effectively carry the herbicide to the long roots.

adapted to survive. Some plants use the heat of fire to open or awaken their seeds and start a new plant. Fires that are too frequent don't allow young plants to mature enough to develop these seeds. Other plants store energy in their roots and then resprout from stumps. Repeated fires can sap so much energy with the demands of frequent resprouting that plants run out of stored energy. As the bushes die off, non-native vegetation takes over. These annual grasses not only can't provide the cover or the nutrition for wildlife, but they also die off faster in spring than native grasses and this extends the fire season. Non-native grasses also ignite easier and spread fire faster than the native chaparral, coastal sage scrub and woodlands we hoped we were protecting as parkland.

Planned Disaster

This onslaught of fires across California over the last few years can be traced to two converging calamities: one is climate change (increased drought and heat) and the other is bad land use decisions. Scientists have documented that the West will experience the impacts of climate change with drought. This decrease in rainfall, smaller snow pack that melts earlier, shorter rainy seasons leading to an earlier and longer fire season will result in continued deforestation. Drought in our already semi-arid region slows recovery of our burned areas even further.

The fires are also the result of land use decisions that put public safety, a basic and primary task of government, at risk. The power of zoning carries with it the responsibility for consequences. Cities approve new

housing developments right next to protected wildlands, providing no buffer from the inevitable flames. The burden of providing adequate defensible space belongs on the private housing projects, not on public parkland that was purchased to conserve the natural resources. Yet the burden of the consequences of these bad land use decisions is repeatedly being borne by the protected lands, the wildlife, the taxpayers, and all the people who suffered. Developers and decision makers are usually long gone when the predictable disaster hits.

One of the more recent projects that was built in Yorba Linda put a golf course between the wildlands and the houses. They also put in cactus patches which became habitat for threatened

Continued on page 5



Russell Cooper

Smoke billows above Brea.



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The firestorm approaches Sleepy Hollow in Chino Hills.



Melanie Schlotterbeck

Charred remains of the State Park's restoration site.



Duane Thompson

Olinda Ranch residents watch as flames approach their Brea street.



Cindy Clouse

Flames approach a Chino Hills' neighborhood.



© 2008 - Jose Fernandez, UltraLightPhotography.com

Burned infrastructure took weeks to repair.



Scott Kirby

Fire aftermath in Yorba Linda.



Lee Paulson

Foscheck is dropped over Diamond Bar.



Duane Thompson

An ashen landscape in Chino Hills State Park.

species. That is how it should be done. That project had other problems but the urban/wildland interface was not one of them.

Another planning mistake is that cities allow developers to build more houses than are allowed in its General Plan in exchange for amenities the City wants. Yet the density in these Plans is important because it determines the size of the infrastructure needed to support the city, including the size of sewers, water tanks and roads. Yorba Linda residents felt the consequence of that higher density when so many evacuating homeowners got stuck in traffic gridlock. They couldn't get out and fire trucks couldn't get in.

After the big fires in 2005 in the forests and on urban edges, a lot of folks studied fires. It turns out that most of the time, wildlands don't burn houses down, houses burn houses down. If air can get into a house, an ember can get into a house.

Personal Gratitude

So many people called or emailed messages of concern and offers to help. A State Park Ranger swung by my house and let us know it was unharmed. A bag of alfalfa pellets showed up on my doorstep - a poignant expression of concern for the hard times facing surviving wildlife. A firefighter friend from Bakersfield was assigned to a bulldozing crew in our neighborhood. Not knowing the outcome, he wanted us to know he made sure they stayed as long as they possibly could. Those kindnesses meant a lot.

This touching email also arrived:

"I am a Cherokee.
In our belief, fire is one of two things,
A purification or an answer to some pressing question.
One generation is born,
Another one passes away.
But the Earth endureth forever."



Non-native weeds emerge under a ruined tree.

Claire Schlotterbeck



Non-native cell stations were also ruined.

Claire Schlotterbeck



Scene overlooking Manely Friends Stables before the fire (above) and after (below).

Duane Thompson



Duane Thompson

CANYON CREST PROJECT ON HOLD

We hope that the fire served to "answer some pressing question" as the Cherokee prayer suggests. Residents in Carbon Canyon have been fighting a proposed 165 unit housing project called Canyon Crest on ridge top land next to the State Park. Proposed deep in the hills this plan makes every mistake possible in siting homes in rural areas - too many, too steep, too landslide prone, too destructive to oaks and walnut trees, and too inaccessible. It also abuts the protected lands of the State Park and they do not manage their lands to reduce

fuel load for new projects unwisely built next door. We can only hope this fire exposed the vulnerabilities of this dangerous housing project. Given the fact that the fire burned the entire site down, we have asked for a new supplemental Environmental Impact Report.

In addition, the landowner is in arrears to the City of Brea to pay for staff time. The Shopoff Group owes Brea \$75,000. The City is requesting another \$30,000 up front before more staff time is committed to analyzing this project.

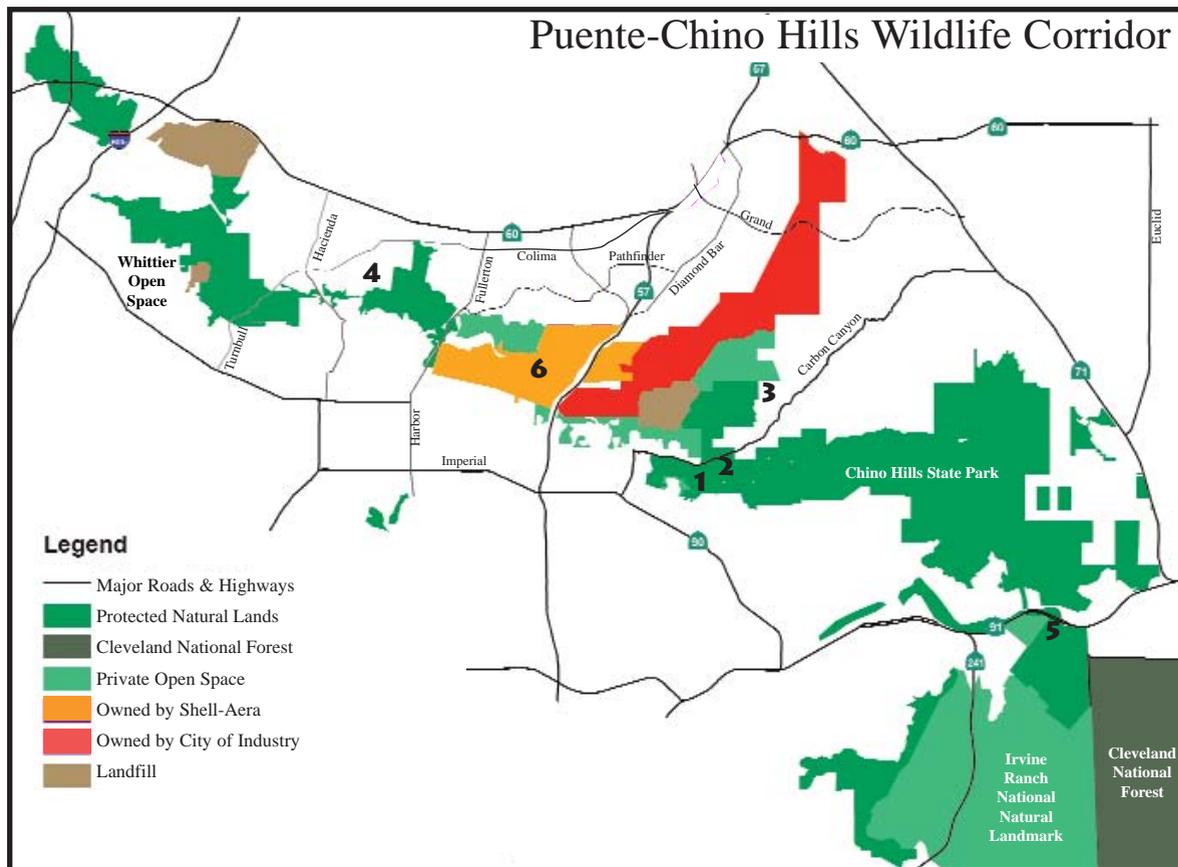


Jebb Harris



Jebb Harris

Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor



VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

The recent fire laid the Park bare, including all of the old barbed wire fencing left over from the ranching days. It had become hidden in the tall grasses and brush. We are currently mapping that barbed wire and will hold work parties this year to remove it once and for all - saving wildlife from suffering further once they return to the land. If you are interested in helping, please email us at info@HillsForEveryone.org.

PACIFIC HEIGHTS UNDER REVIEW

The proposed Pacific Heights subdivision in Hacienda Heights has sprung to life again. The developer hopes to create 47 single family lots on 114 acres next to Schabarum Park and within the Powder Canyon Significant Ecological Area. They would need to grade over one million cubic yards of dirt and remove 126 oak trees while also encroaching into a protected zone to remove another 20 oak trees. Access to the housing project will be through Apple Creek Lane.

The Recirculated Draft Environmental Impact Report is available at:

<http://planning.lacounty.gov/search>

The project number is 92-027 and comments are due March 18th to: rsilvas@planning.lacounty.gov

THREAT TO COAL CANYON LINKAGE EASES

An elevated highway in the median of the 91 freeway has been proposed as one way to address the traffic congestion in the narrow Santa Ana Canyon. The Riverside County Transportation Commission staff proposed the entry and exit structure to this elevated freeway be placed directly over the Coal Canyon Wildlife Corridor.

This proposed placement has just been dropped from consideration after strong objections from Park supporters.

AERA ENERGY PROJECT STALLED

In spring 2006 Los Angeles County Planning told Shell-Aera to redesign its 3,600 unit project in the hills between Brea and Diamond Bar. Instead, Shell-Aera took the same project to Diamond Bar hoping to annex its land into that City. A public meeting in May 2007 exposed strong opposition to the massive project once traffic projections revealed that 50,000 additional cars would join local streets and freeways daily.

The project proceeded to be reviewed by Diamond Bar staff. In May 2008, the City told Shell-Aera to redesign the project to make it less impactful, more cutting edge and "greener." The City also stopped any further review until a redesigned project was submitted. Nothing has occurred since then.

SAVE THE DATE

Docent Program with Habitat Authority

An orientation meeting and free trainings will be held in March for those interested in becoming volunteer naturalists.

To sign up visit:

www.HabitatAuthority.org

Green Scene

Fullerton Arboretum is on the north side of Cal State Fullerton, near Yorba Linda Blvd. and Associated just off the 57 freeway.

Saturday, April 18 - 9A - 4P

Sunday, April 19 - 10A - 4P

Earth Day

April 25th is Earth Day at Chino Hills State Park at the barn at the Rolling M Ranch.

Avocado Festival

The Festival is at the Park in La Habra Heights on Hacienda Blvd, north of Whittier Blvd.

Saturday, May 16 - 10A - 4P



LAWSUIT SETTLED

In March 2008, Hills For Everyone sued Metropolitan Water District (MWD) and State Parks over a planned access road through the State Park and up a steep walnut woodland to the MWD plant in Yorba Linda. We settled the lawsuit with MWD. Although a road will be built into Telegraph Canyon, we will also be able to expand the State Park to protect many more acres of walnut woodland than will be destroyed by the road.



POWERPOINTS AVAILABLE

Looking for a program for your service club, scout troop, church group, homeowner association, or environmental club? We offer free programs, full of pictures and interesting, insightful information and we can design it based on what you want to learn about - wildlife, land use, park history, etc. Call 714-687-1555 to arrange one for your group.

CHECK OUT THIS NEW BLOG

<http://carboncanyonchronicle.blogspot.com>

NEWSLETTER RECIPIENTS

If you wish to be removed from this mailing list, call 714-687-1555 and provide your name and mailing address or email us at: info@HillsForEveryone.org.

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We must not "forget the intimate connection that still exists between civilization and nature."

-- Rick Halsey, Author of Fire, Chaparral and Survival in Southern California



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