

Hills For Everyone

Friends of the
Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor



Newsletter No. 41

Fall 2019

Why Cougars Count

UC Davis Wildlife Health Center



A mama cougar is on the look out, as her two cubs dine on a deer (left). This cougar (right) is shown after being collared for a wildlife study.

All across the nation, we've saved parks, wildlife refuges, and preserves to provide places for nature to thrive. We know now that these parks are not big enough to sustain the suite of species that we had set out to protect. Even parks as big as Yellowstone at over 2.2 million acres (a little smaller than Los Angeles County) are losing species.

One solution is to connect parklands through wildlife corridors—creating functionally bigger reserves. For example, Coal Canyon Wildlife Corridor, which runs under the 91 Freeway, links our hills to the Cleveland National Forest in the Santa Ana Mountains. The Harbor Boulevard wildlife tunnel improves connectivity within the Puente Hills Preserve and reduces collisions in La Habra Heights.

We also know now that saving the top predator like the cougar (or the bear or the wolf) is essential to the health of the whole ecosystem. It goes something like this: if we lose the cougar, there is an explosion of mid-level predators like coyote, skunks, and opossums—and they are much better raiders of bird nests. As the bird population plummets, birds are no longer around to adequately distribute plant and tree seeds. So over time, a long time, the ecosystem collapses.

Conversely, when the top predator is present, the whole ecosystem improves. That's why in Yellowstone, when biologists reintroduced the wolf in 1995, there was eventually an explosion of song birds. The wolves culled the elk herds who had been depleting the vegetation along the streams. Once the elk numbers normalized and they weren't overrunning the streams, the plants re-established themselves, and the birds returned, too.

In our region, cougars are the top predator. They are elusive, shy, and expert ambush hunters. They are certainly nothing to mess with. At eight feet long (including the tail) and 150 pounds, a cougar can clear a six-foot fence with a deer in its mouth. Though their preferred prey is deer, they will eat anything. Females generally have two cubs in a litter who stay with her about 18 months learning the skills needed to survive. Female offspring establish a home range close to mom, but the males, who need a larger range, disperse farther away. These are the cougars who often get into trouble (i.e., attack humans) as they traverse unfamiliar territory in search of a new home and food source.

Due to camera tracking, cougars are frequent celebrities in our news. We all follow the escapades of the radio-collared cougars of the Santa Monica Mountains. They are beautiful, charismatic creatures who are barely

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surviving in the wildland areas of Southern California, including our Puente-Chino Hills. Their vulnerability has become so apparent that the Center for Biological Diversity and the Mountain Lion Foundation have petitioned the state to list the Southern California subspecies as endangered.

Humans are the leading cause of cougar deaths, mostly by way of automobile collisions and second-hand poisoning. Small animals eat rodenticides put out by careless humans, and then cougars eat the small animals, thereby ingesting the poison themselves. A 2018 analysis of 11 studies revealed that more than 85% of cougars or bobcats had rodenticides in their system.

Because of their declining numbers, cougars are increasingly subjected to inbreeding. With their choice of mates limited, they end up mating with close relatives, exaggerating bad genetic traits and further threatening the population's survival.

Several efforts are underway to continue making connections to improve the functionality of our local natural lands. Laguna Greenbelt is leading the effort to complete a habitat connection between the 22,000 acres in the Laguna Coast parklands to the Cleveland National Forest across the 405/5 freeway at the El Toro Y. The wildlife corridor is mostly secured on both sides of the freeway, but we need to



This coyote caught a rabbit near the Irvine undercrossing.

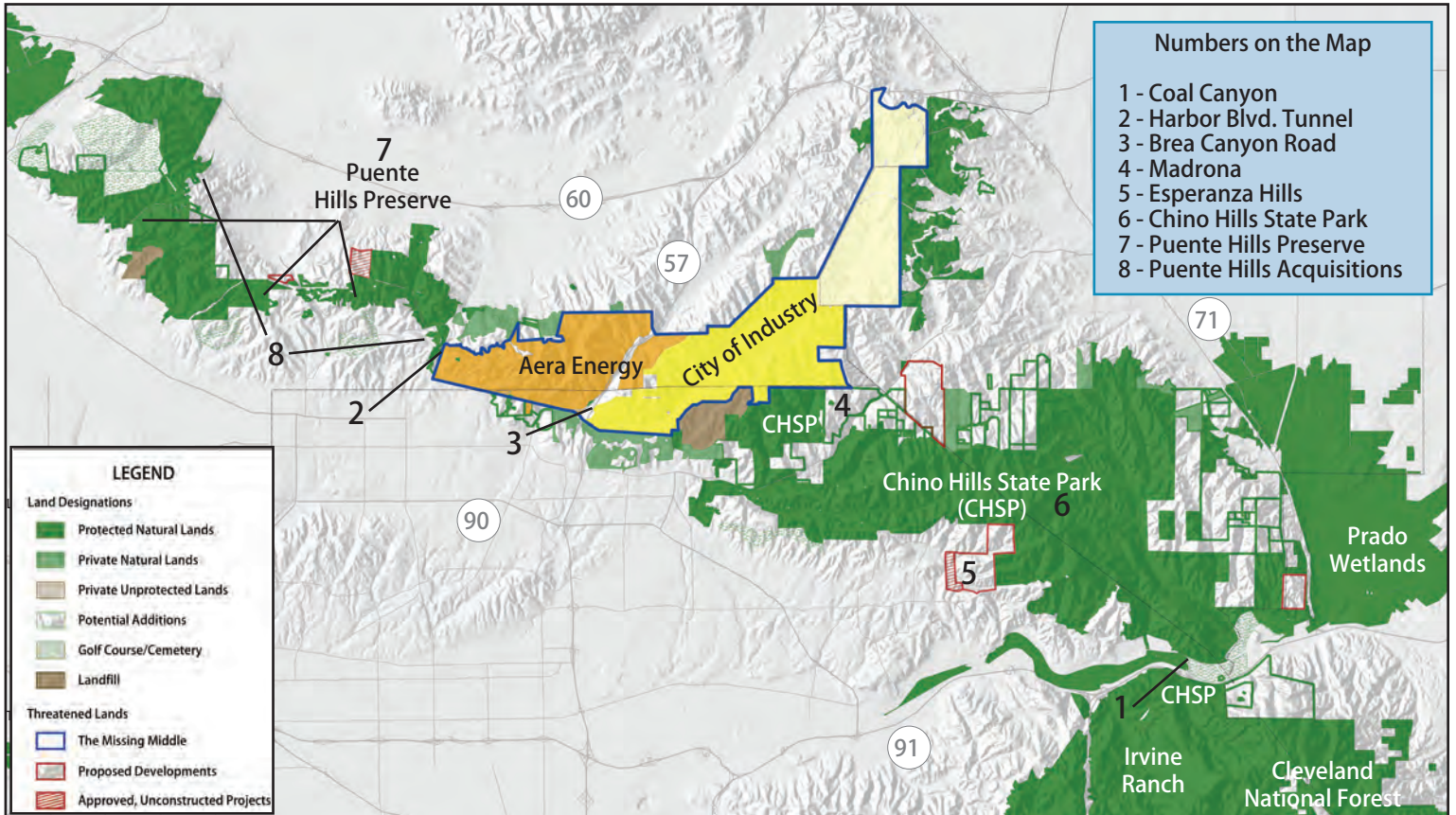
Laguna Greenbelt, Inc.

get wildlife successfully under or over the road.

Another connection needs to be made across the 15 Freeway near Temecula. This would connect two districts of the Cleveland National Forest. The Nature Conservancy is leading the effort on this project. Hills For Everyone supports these efforts because, if successful, they will enhance our hillside ecosystem.

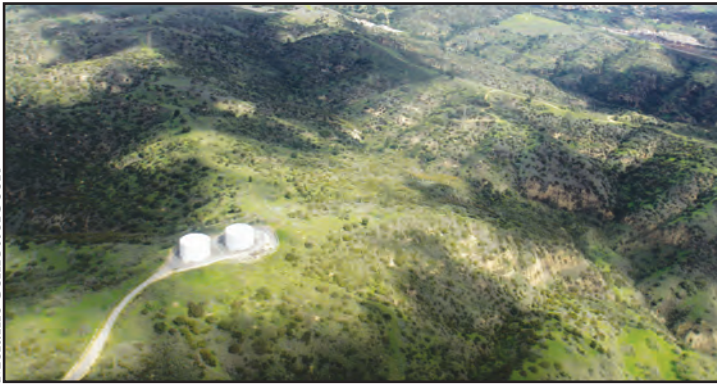
Yet even as efforts are made to connect wildlife preserves, ongoing projects threaten to fragment them. The County of Orange plans to widen Brea Canyon Road and if successful, it will certainly further fragment our hills and endanger our efforts complete the Corridor. This is the only place wildlife can move between the Puente and Chino Hills. We will remain engaged with our partners on this project.

Mapping the Corridor Projects



Madrona

Melanie Schlotterbeck



Though we won the lawsuit that stopped the building of 162 houses on this dangerous site, our acquisition partners were unable to purchase the site for conservation when the seller asked for terms that made the agreement untenable. A private party bought the land. We do not know what their plans are, but we do know that Brea's General Plan and other rules now in place will keep the number of units to a minimum, likely making it economically infeasible to develop.

Esperanza Hills

On a 3-2 vote, the Orange County Board of Supervisors just re-approved the 340-unit project for a third time, despite the best efforts of Protect Our Homes and Hills and Hills For Everyone to make a safer, less damaging project there. Residents have won four times in the Court of Appeal, and two more lawsuits are pending.

Following the approval, Orange County Fire Authority took to the press proudly proclaiming that this project will be an "experiment." They said, "The agency wants to see if modern fireproofing standards ... will give firefighters an edge." They neglected to point out that the one winding, up-and-down entrance road empties onto a street that was gridlocked in the massive fire 11 years ago and prevented firefighters from even getting into the neighborhood.

Melanie Schlotterbeck



Puente Hills Preserve Grows

Two properties totaling about 15 acres were recently added to the Puente Hills Preserve. The steep slopes of the 13.7 acre Johns' property in Hacienda Heights helped keep it relatively untouched for decades, maybe even centuries. You can only imagine the thriving ecosystem and peace that the wildlife are enjoying on it. This land is within the County's designated Significant Ecological Area, and the Habitat Authority's Coyote Trail runs just north of it. The other acreage was added adjacent to other Habitat Authority owned properties near the Harbor Boulevard wildlife underpass, augmenting the connection in this narrow part of the Corridor. This is an important linkage area within the Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor for medium-to-large sized mammals.

We Lost a Friend

Over 25 years ago, the effort to save our hills took a giant leap forward when elected leaders across the hills and across counties came together to form the Wildlife Corridor Conservation Authority. A housing project that would have severed the Corridor was proposed in Powder Canyon in La Habra Heights. Thanks to the leadership of Judy Hathaway Francis, a Heights councilwoman at the time, this narrow, but critical part of the Corridor was saved. We were heartbroken to learn of her passing in May. Ever the lovely but feisty lady, she will be missed by all of us who knew her. Whenever you enjoy the hills, please know that is, in part, due to Judy's efforts. Our condolences to her husband Roy Francis, a La Habra Heights councilmember.



Park Hours Change

Fall hours will start October 1st for Chino Hills State Park. It will be open 8:00 AM - 5:00 PM. Due to improvements and repairs to the water system in the Park, the campground will be closed until March. Habitat Authority hours also change to 9:00 AM - 5:00 PM. Let's leave the early mornings and evenings to the wildlife. Without their presence, we would not have been able to save the land in the first place.

Email Updates

If you have not heard from us lately via email please be sure we have your correct email address by contacting us at: info@HillsForEveryone.org.



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104 Year Fire Study Released

In 2011, Hills For Everyone undertook a study of fires near Chino Hills State Park because the Park was burning much too often. The repeated burns did not allow vegetation to recover, causing it to convert from oak and walnut woodlands, coastal sage, and chaparral to non-native grasslands. These grasses and mustard dry sooner, ignite easier, and spread fire faster. With recent catastrophic fires in California, we've updated the study to cover 104 years of wildfire history.

We obtained data from fire agencies and mapped where fires were starting, what areas were burning, and what the causes were. Most fires have occurred in the last 40 years as development grew. We found that there was an increase in the number of fires, but they are generally smaller. The three "hot spots" where fires are starting remain the same from the first study. There have been 52 fires along the 91 Freeway in the Santa Ana Canyon, 11 fires at Rimcrest in Yorba Linda, and 27 fires near Carbon Canyon Road in Brea. A new hotspot may be developing along the 57 Freeway with 11 fires there in just three years. The study and its data are available at: HillsForEveryone.org.



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