

NCC Quarterly

The Evolution of a Nature Reserve in Orange County

The Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP), approved in 1996, serves as a long-term solution to addressing two very important and often conflicting issues in Orange County – sustained community development and the preservation of biodiverse open spaces.

The economic boom the 1980's fueled mass development throughout Orange County. As houses and hotels began to replace large natural landscapes, much of the region's coastal sage scrub habitat was forever lost. Native species dependent on coastal sage scrub habitats for their survival, such as the Coastal California gnatcatcher, coastal cactus wren, and orange-throated whiptail lizard, eventually became threatened and/or endangered.

Recognizing the need to reach broad consensus about the limits of development within the remaining open spaces in Orange County, the NCCP/HCP began to evolve. Private landowners, conservation organizations, builders and developer associations, and local, state and federal government agencies participated in the creation of a document which protected the most crucial portions of ecosystems as nature preserves, linked them with wildlife corridors, and allowed well-planned development on the remaining land. As part of the agreement, landowners were assured that no further endangered species regulations beyond the NCCP/HCP agreement would be imposed on them.

Orange County's Central and Coastal NCCP/HCP was approved by the state and federal legislature in 1996. Its purpose is to provide regional protection and recovery of multiple species and habitat while allowing compatible land use and appropriate development. The outcomes of the approved NCCP/HCP agreement include:



- 1 Creation of a permanent 37,378 acre subregional habitat reserve;
- 2 Assembly of a membership board to oversee the plan's implementation allowing landowners, developers, local governments, and resource agencies to participate in conservation planning;
- 3 Funding for a nonprofit corporation to oversee long-term management and monitoring of reserved lands; and
- 4 Certainty to the public and affected landowners where the location of future development and open space will reside.

The current participating jurisdictions (signatories) in the plan include City of Irvine, City of Newport Beach, County of Orange, UC Irvine, Irvine Ranch Water District, Metropolitan Water District, the Irvine Company and Transportation Corridor Agencies.

Partner Spotlight – Irvine Ranch Water District

Irvine Ranch Water District (IRWD), established in 1961, provides drinking water, wastewater collection and treatment, recycled water programs and urban runoff treatment to more than 380,000 residents. IRWD's geographical footprint spans 181 square miles and provides service to the cities of Irvine, Tustin, Newport Beach, Lake Forest, Orange and Costa Mesa.

What you may not know about IRWD is its innovative leadership in water conservation, its commitment to protecting wildlife and critical habitats, and guidance implementing the County of Orange County's Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP).

Have you ever wondered how Irvine and surrounding communities keep parks, medians, public landscaping, and athletic facilities vibrantly green and beautiful year-round, and still maintain essential water resources to fight wildfires? The recycled water program, developed by IRWD, is a nationwide model for demonstrating how recycled water benefits quality of life for both developed and natural communities. Recycling water extends drinking water supplies for most species, reduces the amount of treated sewage discharged into the ocean, and minimizes reliance on expensive imported water. IRWD's pioneering of recycled water use started in 1963 and continues today.

Protecting wildlife and critical habitats is also an unusual, but prominent function of IRWD. The greatest example is the work taking place at the 320-acre San Joaquin Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary (<https://www.irwd.com/san-joaquin-marsh>). As a refuge to more than 200 species of birds, the Marsh's freshwater coastal wetlands, trail systems and nature education programs are carefully administered by IRWD and its partners. In addition, the site aids in naturally cleaning urban runoff from the San Diego Creek and shielding Back Bay by removing nitrogen, selenium, copper, trash and excessive sediment from the water supply.

When it comes to walking its talk, IRWD was among the first to sign-on to the NCCP/HCP. The 75-year agreement (1996-2071) assures habitat protection and preserved open spaces across the 38,000-acre Nature Reserve of Orange County. When examining the linkages of a water district to land conservation, IRWD Director and Natural Communities Coalition President Steve LaMar said, "From the forests and headwaters to wetlands and coast, IRWD appreciates the critical connection between water and land. We welcome the opportunity to work jointly with other public and private landowners to improve our natural habitat."

For more information on IRWD, go to www.irwd.com



Natural Communities Coalition Welcomes Mendel Stewart



Wildlife biologist, Mendel Stewart, recently started working for Natural Communities Coalition (NCC) as its Natural Resources Coordinator. Mendel comes to NCC after spending a career with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Through his 34-year tenure at USFWS, Mendel held a variety of positions involving land management and regulations under the Endangered Species Act.

Mendel grew up in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and spent much of his childhood hunting and fishing along the waterways and farmland near his home. These activities led him to appreciate the importance of healthy wildlife populations and habitats. It was also a time highlighted by the environmental era of the early 70's which helped instill a conservation ethic and desire to make improvements in the world.

Mendel attended Western Kentucky University where he received a bachelor's degree in Biology. He followed this up during his years at USFWS with a master's degree in Public Administration from the University of Memphis.

At NCC, Mendel will be charged with leading a variety of projects. He is particularly excited about some of the

restoration activities focused on improving coastal sage scrub habitats on the Reserve. Mendel plans on helping develop more cost-effective methods of providing plant materials as a need which was identified in the NCC Strategic Plan. He went on to state, "I would like to develop a model that can be replicated regionally that achieves the quantity and appropriate genetic quality at a cost that meets each of our reserve managers needs and beyond."

When asked about NCCP/HCP and its future effectiveness, Mendel concluded, "One of the things I would like to help ensure is long-term understanding and appreciation of the Reserve's open spaces as primarily places for wildlife where human recreation is not compromising but rather complementary to long-term protection."

If you would like to learn more about NCC's natural resource focused programs and initiatives, please email Mendel at mstewart@occonservation.org or give him a call at (714) 973-6651.



Orange Throated Whiptail

The official bird of Villa Park is the hummingbird. The official tree of San Juan Capistrano is the sycamore. The official flower of Newport Beach

is bougainvillea. So what's the official reptile of Orange County?

My vote goes out to the orange-throated whiptail. This small, two to four inch lizard has a black, gray or dark brown back with up to six yellow stripes. Adult males (as pictured) have a prominent, bright orange throat and chest, which merit at least, a nomination as OC's official reptile.

Orange-throated whiptails are known to occupy open, sparsely covered land with loose soils and rocks. They prefer native habitats including chaparral, coastal sage scrub and oak woodlands. The vegetation surrounding the whiptails is important as its favored meal selection are termites. Spiders, cockroaches, grasshoppers, crickets,

moths, and beetles are also an acceptable food source when termites migrate deep in the soil during summer heat.

Orange-throated whiptails are located from the Santa Ana River south to the Baja California peninsula. Places where they have been most prominently spotted in Orange County include Santa Ana Mountains, San Joaquin Hills, Trabuco Creek and San Juan Creek linkages.

In 1994, it was estimated that 75% of the orange-throated whiptail population had been lost due to the development of lower coastal floodplains. Species survival over the past two decades has become dependent on smaller, higher elevation drainages and terraces for habitat. Due to the limited dispersal opportunities within its shrinking habitat, local populations have become a greater risk for local extinction.

On a positive note, the nearly 38,000-acre Nature Reserve of Orange County will continue to serve as protected habitat for the orange-throated whiptail through 2071, and hopefully beyond.