

# NCC Quarterly

## A Salute to Stacy Blackwood

For the past 12 years, conservation throughout the Nature Reserve of Orange County has been exponentially championed by Stacy Blackwood, former OC Parks Director and Open Space Manager for the City of Irvine.

From 2009 to 2012, Stacy was instrumental in evolving and building habitat protection within Irvine's Southern and Northern Open Space Preserves. The impacts of her work in Irvine can be readily seen in the rich, native habitat sections beneath Serrano Ridge and within Bommer and Shady Canyons.

From 2012-2021, Stacy served an employee of OC Parks, and has held its Director position since 2013. During her tenure with OC Parks, Stacy actively converted privately owned lands to publicly owned and operated parks and conservation easements. Irvine Ranch Open Space properties, including Limestone Canyon, Fremont Canyon, Weir Canyon and Black Star Canyon were all transitioned from Irvine Company holdings to open space and wilderness parks which are now part of the OC Parks system.

When it comes to conservation, Stacy genuinely walks her talk. While serving on the Natural Communities Coalition (NCC) Board and Executive Committee since 2009, Stacy chaired two board committees and continually worked to benefit landowners within the reserve with a keen knowledge of the terms of the permit that created the reserve. According to NCC Executive Director Jim Sulentic, Stacy's commitment to a whole reserve approach and strategic thinking created many admirers among board members and NCC staff. In addition, Sulentic said, "Stacy elevated OC Parks and NCC's ability to conserve protected lands while navigating dynamics such as competing interests for trail use, wildlife threats and best practices for integrated pest management, including invasive plants and insect tree pests."

As Stacy makes her way to San Diego to spend more time with family and enjoy the outdoors, her extended family at NCC wish her all the best and look forward to meeting up again in nature.





# The Small but Mighty Coastal California Gnatcatcher

Weighing in at approximately two ounces and standing at four and a half inches tall, is the small but mighty, coastal California gnatcatcher. If there ever was a transformative icon, symbolizing the need for a permanent subregional habitat reserve system, the California gnatcatcher is a worthy nominee.

Looking back to the 1980's, when Orange County underwent a period of immense economic growth, houses, hotels, commercial and industrial centers rapidly began to replace large natural landscapes. The net result was a significant loss of coastal sage scrub habitat. Native species dependent on coastal sage scrub, such as the coastal California gnatcatcher, were squeezed to the point where their population numbers plummeted.

In the early 1990's, a scientist by the name of Jonathan Atwood authored a study on gnatcatcher populations, which concluded there were no more than 1000-1500 pairs in Southern California. Atwood's study also suggested the continued loss of habitat could result in extinction. On March 25, 1993, the coastal California gnatcatcher was formally listed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service as threatened, per the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The "threatened" listing of the coastal California gnatcatcher proved to be a significant initial blow to development and economic interests. Both the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) and Federal Endangered Species Act (FESA) spelled out the means to protect the coastal California gnatcatcher, but severely impacted the ability of developers to efficiently navigate permitting processes, particularly where coastal sage scrub and potential gnatcatcher habitats were present.

The State of California's Natural Community Conservation Planning (NCCP) Act of 1991 came at a time when CESA and FESA were being challenged for the impacts the regulatory acts were having on local economies. NCCP provided a new approach, which focused on a commitment to regional protection and the recovery of multiple species while allowing

compatible land use and appropriate development. In addition, the NCCP Act aided in building collaboration among wildlife agencies, local governments and private interests. Through its implementation, NCCP was devised to balance the needs of natural resource protection with the economic health of the region and in the process create a more predictable and efficient regulatory process.

California's first NCCP, resulting from Governor Pete Wilson signing AB2172, was the County of Orange Central and Coastal Subregion NCCP/HCP. The 75-year plan, approved in 1996, was prepared through cooperation with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and United State Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and included the input of private landowners, conservation organizations, builders and developer associations, and local state and federal government agencies. Included in the agreement were assurances to landowners that no further endangered species regulations beyond the NCCP/HCP agreement would be imposed on them.

As part of the regional monitoring effort, NCC is participating in a long-term, coordinated survey project with the USFWS and numerous agencies in the five counties that encompass the US distribution of the gnatcatcher. The purpose of the project is to identify trends in the status of gnatcatcher populations and habitat quality. The first survey was conducted in 2016 and repeated in 2020. For the status of gnatcatcher locally, occupancy in the coastal reserve appears to be steady. In the central reserve, the populations have been rebounding from the 2007 and 2017 wildfires, but may decrease again because of the change in habitat following the 2020 wildfires.

As the subject of conservation planning and assessment for over 30 years, the coastal California Gnatcatcher may be the most prominent species linked to the NCCP/HCP. Today, there are a number of NCCP entities focused on the gnatcatcher, ranging from Palos Verdes to San Diego. While its size is quite diminutive, the coastal California gnatcatcher has been a mighty force in providing the rationale and long-term results of a permanent subregional habitat reserve system.

# WILDERNESS ACCESS DAYS

For those who love to explore and experience nature on their own, one of the best days each month may as well be Wilderness Access Day. Facilitated within the Nature Reserve of Orange County and on lands owned by OC Parks and the City of Irvine, Wilderness Access Days provide a unique opportunity to independently explore and experience nature at its most scenic and habitat rich locations.

Individuals looking to run, hike, mountain bike, birdwatch, or saddle up their horse on Wilderness Access Days are treated to an enhanced availability of trails. Many of the trails open for use on Wilderness Access Day are typically closed to everyday use due to the sensitivity of ecosystems and regulatory conditions in place to protect threatened and/or other native species of concern.

Wilderness Access Days also offer an increased level of safety supports and services. Trail docents, rescue personnel and rangers/open space enforcement staff are all in place to help everyone enjoy the experience safely.

Wilderness Access Days start at 8:00 a.m. and its recommended participants arrive at the trailhead when the event begins. Parking resources at Bommer Canyon, Cattle Camp and Quail Hill Loop tend to fill up early. Alternate parking for the Irvine events include Quail Hill Community Center and Laguna Coast Wilderness Park. Wilderness Access Day events hosted by OC Parks may also present some parking challenges, depending on the location and number of attendees.

To learn more about future Wilderness Access Day events and locations, go to <https://letsgooutside.org> and click on "Activities."



# Public Safety in Open Space Land Management

## (Part two of a three-part series)

Landowners and land managers throughout the Nature Reserve of Orange County deliver an abundance of safety services to those who utilize wilderness parks and open spaces. While public safety may not be the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about a nature preserve, it has evolved to become one of the most important duties of landowners and land managers.

As the second of a three-part series, this article focuses on the role of public safety in the management of protected open spaces. The first article, which appeared in the July edition of NCC Quarterly, reviewed the vital role science plays in managing natural landscapes. The third and final feature will examine customer service and its necessity to the operation of wilderness parks and open spaces.

Public safety (as it relates to land management) is an incredibly broad term. Highly specialized personnel from numerous agencies serve a critical role in keeping natural landscapes safe and accessible to the public.

When you take a closer look at the function of public safety representatives, you begin to develop a greater appreciation for their presence and accomplishments. These individuals are continually tasked with responding to threats which they have no control. Public safety representatives also have to approach much of their work as a cohesive unit, but are employed by multiple entities with contrasting missions and operating structures. And to complete the cycle, public safety personnel are often relied upon to be the accident and incident prevention educators and advocates.

### Threats to Protected Open Space

The Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP) of Central and Coastal Subregion of Orange County was approved in 1996. The NCCP/HCP approval led the way to the establishment of the 37,000-acre Nature Reserve of Orange County. While the NCCP/HCP has been in existence for 25 years, public safety threats to the Reserve continue to grow.

According to "Wilderness Connect," (an online collaboration involving University of Montana, Arthur Carhart

National Wilderness Training Center and the Aldo Leopold National Wildlife Research Institute) a variety of threats are currently impacting the health of our natural spaces. These threats as identified below, necessitate action by public safety representatives and others:

- Climate Change is associated with higher temperatures, reduced snowpack, extreme drought, and other climatic shifts which contribute to larger, more frequent and intense wildfires. In addition, climate change has the potential to cause significant ecological adaptations, which affect how local habitats (including coastal sage scrub) may survive and function in the future.
- Invasive species can wreak havoc on ecosystems by preying on or competing with native species and spreading novel diseases. Some of the problematic invasive species impacting Orange County landscapes include Sahara Mustard, Polyphagous Shot Hole Borer and Artichoke Thistle.
- Air and water pollution sources, emanating from outside wilderness areas (e.g. urban runoff) adversely impact the health of Orange County's open spaces.
- Technology is introducing a new source of threats to wilderness. In addition to the advent of e-bikes, technology perpetuates a false sense of security and often leads people to go beyond their personal limitations and abilities.
- Lack of public awareness in the form of disconnected urban audiences are less likely to support and value wilderness. Public surveys have found that people who know about wilderness value it tremendously, yet almost 50% of Americans do not understand what wilderness is, how it shaped our nation, how they benefit from it, and how it enhances the quality of life in our communities.
- Overuse, often described as, "loving it to death," has become a genuine concern throughout many of Orange County's wilderness parks. Excessive visitation has the potential to degrade landscape and the ecosystem processes as well as detract from the expectations of a genuine wilderness experience.

## Role of Public Safety Representatives

Public safety representatives are on the front line, working daily to minimize the threats and their associated impacts to open spaces. These individuals, who have contrasting organizational structures, work cultures and responsibilities, must work in collaboration to respond to the public safety incidents they are confronted with. The variety of positions include:

- Park Rangers oversee park safety and just about everything else at their assigned location. California State Parks, City of Newport Beach, and OC Parks employ park rangers who are on duty seven days weekly. As the gatekeepers to much of Orange County's open space, these individuals are confronted with and respond daily to unique situations with superior problem solving and interpersonal skills.
- Fire agencies include Orange County Fire Authority, Newport Beach Fire Department, Anaheim Fire Department and Laguna Beach Fire Department. As expected, these departments are charged with the prevention and response to fire emergencies. In addition, fire agencies manage search and rescue and emergency care needs. They also support vegetation management on trails and fire roads.
- The Orange County Sheriff's Department and city specific police departments are the lead agents for law enforcement and shared emergency response within their jurisdiction. The City of Irvine's Police Department oversee the open space patrol function with Irvine's preserve.
- Wildlife biologists and ecologists continually strive to reduce invasive populations and prevent the impacts of degradation, pollution, and climate change.
- Fire Watch personnel and volunteers are deployed throughout the Nature Reserve on days when there is an elevated fire risk (e.g. Red Flag Days). The Fire Watch charge is to help protect lands from catastrophic wildfires and fire danger through education, early reporting and deterrence.
- County of Orange Area Safety Task Force (COAST) is a collaboration of public agencies, municipalities, landowners and land managers affected by wildfire in Orange County. In alliance with National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy, its aim is to reduce the severity, frequency, spread and impact of wildfires in Orange County.

## Incident and Accident Prevention

As trail use throughout the Nature Reserve of Orange County has reached record attendance levels in 2021, the safety of all individuals utilizing the Reserve remains paramount. While new users may be unfamiliar with concepts such as trail etiquette, plant and wildlife hazards, and physical limitations, it is in everyone's best interest to facilitate modes of trail use and resource education. Some of the local training and orientation options are included below:

- Programs and activities led by docents at OC Parks, City of Irvine and City of Newport Beach trails are an ideal way to educate the new trail users about trail safety. Go to <https://letsgooutside.org/activities/> to check the offerings.
- Hiking safety tips provided by Crystal Cove State Park are offered through their website <http://www.crystalcovestatepark.org/backcountry-safety-tips/>
- Mountain biking skills clinics are offered at Portola Staging Area in Irvine. The free classes are led by Irvine Ranch Conservancy staff and volunteers. Go to <https://letsgooutside.org/> for class dates and times.
- Trail maps are recommended for any hiking, biking, birding or equestrian trip and can be downloaded by clicking on the landowner titles below:
  - [OC Parks](#)
  - [City of Newport Beach](#)
  - [City of Irvine](#)
  - [California State Parks: Crystal Cove](#)

## Conclusion

The Natural Communities Coalition recognizes public safety as one of the most important services provided throughout Orange County's Nature Preserve. As detailed through this article, there are many people and multiple organizations to thank for caring for the natural features and health of the Reserve while assuring the public of life enriching experiences in nature, now and in the future.