

# NCC Quarterly

## Revisiting the NCCP/HCP Document

The Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP) for the County of Orange Central and Coastal Subregion is an extremely comprehensive document. Its 1,384 pages of content include an Introduction (Part 1), Conservation Strategy (Part II), Environmental Impact Report (Part III) and Implementation Agreement. The combination of these four sections addresses an adaptive conservation planning process which provides regional protection and recovery of multiple species and habitat while allowing compatible land use and appropriate development.

While thorough in context, the NCCP/HCP document may be a difficult or abstract read, particularly for those individuals who were not a part of the original NCCP/HCP planning process. As many of the NCCP/HCP experts who were around in 1996 have either retired or moved on, the institutional knowledge essential to the effective delivery of the 75-year NCCP/HCP remains.

The Natural Communities Coalition recognizes the need to update landowners, partners and stakeholders on the vision, goals, and mandates prescribed by the NCCP/HCP. Each of the excerpts included below was taken directly from the NCCP/HCP document for the County of Orange

Central and Coastal Subregion. By revisiting the voluminous plan, a greater understanding of its contents may be ideally realized among landowners, partners, stakeholders and general public.

### Chapter 1: Project Need and Purposes

The need for subregional NCCP/HCP was established over recent years by a combination of legislative and regulatory actions, and by the findings compiled by the Scientific Review Panel that was created by the State of California to provide state/federal agencies with scientific expertise on issues relating to the protection and management of coastal sage scrub and associated habitats and species.

In 1991\*, the California Legislature enacted the NCCP Act. The Legislature found and declared as part of the Act that "there is a need for broad-based planning to provide for effective protection and conservation of the state's wildlife heritage while continuing to allow appropriate development and growth."

\*The NCCP has been amended by State of California in 1996, 2000, 2003, 2011 and 2012.

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California gnatcatcher



Orange-throated whiptail



Coastal cactus wren

## Revisiting the NCCP/HCP Document *From page*

### Chapter 2: Existing Biological Setting

The NCCP/HCP's overall biological goal is "to conserve healthy functioning ecosystems and the species that are supported by them." Through the development of the Central and Coastal Subregional Plan for Orange County, the program concentrated on three "target species" which are correlated with healthy, well-connected coastal sage scrub ecosystems. The "target species" include two birds, the coastal California gnatcatcher and the coastal cactus wren, and one lizard, the orange-throated whiptail.

The NCCP "target species" were selected by the state-sanctioned Scientific Review Panel. The Scientific Review Panel also established specific survey protocols for surveying these "target species" and conducted these surveys prior to the approval of Orange County's NCCP/HCP in 1996.

### Chapter 5: Section 5.1 Adaptive Management

The NCCP Planning Guidelines recommend that an "adaptive management" regime should be implemented to manage biological resources within the subregion. As used in this NCCP/HCP, adaptive management is defined as a flexible, iterative approach to long-term management of biotic resources that is directed over time by the results of ongoing monitoring activities and other information.

Under this approach, biological management techniques and specific objectives are regularly evaluated in light of monitoring results and other new information. These periodic evaluations are used over time to adapt both the management objectives techniques to better achieve management goals. This approach involves managing coastal sage scrub and adjacent habitats in a manner designed to support a broad range of coastal sage scrub species over the long term, with particular emphasis on "target and identified" species.

The purpose of adaptive management within the framework of the NCCP/HCP Reserve System is to maintain the long-term habitat value within the subregion. The NCCP Planning Guidelines define the manner in which the creation and management of the Reserve System provide for assuring no net reduction in the ability of the subregion to maintain viable populations of "Target Species."

## Nuttall's Scrub Oak

Nuttall's scrub oak (*Quercus dumosa*) is one of the 39 identified species receiving regulatory coverage under the Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP).

At one time, Nuttall's scrub oak thrived in chaparral along the Southern California coast and into Baja California. Today, the plant is considered rare, as its habitat has largely been displaced by development and other human activity. Nuttall's scrub oak has also been impacted in areas with frequent fire.

The "Nuttall" designation comes from Thomas Nuttall, a Naturalist from England who is known for his designation as one of the most accomplished naturalists of North American flora and birds. It is believed his introduction to and common name reference of the Nuttall scrub oak occurred during his visit to the Pacific coast in the 1830's.

The Nuttall scrub oak is a scraggly perennial of the Fagaceae family. It has short spiny leaves and can grow 4-12 feet in height. Nuttalls have a lifespan of up to 100 years. Its annual growth depends on the frequency and volume of winter rains. Its low and spreading canopy serve as protection and an insulating layer for ground dwelling animals, such as reptiles, including the orange-throated whiptail.

Like other oaks, the Nuttall species blooms from March to May and produces acorns, solitary and paired, which mature over a year. The California Native Plant Society notes the (Nuttall) "acorns are dispersed by gravity as they fall from the tree, and by animals that pick them up, such as squirrels and jays. Animals eat them immediately or cache them for later. The acorns tend to germinate easily. Reproduction via seed generally occurs only in very moist years."

Locations of Nuttall's scrub oak populations within the NCCP/HCP Coastal and Central Subregion of Orange County are additionally considered to be at risk due to climate change. Protection for the plant and its recovery will remain within the scope of the NCCP/HCP throughout the nearly 38,000-acre Nature Reserve of Orange County.



Nuttall's scrub oak

# The Bridges at Buck Gully

Approximately 10 years ago, the City of Newport Beach, which is a signatory to the NCCP/HCP, completed a project which accomplished two very important objectives. With exceptional planning, creativity and efficiency, the City developed a process to improve public access and visitor experiences at the 300-acre Buck Gully Reserve while effectively restoring ecological balance and improving habitat value within the Reserve.

In commemorating the 10th anniversary of the event, Newport Beach Council Members, Commissioners, residents, and staff joined up at the Newport Coast Community Center on August 24, 2022. Those attending the event were treated to a video presentation, led by former Newport Beach City Council member and current NCC Board Member Nancy Gardner, regarding the natural habitat of Buck Gully and the City's commitment to environmental conservation. Attendees also learned of the unique challenges associated with installing four bridges in remote locations by way of helicopter, which incidentally was not permitted to hover for any length of time due to Federal Aviation Administration regulations.

Some of the stories shared about the project were intriguing. According to Adam Mayhort, Director of Planning and Infrastructure for Irvine Ranch Conservancy, the aluminum bridges were constructed in Florida and shipped to Newport Beach. Once arriving in Newport Beach, the bridges were then staged on property adjacent to Buck Gully where they were picked up by a helicopter and carefully flown into remote areas of the canyon. With bridges hanging from a long and sturdy cable, the construction team carefully anchored them in place. Fortunately, only one of the bridges had to be strategically re-directed in mid-flight to fit underneath the dense tree cover and tight space between canyon walls. Mayhort described this experience as being "kinda-hairy."

Many of those attending the anniversary participated in a docent-led interpretive hike through Buck Gully and its network of bridges. The Buck Gully trail extends 2.55 miles and is open daily for hiking, mountain biking and bird watching use from dawn to dusk. Please note dogs are not permitted on trails and mountain biking is directionally limited. Individuals may also register to participate in a free docent led hikes at Buck Gully by going to [www.letsgooutside.org](http://www.letsgooutside.org)



Grace Leung, Joy Brenner, Robyn Grant and Nancy Gardner at Bridges of Buck Gully event

# Red-shouldered HAWK



Red-shouldered hawk

The Red-shouldered hawk (*Buteo lineatus*) is a mid-size hawk native to the Pacific coast and is also one of the 39 identified species receiving regulatory coverage under the Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/NHCP). Red-shouldered hawks prefer a riparian or oak woodlands habitat, but have also been spotted in eucalyptus groves.

Red-shouldered hawks got their name for the reddish hued upper wing (which look like shoulders) and colorfully streaked neck and chest. They are significantly smaller than the Red-tailed hawks often seen throughout the Nature Reserve of Orange County and are similar in size to a Cooper's Hawk.

Prior to 1900, the Red-shouldered hawk was one of the most common North American raptors. Hunting, logging, insecticide poisoning, and industrial pollutants have reduced population numbers over the past two centuries. Habitat loss however remains the biggest threat to sustaining Red-shoulder populations throughout Orange County.

While recognized as one of the noisiest North America raptors, Red-shouldered hawks have a repertoire of at least seven different calls. They are extremely vocal when disturbed at their nests, particularly when a predator, such as a great horned owl is nearby. The "kee-awh" sound one may hear when spotting a Red-shouldered hawk is likely a male

performing a courtship "sky-dance" which is combined with flight high into the air followed by a steep dive and spiral ascent.

An interesting fact about Red-shouldered hawks is they are monogamous and pairs mate for life. Mating season occurs between April and July and pairs tend to nest in wooded areas which are located near water. The same nests are typically used year after year and are refurbished each spring with new sticks and other debris. The clutch size for Red-shouldered hawks is typically 1-5 eggs with an incubation periods lasting 28-33 days. Hatchlings are brooded constantly by the female for approximately 40 days and leave the nest at six weeks. The young hawks remain dependent on their parents until they are 17-19 weeks old.

The diet of a Red-shouldered hawk consists of mammals, amphibians, reptiles and birds. Their life expectancy is 20-25 years and they can fly at a speed up to 35 miles per hour.

When Red-shouldered hawks are found locally to be injured or sick, the Orange County Birds of Prey Center, located in Lake Forest, is readily equipped to provide treatment and sheltering. The Center continues to provide care until the birds may be able to return to the wild, or remain humanely sheltered if incapable of surviving without human assistance.