U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office

2024 Year in Review

We work to protect fish, wildlife, plants, and natural habitats of the Central California coast.

IN THIS ISSUE

In This Issue

Based in Ventura, our biologists and natural resource professionals work across the Central California coast in Santa Cruz, San Benito, Monterey, Santa Barbara and Ventura counties; portions of Los Angeles and San Luis Obispo counties; and the northern Channel Islands.

On the front cover: Santa Cruz long-toed salamander photographed as part of National Geographic PhotoArk project. Photo by Joel Sartore/National Geographic

On the back cover: Wildlife inspired recipe creations. Photos by Olivia Beitelspacher/USFWS

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From the Field Supervisor

Dear reader,

It's my pleasure to share our 2024 magazine with you as we take a look back at highlights in endangered species recovery this year.

We made headway for rare plants by releasing a draft recovery plan for the endangered Vandenberg monkeyflower, a blueprint to guide conservation efforts. We planted La Graciosa thistle at Black Lake in partnership with the Land Trust of San Luis Obispo County and established a seed bank for endangered Lompoc yerba santa alongside Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. We also worked with a farming family to protect one of the last remaining Gaviota tarplant populations in perpetuity.

We worked with our Department of Defense partners to help restore habitat for monarch butterflies, an icon of the central California coast that has faced steep declines in recent years.

We surveyed rare species in the field -- least bell's vireo, California tiger salamander, Morro shoulderband snail and others -- all in an effort to understand, protect and restore vital ecosystems where they thrive.

We celebrated $1 million in funding for a habitat conservation plan to protect 22 rare species in San Benito County, a major milestone to support conservation and the local economy. We worked with our academic partners to rear endangered salamanders in captivity to increase populations in the wild.

Recognizing the importance of diversity in conservation, we connected with local community groups from Latino Outdoors and Oxnard Birders Club to Ventura County Pride Week organizers to share our mission and provide access to resources and experiences in nature.

I was also proud this year to welcome new members to our Ventura team including Science in the Service interns, Pathways interns, and our fourth Kendra Chan Conservation Fellow to carry on a legacy that champions diversity in conservation. We also continued our women in science video series to highlight the personal journeys of women in our agency to inspire others.

This will be my last message as Field Supervisor for our Ventura office as I embark on the next chapter of life this December. It has been a privilege to serve threatened and endangered fish, wildlife, and plants for the benefit of the American people. It has been an honor to work along side so many wonderful, talented, and passionate Service employees for the past 33 years. I am confident our Ventura team will continue to serve this community with excellence as we work to prevent the extinction and promote the recovery of our rarest species.

Field Supervisor Steve Henry retires after 33 years with the Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office. Photo by Ashley McConnell/USFWS

Stephen P. Henry
Field Supervisor

Building ‘comunidad’ with Latino Outdoors and Oxnard Birder’s Club

Latino Outdoors Ventura and Oxnard Birder’s Club members with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff at Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge. Photo by Vanessa Morales/USFWS

“It felt incredible to see California condors soaring in the wild and understanding the deeper implications of their presence,” said Martín Mejía, a Fillmore resident and member of Latino Outdoors Ventura. Mejía was among 17 participants who joined U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists and staff on a field excursion to Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge (refuge) in Ventura County, California, this September. For most it was the first time seeing a federally endangered California condor in the wild.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service partnered with Oxnard Birder’s Club and Latino Outdoors Ventura to host the event during Latino Conservation Week, an initiative of the Hispanic Access Foundation to support the Latino community in getting outdoors and participating in activities that protect our natural resources.

“Participating in Latino Conservation Week is a priority for us,” said Vanessa Morales, bilingual communications specialist with Ventura field station, who helped coordinate the event as a federal liaison with Latino Outdoors’ Ventura chapter. “Here in Ventura County, the Latine community is deeply attached to nature and conservation. Historically, however, we have not always been able to enjoy the outdoors as a safe and welcoming place that values our cultural connections to nature. We at the Service strive to facilitate inclusive opportunities, such as bringing folks up to see the refuge and bringing awareness to this incredible endangered species that resides right in our backyard.”

After caravanning up the mountain to the refuge, which was established to provided habitat for California condors in 1974, the group took a bird walk led by wildlife biologist Stephanie Menjivar. Next, they collected data on bluebird nesting boxes and helped clean and prepare them for the next season with Science in the Service intern Sophia Scipione. Refuge manager Louie Ocaranza shared the history of the California Condor Recovery Program and the team’s ongoing efforts that have brought North America’s largest bird back from the brink of extinction.

The refuge is accessible to the community through organized tours and volunteer work days led by the Friends of California Condors Wild and Free throughout the year. “The National Wildlife Refuge System belongs to all of you. It is public land that should be experienced and enjoyed by all,” emphasized refuge manager Louie Ocaranza during the event, explaining that stewardship can happen through anyone.

The team ended the day spotting five California condors flying in the distance.

“It was a day filled with conservation, deepened appreciation for threatened and endangered species and the outdoors, networking, and building comunidad,” said Morales.

“The experience was a testament to the importance of connecting with local communities in which our offices serve. By bringing together talents from wildlife biologists, communications specialists, and refuge staff, visitors benefitted from the perspectives and expertise of people from diverse lines of work within the agency. Further, partnering with these two community organizations that have earned the trust of local communities enhances our agency’s mission to advance Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility within the field of conservation.”

Santa Barbara farming family dedicates lands to support recovery of iconic endangered Gaviota Coast plant

When the Harris family's real estate agent unexpectedly disclosed the presence of Gaviota tarplant, a federally endangered plant, on the property of their potential dream farm back in 2021, they had to make a choice: should they look elsewhere or embrace it?

"Part of me thought it was pretty scary having an endangered species on the property, but then the other part of me thought about how exciting it was," said Craig Harris, as he recounted the important decision he and his wife, Aira, had to make about whether or not to move forward with the purchase of the property north of Arroyo Hondo Creek off U.S. Highway 101. "In the end, we embraced the journey and said, alright, let's do this."

Gaviota tarplant is an annual herb with bright yellow flowers resembling sunflowers, blooming from June to September after California grasslands have turned brown. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) listed it as endangered in 2000, while the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) began state protections in 1990. The species occurs in grasslands of southwestern Santa Barbara County, notably along the Gaviota Coast and Santa Ynez Mountains.

Only eight known populations of Gaviota tarplant exist within its extremely limited range. Few are fully conserved, and even fewer receive active management for recovery. Without active management against nonnative weeds like mustard, veldt grass, and iceplant, many Gaviota tarplant populations risk disappearing entirely. Smaller populations of Gaviota tarplant are especially vulnerable to wildfires, which are increasing due to climate change. Post-fire areas often attract invasive weeds and are prone to erosion, threatening the plant's long-term survival. Other threats include habitat loss from development and other land-uses like wind energy and agriculture.

"It's easy to get discouraged by the threats to Gaviota tarplant. However, thinking about our dedicated partners and people like the Harris', who have rallied for its future, gives me hope," explains Kristie Scarazzo, senior botanist at the Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office, who leads Service recovery efforts for the Gaviota tarplant.

After graduating from UC Santa Barbara in 1995, Craig Harris joined the Peace Corps in Paraguay, where he met Aira, who was in the environmental education program. They worked with rural communities facing deforestation and erosion issues, teaching regenerative farming techniques. They returned to Santa Barbara in 1999, married, pursued careers with local nonprofits like the Special Olympics and Foodbank of Santa Barbara County and raised their twin sons, Noah and Zachary.

Following decades of community work, and with their sons grown and attending California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, the Harris' wanted to return to their days of sustainable agriculture. They sought to purchase raw land on the Gaviota Coast, motivated by their connection to the community and the potential for a small family farm. Although learning of Gaviota tarplant's presence on the property was surprising, the opportunity to work with nonprofits was a driver rather than a deterrent.

"I figured there were all kinds of ecological organizations and conservation groups that would be excited to partner with us to help us protect it and promote more of it," said Harris of the tarplant.

And there were.

In 2021, Craig Harris was contacted by the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County (Land Trust) regarding BayWa r.e's Strauss Wind Farm, California's first coastal wind turbine project, in Lompoc. The wind farm, which has since become fully operational, aimed to provide renewable energy to 36,000 homes. The 5,887-acre, $150 million project, which includes 27 turbines, was chosen because of its potential to generate coastal wind energy but was located in the center of the largest known Gaviota tarplant populations.

Because of the effects to this important population, BayWa r.e consulted with the Service during the development of the project to conserve the Gaviota tarplant. During this consultation process, BayWa r.e agreed to measures to minimize and offset impacts to Gaviota tarplant. The Service issued a biological opinion containing its analysis of effects of the project on the plant and a determination that the project was not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of Gaviota tarplant, enabling the project to proceed.

Federally endangered Gaviota tarplant. Photo courtesy of Jacob Marcon/Dudek

BayWa r.e also consulted with CDFW because of effects to Gaviota tarplant from the project, and obtained an Incidental Take Permit, or an authorization allowing the project to proceed even though it might incidentally harm or kill the plant. However, as part of the permit, BayWa r.e was required to plan ways to reduce or minimize impact of the wind farm on the Gaviota tarplant and provide compensation (or mitigation), such as habitat restoration or protection, to ensure that the plant and its environment were still protected while the project completed development.

Shortly after their purchase, the Harris' met with representatives from the Service, CDFW, and Strauss Wind Energy Project to discuss a conservation easement, which is a legal agreement with landowners that sets development rules to protect natural or historical features. The intent of the easement would be to offset harmful impacts from the developing wind farm on the plant. The overall idea gained momentum, and everything started to fall into place to establish a protected area for the plant on the farm. Scientists conducted surveys to identify and characterize onsite biological resources, map Gaviota tarplant distribution, and look for other suitable habitats onsite for the species with restoration potential on the Harris property.

A third-party conservation organization, such as a land trust, needed to be selected to be responsible for enforcing the conservation easement's requirements. The Harris family chose the Gaviota Coast Conservancy (Conservancy), a nonprofit dedicated to conserving the ecologically sensitive area and protecting it from harmful development pressures. For decades, the Conservancy has advocated for sustainable land use and implemented conservation policies that protect critical habitats, including those of the endangered Gaviota tarplant. The Harris' appreciated the Conservancy's commitment to balancing agricultural productivity and farming with ecosystem protection, reflecting their commitment to environmental stewardship and desire to preserve the region's biodiversity and agricultural heritage for the community and future generations. With this partnership, the Harris family and the regulatory agencies began finalizing the conservation easement's parameters, including financial compensation for the Harris family for purchase of the easement

The Gaviota tarplant conservation easement at the Harris Farm is anticipated to be finalized by early 2025. It covers about 30 of the 77-acre site, meeting key mitigation requirements for BayWa r.e's Strauss Wind Farm. The easement permanently protects these acres from development and conserves the local Gaviota tarplant population. It also includes plans for restoring native grasslands, managing invasive species, and boosting the tarplant population through outplanting. Additionally, the easement allows for continued cattle grazing, which can help control invasive grasses that threaten the tarplant's survival.

When asked if the conservation easement would conflict with his plan to run a family farm, Harris said:

"One of the things I've learned is that the agencies and nonprofits I'm working with want us to be successful on our property. For us, this means farming, cattle grazing, protecting Gaviota tarplant, and also having a conservation easement. I've never felt like I had to give up rights or that I am unable to do any of the things I've wanted to do as a farmer."

"I think this conservation easement and an agricultural operation are absolutely compatible. They can be, should be, and need to be," he continued. "If there weren't mechanisms to allow ranchers and farmers to have a viable business, then there would be no incentive to partake in conservation. However, once this is all said and done, we'll be able to lower our property taxes on the parcel and it makes the farming part of our property more viable. So, there is financial and environmental synergy, and incentive for the easement."

On the property, where there have been ranching practices for the last 200 years, the bright fields of yellow, Gaviota tarplant, are prevalent. The Harris Farm will continue its pasture operations under an approved grazing management plan, where there will be sustainable grazing activities strategically timed to benefit Gaviota tarplant. Managers will seasonally remove cattle while the plant is above ground and will not continue to graze in occupied areas until the plants set seed at the end of their annual life cycle. After discussions, the Harris' also secured permission for future docent-led hikes through the easement, allowing others to see the Gaviota tarplant.

Harris said he could never imagine being disappointed in himself for the conservation of an endangered species. When asked what stewardship meant to him, Harris thoughtfully replied, "Who knows if we're going to be fortunate enough to hold title to the land for one generation or 10. At best, I'm on this land for 50 more years, and then I'm gone. If you get the chance to do something permanent and positive, why not go for it? Establishing a conservation easement is an oversized impact that somebody can have when they're taking their turn as a steward."

conservation in action

Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office staff on the Harris Farm property with Craig Harris. Photo by Kristie Scarazzo/USFWS

Successful breeding season for endangered salamanders

Santa Cruz long-toed salamander photographed as part of National Geographic PhotoArk project. Photo courtesy of Joel Sartore/National Geographic.

Teams of postdoctoral scientists from the University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC) and University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) are working to breed, study, and release federally endangered salamanders with the goal of helping recover the species.

Santa Cruz long-toed salamander

Since 2020, a team at UCSC's Coastal Science Campus has bred thousands of Santa Cruz long-toed salamander larvae in outdoor mesocosms, or controlled systems within cattle tanks. The larvae are then released into ponds, some of which are created and managed by the Elkhorn Slough Foundation.

The UCSC team has also been collecting genetic data to determine which larvae survive to adulthood and return to the ponds to breed. This data is critical in determining which lines are strongest and have the most genetic viability for the future.

Left: Breeding tanks at UCSC. Right: Elkhorn Slough Foundation staff releases salamander into pond. Photos by Olivia Beitelspacher/USFWS

The Elkhorn Slough Foundation manages more than 4,200 acres of protected land including six ponds to benefit salamanders and a host of other species. In May, after another successful breeding and releasing season, the last of the approximately 800 salamander larvae were released into a slough pond. Three years prior, larvae were released into this pond and later rediscovered as adults, a promising sign of the program's success.

"Our goal is to strategically create a complex of ponds across the landscape that facilitates full utilization of high-quality habitat while also ensuring that salamanders can exchange genetic information throughout the area. These strategically placed breeding habitats are intended to provide resiliency and redundancy for the species in northern Monterey County to ward off threats such as climate change," says senior biologist, Chad Mitcham.

California tiger salamander

For the past two years, a team from UCLA's La Kretz Center for California Conservation Science has bred nearly 1,500 California tiger salamanders at a private ranch near Lompoc. They were then released into ponds in Santa Barbara County in close partnership with willing private landowners. Research is ongoing to evaluate whether the salamanders, each tagged with a unique identifier, have returned to ponds where they were released or migrated elsewhere. With great anticipation, we await new findings to share with our partners and help continue our collective work to recover the salamander countywide.

This past summer, after another successful breeding and releasing season, the last of the approximately 650 salamander metamorphs were released into a livestock pond.

"This work demonstrates the power of partnerships to implement a savvy solution to a difficult recovery problem; namely, that populations of an endangered species are becoming increasingly isolated and inbred—breeding with kin and exhibiting signs of reduced fitness—as a direct consequence of expanding urban and agricultural development. For many who cherish the salamander and the grassland ecosystem on which it and cattle ranchers both depend, this work gives great hope. Our main goal in this project is to enhance salamander genetic diversity and augment their population numbers to advance recovery of the species and ensure its persistence for current and future generations of Americans to enjoy," says biologist Andrew Dennhardt.

Left: Volunteers unload more than a hundred livestock-water tanks in Santa Barbara County at the beginning of the propagation project. Photo courtesy of Sonia Wisniewska. Right: A newly metamorphosed California tiger salamander ready for release. Photo by Andrew Dennhardt/USFWS.

Give wildlife the space to be wild

Wildlife officials remind ocean-goers to give sea otters and other coastal wildlife space. Avoid feeding or approaching wildlife, and if wildlife approaches you, back up and leave the immediate area.

We're just having fun, but this is where they eat, rest, and raise their young. If you're out on the water with others who think it's ok to get close since it's just this once, you can help by urging them to think again.

Research shows that sea otters living in urbanized areas of California are disturbed by people an average of nine times each day! Repeated disturbance depletes their energy reserves and may turn a naturally wary sea otter into an aggressive one.

Let's work together to keep sea otters healthy and wild. That means never feeding sea otters and keeping a safe distance so they can rest, feed, and take care of their pups.

- Never feed sea otters, as they can become aggressive, which could result in their removal from the wild.

- Be aware of your surroundings and alert to nearby wildlife when recreating.

- If you are taking photos or videos, make sure you are not drifting too close.

- Keep kayaks at least 60 feet (or five kayak lengths) away from otters and don't point your kayak directly at an animal.

- When passing otters, maintain the 60-foot buffer and pass in parallel moving slowly but steadily past rather than stopping.

- Keep pets on a leash on and around docks and harbors and never allow them to interact with wildlife, even if the animals appear to be playing.

- Maintain a safe distance—if a sea otter is looking at you, you are too close and should back away. Getting too close can interfere with the animal's ability to forage and get essential rest, ultimately affecting the animal's overall health.

Sea otters are naturally wary of people and avoid interactions, but they may become aggressive towards people if people don't respect their space. If a sea otter approaches you, it may be an indication they are defending their space. It is your responsibility to avoid and discourage these interactions.

If a sea otter approaches your kayak, surfboard, or other watercraft:

- Stay calm.

- Immediately move away from the sea otter.

- Do not try to photograph, touch, pet, or feed the sea otter.

If the sea otter pursues you or a member of your party:

- Make yourself large (wave arms, etc.) and noisy.

- Slap the water with your paddle or hand.

- Splash water towards the sea otter.

- Bang on your craft with your paddle or hand.

If all above methods fail and the sea otter still tries or is able to climb onto your kayak or board:

- Use your paddle or another object to block access or push the sea otter off your craft. Federal laws protect sea otters, and harassing or injuring a sea otter is illegal. However, a gentle nudge with your paddle is acceptable if needed to protect yourself and the sea otter from harm.

- Rock your kayak/board or otherwise make it an unstable platform.

- Do not attempt to move the sea otter with your hands.

- Do not try to touch or pet the sea otter or pause to take pictures.

- As soon as the sea otter is off your craft, leave the area immediately.

If you are out with your dog and encounter a sea otter:

- Never allow your dog to chase, harass, play with, or otherwise interact with a sea otter. A dog can injure a sea otter, and a sea otter can easily injure or kill a dog. Interactions can also result in disease transmission that could harm the sea otter, your dog, or you.

Be a good sea otter steward on and off the water. Recognize that posting videos and photos of sea otter encounters may promote similar wildlife interactions in the future. Use care when you share.

Kayakers should avoid disturbing resting sea otters by keeping a sufficient distance (at least 60 feet away is recommended), pass by parallel to the sea otters rather than pointing directly at them, and keep moving slowly but steadily past them. Inset: Southern sea otter mom with pup. Photos by Lilian Carswell/USFWS

Nearly $1 million to support habitat conservation plan for San Benito County

In early July, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced over $20.5 million in grants to seven projects in California that support land acquisition and conservation planning for at-risk and listed species through the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund. Partners in California will receive close to half of the $48.4 million awarded nationally to 19 states and Guam to conserve 23,000 acres of habitat for 80 listed and at-risk species. The grants will be matched by more than $27.75 million in non-federal partner funds.

The Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund supports the following three nationally competitive grant programs: the Recovery Land Acquisition Grant Program, the Habitat Conservation Plan Land Acquisition Grant Program, and the Conservation Planning Assistance Grant Program. One of the projects selected includes the San Benito County Conservation Plan and permanent protection of habitat to protect its listed species.

San Benito County Conservation Plan

San Benito County will receive $910,558 to support the development of a Habitat Conservation Plan, permanent protection of habitat through the establishment of preserves, and development of management guidelines for the conservation and recovery of twenty-two federally listed and at-risk species such as the blunt-nosed leopard lizard, giant kangaroo rat, San Joaquin kit fox, San Joaquin woolly-threads, and monarch butterfly. A non-federal cost share of $319,926 will be provided by the San Benito County Planning Department towards this project. San Benito County is topographically diverse, encompassing mountains, gently sloping foothills, rich agricultural valleys, and urban areas.

Blunt-nosed leopard lizard. Photo by Thomas Leeman/USFWS

Monarch butterfly. Photo by Ron Holmes/USFWS

San Joaquin kit fox. Photo by Carley Sweet/USFWS

Blooming narrow-leaf milkweed plant. Photo by Abigail Sanford/USFWS

Restoring monarch habitat on military lands

The Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office received an Installation Climate Change Conservation Resilience Project Grant for nearly $500,000 from the Department of Defense in early 2024. These grants are awarded to Fish and Wildlife Service field offices to complete climate resiliency projects on military lands.

The funding is being used towards conducting baseline habitat assessments and monitoring, the restoration of five acres of overwintering and breeding habitat for monarch butterflies, and four years of habitat assessments post-restoration on Camp Roberts and Camp San Luis Obispo (SLO), both National Guard base camps. Camp Roberts and Camp SLO fall within Xerces Society's high priority monarch butterfly overwintering and breeding zones, making them ideal locations for restoration efforts.

We are partnering with monarch restoration and monitoring experts at Monarch Joint Venture, Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, Environment for the Americas, and the Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District. Currently, at Camp Roberts and Camp SLO, our partners are busy surveying for monarchs and selecting which sites would be best to restore with nectar-rich plants such as California buckwheat, narrowleaf milkweed, and purple sage. Overwintering and breeding habitats have different plant species, so each Camp will get a tailored restoration plan.

We are grateful to the land managers at Camp Roberts and Camp SLO, and to our partners helping to carry out the habitat restoration for the western monarch butterfly, a candidate species for the endangered species list.

Final habitat conservation plan for Salinas River Lagoon and Sandbar Management project in Monterey County

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the availability of a final habitat conservation plan (HCP) and incidental take permit for the Monterey County Water Resources Agency's (MCWRA) periodic management of the Salinas River Lagoon and sandbar for purposes of flood control in Monterey County. The 5-year incidental take permit was signed on March 28, 2024.

The final HCP is a strategy to conserve the federally endangered tidewater goby, threatened western snowy plover, and threatened Monterey spineflower while allowing MCWRA to prevent flooding of lands adjacent to the Salinas River Lagoon during severe storm events and ensure compliance under the Endangered Species Act. As mitigation for effects from beach access and sandbar excavation activities associated with management of lagoon water levels, MCWRA proposes to fund two research projects to support tidewater goby recovery, contribute funding to California State Parks' western snowy plover habitat management and public outreach programs at Salinas River State Beach, and fund the removal of invasive species on one acre of Monterey spineflower habitat at the state beach.

"The Monterey County Water Resources Agency collaborated closely with the Service in developing this plan, which will contribute to the recovery of three federally listed species while ensuring MCWRA's compliance with the Endangered Species Act," said Mark Ogonowski, senior fish and wildlife biologist with the Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office.

The HCP was prepared by MCWRA to support its application for an incidental take permit. Habitat Conservation Plans are a necessary part of an application for an incidental take permit under the Endangered Species Act. The final HCP and incidental take permit are available for public viewing at https://ecos.fws.gov.

Working with others is essential to protecting ecosystems that benefit society as a whole. The Service regularly engages conservation partners, the public, landowners, government agencies, and other stakeholders in our ongoing effort to identify innovative strategies for conserving and recovering protected wildlife, plants, and their habitats.

Western snowy plover. Photo by USFWS

Vandenberg monkeyflower. Photo by Mark Elvin/USFWS

Draft recovery plan for Vandenberg monkeyflower

This February, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released a draft recovery plan and associated recovery implementation strategy for the conservation and recovery of Vandenberg monkeyflower, a federally endangered plant. Recovery plans are required for federally listed species and identify recovery actions that, when implemented, will achieve the plan's goals for conservation and persistence of the species. A copy of the draft recovery plan is available at https://ecos.fws.gov.

"Our strategy is to systematically increase the monkeyflower's population and ability to withstand potential threats until it is able to become self-sustaining throughout all of the areas where it is found," said Kristie Scarazzo, botanist with the Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office.

"We are committed to working with our partners to effectively manage the populations adaptively, as we learn what is most likely to achieve recovery throughout the plant's small range of habitat."

Vandenberg monkeyflower is an herbaceous annual plant, endemic to the Burton Mesa landform in southwestern Santa Barbara County, California. The primary threats to this species include invasive species, anthropogenic fire, recreation and other human activities, habitat loss from development (including military, state and residential), utility and pipeline maintenance and climate change.

Southern sea otter floating in group. Photo ly Lilian Carswell/USFWS

Community open house report on potential sea otter reintroduction in Northern California and Oregon

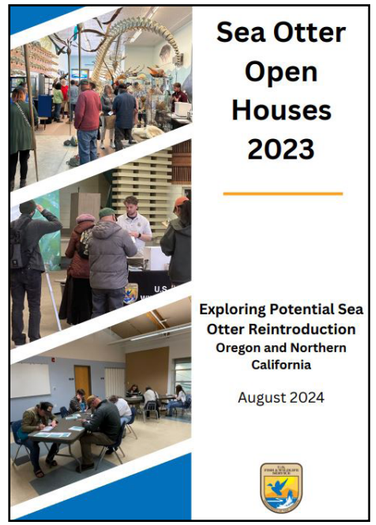
One of 16 community open house hosted by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Northern California and Oregon. Photo by Vanessa Morales/USFWS

Last summer the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service held a series of community open houses to gather perspectives and share information on potential sea otter recovery efforts in Oregon and Northern California. This followed the release of a Feasibility Assessment of Sea Otter Reintroduction to the Pacific Coast, developed at the direction of Congress in 2022. We held these sessions in 16 coastal communities along our coast, from Astoria, Oregon, to the San Francisco Bay Area in California.

We are pleased to share a summary of the key messages we heard from community members who attended these open houses in our 2023 Sea Otter Open Houses report. We found that our interactions with community members were informative and enlightening and hope you will also find value in learning more about the breadth of interests and perspectives represented by open house participants through this report.

There is currently no proposal to reintroduce sea otters, and we will continue to engage Tribes and stakeholders as we continue to gather information and consider potential reintroduction.

The Service aims to be inclusive, thoughtful, and scientifically sound as we consider actions to support sea otters and ecosystem recovery, now and in the future.



To read the report visit https://www.fws.gov/project/exploring-potential-sea-otter-reintroduction

Field Feats

Snailing in Morro Bay

During the February rainstorms, our biologists went snailing, or looking for snails, since snails are most active during wet conditions. We joined Morro Bay State Parks at the Morro Dunes Natural Preserve in Montaña de Oro State Park in search of the federally threatened Morro shoulderband snail. The Morro shoulderband snail is threatened, in part, because of habitat loss from development and habitat degradation from invasive plants. In the future, State Parks will be removing invasive ice plant to restore the Morro Dunes back to native dune scrub. The intent of snailing is to locate areas with the Morro shoulderband snail so they can be carefully avoided when removing ice plant. This restoration project will allow important dune scrub vegetation such as mock heather, lupine, and buckwheat to re-establish. Dune scrub is as valuable habitat for the Morro shoulderband snail as it is for dune stabilization.

Morro shoulderband snail. Photo by Emily Levin/USFWS

A walk in the refuge

In July, students from Middlebury College's Environmental Analysis program joined refuge manager Diane Kodama and fish and wildlife biologist Christine Fox for a tour of the Salina River National Wildlife Refuge. Kodama shared the history of the refuge noting that it had once been a military installation and agricultural fields. Fox spoke about the importance of the Endangered Species Act for protecting animals and plants from extinction and how the refuge is home to numerous listed species including western snowy plover, Smith's blue butterfly, Monterey spineflower, and tidewater goby. The students were thrilled to see a western snowy plover and other shorebirds. During the field trip, they discussed the challenges listed species face on their path to recovery but ended the day with words of encouragement and hope as well as some solutions to these challenges.

Biologist Christine Fox and refuge manager Diane Kodama of the Salinas River National Wildlife Refuge lead a tour. Photo by Christine Fox/USFWS

Planting La Graciosa thistle at Black Lake

In early July, our staff joined partners at The Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County to dig, plant, and install protective cages for over 200 federally endangered La Graciosa thistle plants at Black Lake Ecological Area after propagating the seeds in their greenhouse earlier this year. Most of La Graciosa thistles' habitat has disappeared and been degraded due to development, urbanization, ground water pumping, nonnative, invasive plant species, and climate change effects. Recovery of threatened and endangered species would be impossible without the dedication and technical expertise of partners like the Land Conservancy, and we are so grateful to work with them.

Planting La Graciosa thistle at Black Lake. Photo by Vanessa Morales/ USFWS

San Joaquin kit fox management plan sees successes

In June, our team visited the Arevon California Flats Solar Project located in southeastern Monterey County to check on the resident San Joaquin kit fox population, a species listed as federally endangered since 1967. As part of the project's mitigation for building the solar project, California Flats Solar and Althouse and Meade consultants developed a management plan for the endangered San Joaquin kit fox. The plan included the installation of artificial dens which the kit foxes use for breeding, resting, and predator avoidance. A special fence was installed with spacing that allows kit fox to pass through while keeping coyotes and other predators out. Biologists were thrilled to see one of the mating pairs had a record number of eight pups, a testament to the effectiveness of the management plan!

San Joaquin kit foxes. Photo courtesy of Will Knowlton/Althouse and Meade, Inc.

field feats

Field Feats

Surveying for salamanders

After more than eight years of interannual monitoring, our biologists and partners successfully surveyed for the federally endangered California tiger salamander at 43 vernal pools or breeding ponds across 14 private properties—the largest collaborative effort mobilized to date. Another amphibian species encountered by surveyors included the western spadefoot, which has recently been proposed for federal protection under the Endangered Species Act and also comprises a state species of special conservation concern. We found that both the salamander and spadefoot occupied around half of the vernal pools surveyed, occasionally co-occupying the same pools together.

This work allows biologists to estimate salamander and spadefoot numbers and trends and genetic health over time. Such a broad-scale project could not be accomplished without continuing engagement and support from our generous partners and landowners from across the region. Special thanks to all the volunteer surveyors and their home organizations for eagerly contributing to this project and the advancement of community driven science. We also thank our private landowners for granting access to their properties across the County.

"Regionwide, winter rains have been a gift. We documented salamanders and spadefoot this spring in places that they have not always shown up in recent years because of severe drought; it's a relief to see these animals still holding on, though just by a thread and in great need of conservation aid," said biologist Andrew Dennhardt. "We have more work to do to fully recover these sensitive species long-term. I trust that the necessary momentum blossoms as a direct result of unique collaborations such as these interagency surveys."

California tiger salamander larvae captured in a dip net from a small ranch pond in late April. Photo by Andrew Dennhardt/USFWS

View of a classic vernal pool used by native amphibians for forage, shelter, and reproduction as well as larval growth and metamorphosis residing on an active livestock ranch. Photo by Andrew Dennhardt/USFWS

Western spadefoot larva captured in a seine net from a small ranch pond in late April. Photo by Andrew Dennhardt/USFWS

Evaluating fire impacts to Arroyo toad

In late July, biologists visited with Los Padres National Forest staff to discuss and evaluate potential impacts of the Post Fire and associated suppression activities on arroyo toad aquatic and upland habitats along Upper Piru Creek near Lebec, California.

The fire burned a total of 15,582 acres and multiple legacy campground structures. While biologists found much of the upland vegetation and soils well burned—in a word, scorched—nearby on the tour, they also found water continuing to flow in the creek hosting more than 50 arroyo toad metamorphs or toadlets. Such a pleasant discovery brought hope to the group walking amidst such a barren landscape.

"The young toadlets showed us some true grit just trying to get by: shelter, eat, and grow toward maturity over a couple years' time," said wildlife biologist Andrew Dennhardt. This work brings agencies together to discuss the impacts of wildfire on protected plants and animals and discuss habitat restoration and associated techniques for management action.

"The observation underscores the importance of ongoing conservation efforts and adaptive management strategies in protecting vital ecosystems," said wildlife biologist Emily Levin.

A newly metamorphosed, juvenile arroyo toad basking on a rock along Upper Piru Creek in late July. Photo by Andrew Dennhardt/USFWS

Looking south-southeast, downstream on Upper Piru Creek, with burned areas of the Post Fire visible in the background as well as juvenile toads observed onsite. Photo by Andrew Dennhardt/USFWS

Field Feats

Seed cleaning party!

In December 2023, our biologists joined staff from California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), Vandenberg Space Force Base (VSFB), and Santa Barbara Botanic Garden (SBBG), to participate in a work exchange to help clean and curate seeds of the federally endangered Lompoc yerba santa. We have worked with VSFB to collect multiple conservation collections of newly identified seed producing populations on base that were unrepresented in any designated conservation seed bank.

All partners came together to lend a hand cleaning, counting, and packaging seeds to be put in the conservation seed bank. These newly added seeds contain valuable genetic material that can be used in future research and augmentation efforts to help safeguard populations. We are extremely grateful for the continued partnership with VSFB, CDFW, and SBBG and this event highlights the combined coordination and effort it takes to conserve species.

"It takes a village to recover an endangered species," said fish and wildlife biologist Daniel Cisneros. "There are so many hands involved in the process and this was a really special moment for a few of us who help to protect Lompoc yerba santa in one way or another by coming together to support the conservation of this species."

Botanists and conservation partners clean Lompoc yerba santa seeds together at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. Photo by Daniel Cisneros/ USFWS

Monterey Recovery Action Team site visits

This summer, Todd Lemein, Ken Niessen, and Ann Bliss from the Monterey Recovery Action Team toured our office's northern jurisdiction to observe several plant species and their habitats across coastal plateaus, dunes, Monterey pine forest, maritime chaparral, sandhills, and grassland habitats.

They observed Monterey spineflower, Hickman's potentilla, Monterey gilia, coastal dunes milk-vetch, Tidestrom's lupine, Menzie's wallflower, Gowen cypress, Santa Cruz cypress, Ben Lomond spineflower, Scotts Valley spineflower, and Scotts Valley polygonum. The team was also able to see the sandhills community in Bonny Doon several years post fire and how that may be affecting Santa Cruz cypress, Ben Lomond wallflower, and Ben Lomond spineflower. Much of the habitat was within an urban interface, highly fragmented, and subject to various forms of land use including recreation which highlighted challenges to species recovery.

Looking across Monterey pine forest in Pebble Beach from a Monterey gilia and Monterey spineflower location. Photo by Ann Bliss/USFWS

Learning about least Bell's vireo

For the fourth consecutive spring, biologists and partners successfully surveyed for the federally endangered least Bell's vireo at dozens of point-count stations along the Santa Clara River in Ventura and Los Angeles counties—noting hundreds of positive detections of the vireo as well as that of the yellow-breasted chat, yellow warbler, lesser nighthawk, and Swainson's thrush, among other native bird species. This work allows biologists to estimate vireo population abundance and trends over time as well as enhance scientific understanding of vireo ecology in sensitive riparian ecosystems. Such a broad-scale project could not be accomplished without continuing engagement and support from our generous partners and landowners from across the region. Special thanks to the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, United Water Conservation District, Woodstar Biological, LLC, and Five Point, LLC for their invaluable contributions to this project and the advancement of community driven science. We also thank our public and private landowners for granting access to their properties across the valley.

"It's been refreshing to witness local community members step up and lend their helping hands and pairs of keen ears and eyes to this project," reflects biologist Andrew Dennhardt. "We are not only learning where vireos take up their annual residence each spring, but also how they maintain their populations and respond to threats from broad-reaching human activities; there's still much left to learn."

Fernando Lara scans to locate a male least Bell's vireo heard singing at a point-count station while surveying in early June. Photo by Andrew Dennhardt/USFWS

Andrew Dennhardt records some data prior to the start of a survey at a point-count station, standing in a dense patch of vegetation. Photo by Fernando Lara/USFWS

our community

Our Community

Events

Oxnard Native Plant Festival

Biologists and staff attended the Oxnard Native Plant Festival to share the benefits of planting native seeds and plants for both people and pollinators and provided bilingual information about plants and pollinators of the area.

Visitors got a chance to play a match-the-pollinator game highlighting the importance of planting a variety of native plants to attract and feed different types of pollinators. Visitors took home their own packet of native common yarrow seeds to plant at home. Huge thanks to the Oxnard Performing Arts Center for gathering our community for educational and cultural events.

Fish and wildlife biologist Daniel Cisneros leading a pollinator activity. Photo byVanessa Morales/USFWS

Condor talk at Channel Islands National Park

Assistant field supervisor Joseph Brandt presents on California condors at Channel Islands National Park. Photo by Vanessa Morales/USFWS

In late March, assistant field supervisor Joseph Brandt gave a presentation about California condors at the Channel Islands National Park Visitor's Center as part of the Ventura Land Trust's Environmental Speaker Series. As a fish and wildlife biologist working with condors for over 20 years, Joseph spoke passionately about protecting North America's largest bird and shared stories of life, death, and hope for the species to an audience of nearly 75 people. We thank the Ventura Land Trust for the invitation and the Channel Islands National Park for hosting.

Ventura's got Pride!

Staff at Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office activity booth at Ventura County Pride Event. Photo by Vanessa Morales/USFWS

We hosted an educational booth at the 25th annual celebration of Ventura County Pride Festival in early August, an event celebrating the LGBTQ+ community, supporters, and allies in Ventura County. Visitors of our booth were welcomed with examples of Pride in the Wild, received information about threatened and endangered species, learned about pollinators and western monarch conservation, and took home native seed packets to plant at home. Thank you to the Diversity Collective for hosting this amazing event in our community and to everyone who stopped by to learn about the species we protect.

Connecting with families at Sylmar Charter School

In early April, Fernando Lara and Vanessa Morales attended the Sylmar Charter High School Career and Resource Fair in southern California's San Fernando Valley. They shared an engaging mapping activity that encouraged students to think about endangered species and their habitats. The activity gave English and Spanish-speaking students a general understanding of what a geography professional does and opened discussion about personal journeys to careers with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

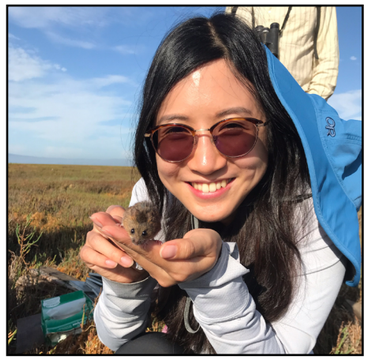
Geographer Fernando Lara attends a bilingual career fair at Sylmar High School. Photo by Vanessa Morales/USFWS

our community

Our Community

New to our team

Alice Lee, deputy field supervisor



"I am deeply honored to join the Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office as their deputy. Our dedicated team is an inspiration, embodying a culture of collaboration and empowerment as we work together to conserve species and create a lasting impact for both our communities and the ecosystems we cherish."

Originally from Taiwan, Alice attended National Taiwan University and double majored in law and biology. After practicing law in Taiwan for a few years, Alice earned a master's degree in law from Harvard Law School. Alice joined our team after serving as a Conservation Planner in Lakewood, Colorado. Prior to joining the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, she worked for the U.S. Forest Service, where she held roles as a Planning and NEPA Specialist in Colorado and a Regional Litigation Coordinator in Georgia.

Abigail Sanford, fish and wildlife biologist

"In my role, I help analyze impacts to threatened and endangered species. I am the species lead for the San Joaquin kit fox and the blunt-nosed leopard lizard."

Offering advice to students seeking a career with the agency, Abigail says, "I'd say if you can get into the Directorate Fellows Program (DFP), go for it! It is one of the best ways right now to land a permanent position with the agency and almost 100 internships are published each year, so there's a higher chance of getting into that program compared to other similar internships. You must be a student to be eligible, so make sure you do it before you graduate!"

Stephanie Menjivar, fish and wildlife biologist

"I find that diversity in conservation is so important. We put so much emphasis on biodiversity in conservation, so does it not make sense to include diversity in the agency as well? Just like how a healthy ecosystem needs biodiversity, so does the field of conservation."

Stephanie brings great experience to our Vandenberg-focused team and will be helping with section 7 consultations, Sikes Act responsibilities, and identifying and developing recovery opportunities with our Department of Defense partners. Stephanie, a former Directorate Fellow, has extensive background in herpetology, urban ecology, and animal behavior. In her previous role in Palm Springs, Stephanie worked on desert tortoise recovery and renewable energy projects in the Colorado Desert. She received her master's degree at California State University, Northridge and her undergraduate degree at Warren Wilson College.

Emily Levin, fish and wildlife biologist

"I focus primarily on conservation projects in Los Osos, a community I am proud to call home. Being able to blend my love for this region with meaningful conservation work gives me a profound sense of purpose and connection to the community."

Emily is a wildlife biologist who discovered her passion for nature after taking an AP Environmental Science class in high school. She immersed herself in environmental literature and eventually gained a degree in environmental management and protection at Cal Poly. In her role, she is not only able to protect the species she cares deeply about but can also engage in initiatives that make a tangible impact on our environment.

Isabel Martin, recovery permit coordinator

"Hello, I'm Isabel Martin an incoming listing and recovery biologist! In May I graduated from University of California Berkeley with a B.S. in environmental sciences and a minor in food systems. Last summer I was a directorate fellow (DFP) with science applications at headquarters working on Tribal conservation.

I grew up in Napa, Calif., where I got my passion for conservation and food systems. I'm excited to apply my background in community engagement and environmental justice with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service."

Bryce Koester, fish and wildlife biologist

Bryce joins the Central Coast Division and is most recently from Dallas, Texas where she worked as an intern for the National Park Service at the Padre Island National Seashore.

She earned a master's degree in environmental science at Drexel University and studied earth and environmental sciences at Vanderbilt University.

Our Community

Honoring women in science

Every year, we honor the instrumental contributions of remarkable women to our ultimate mission: the conservation and protection of rare fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. Check out the online video series on Youtube where you'll hear what inspired these women to pursue careers in conservation and what advice they have for young women today.

Watch the videos from the USFWS Youtube Women in Science playlist: https://ow.ly/Wbcx50Ul3PF

"I implore girls these days to follow your heart, because look at me now - I'm right where I started as that little girl playing in the dirt and my soul is singing." - Deb Kirkland, Habitat Conservation Plan Coordinator

"I've always seen nature as like a refuge and a place of solitude and I wanted to share that with others." - Christine Fox, wildlife biologist

Meet our interns

Max Tcheng - Kendra Chan Conservation Fellow

"I believe breaking down barriers and bringing people together from diverse backgrounds gives us the best chance of helping our environment. In my future work, I hope to intentionally work with holders of diverse knowledge to further conservation efforts and increase collaboration between everyone who has something to say about it, and everyone who might have wisdom that could help."

The focus of Max's project is habitat analysis for the Ohlone tiger beetle. Last year he completed the UC Santa Cruz CITRIS Initiative for Drone Education and Research program, which teaches students airspace regulations, how to fly drones, and provides real drone project experience. "The program inspired me to think about the potential applications of drones in my projects, like habitat analysis for my current project. Seeing the potential for this technology to do so much good in the world inspires me to keep learning and be a proponent for drone applications."

Learn more about the Kendra Chan Conservation Fellowship: https://www.fws.gov/project/kendra-chan-conservation-fellowship

Mia Ashby - Science in the Service intern

"I just completed my first year of the Evolution, Ecology, and Organismal Biology Masters Program at UC Riverside. I would like to gain experience working with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service because I think collaborations between agencies and academia are very important and I would like experience working with both." Mia is working as part of the Natural Resources Damage Assessment program to implement seabird restoration projects that compensate for environmental injuries caused by the Refugio Beach Oil Spill.

Kayla Schneider – Science in the Service Intern

"Accessibility to the outdoors is a fundamental right, and I firmly believe every individual should have the right to feel safe on our public lands and in our outdoor spaces. When we actively seek to dismantle existing barriers and confront institutions that perpetuate exclusivity, we can enable equitable access to the outdoors to create space for the next generation of stewards, naturalists, and conservationists." Kayla is working on a project that analyzes the habitat of the endangered Santa Cruz long-toed salamander, which is a subspecies of long-toed salamander that is endemic to Santa Cruz and Monterey County.

Brianna Fernandez – Pathways Intern

"You don't know what you're capable of until you go out and try it out yourself. You can walk in with doubts, do the whole experience, and then suddenly you're like, wow, I really did that. Seek out advice from people and do your research if it is something that excites you." Brianna's project involves creating outreach materials for educators such as an activity book and species expert video interviews. Ideally, educators will use these resources to teach about endangered species, specifically the Western snowy plover and California tiger salamander.

Krista Smith – Pathways Intern

"Conservation and protection of wildlife and their habitats have fueled my passion for many years now, and I cannot wait to turn those passions into a career. Being accepted for the Pathways Internship at the Ventura office is such an incredible opportunity and milestone on my journey to a future with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service." Krista's project includes creation of a multi-dimensional educational resource consisting of a Habitats of the Watershed video series integrated within a lesson plan. This project aims to provide educators with an accessible resource that brings students on a virtual tour of a local watershed, the Santa Clara River, to communicate the importance of the habitats along the watershed and the listed species that live there.

Learn more about internship opportunities: https://www.fws.gov/internships

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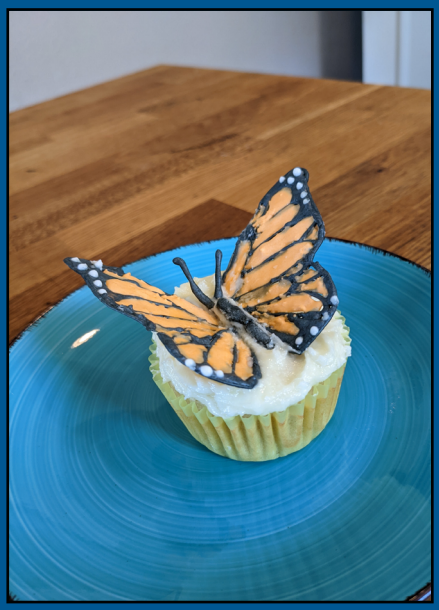
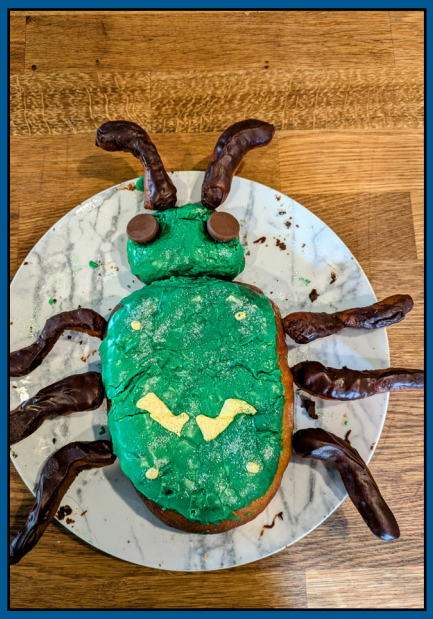
December 2024





Learn to Bake with Us(FWS) and make wildlife inspired treats

Scan the QR code for the recipes and video tutorials in the Bake with Us(FWS) Instagram series! *Tutorials by Olivia Beitelspacher/USFWS*