

california

Irvine Ranch Land Reserve. Photo by Stephen Francis. © The Irvine Company

An Enduring Legacy: Irvine Ranch Land Reserve



Trish Smith, senior project ecologist for The Nature Conservancy. © Stephen Francis

Conservancy ecologist Trish Smith stands on a dry, grassy slope, taking in the panoramic view of Limestone Canyon, one of several rugged landscapes that comprise the rambling 50,000-acre Irvine Ranch Land Reserve in southern California.

“We really have magnificent wildlands and natural diversity here,” she says. “It’s not something most people would typically associate with crowded Orange County.”

Smith trains her binoculars on the slope, surveying the progress that native plants have made in their struggle to reclaim the hillside. To her delight, native bunch grasses are flourishing in an area once dominated by invasive artichoke thistle.

“When we mapped weeds here in 2002, artichoke thistle covered nearly 50 percent of this hillside,” Smith explains. “Now, thanks to our restoration efforts, it’s down to 5 percent, which shows that nature can heal itself if you help it along.”

Smith’s promising battle with artichoke thistle is one of many accomplishments recorded by the Conservancy during its 16-year tenure as manager of the reserve’s wildlands. In April the Conservancy added the reserve to its long list of legacy projects by transferring its management responsibilities to the Irvine Ranch Land Reserve Trust, a nonprofit created and funded by The Irvine Company to ensure the reserve’s long-term stewardship. The trust is headed by Mike O’Connell, former South Coast Director for the Conservancy.

continued on page 3

Mediterranean Habitats



California Program Executive Director Mark Burget.
© Jenny Thomas

The cover photo on this issue of *California Update* stopped me in my tracks. Representing nearly 20 years of partnerships and hard work, the Irvine Ranch Land Reserve holds a special place in our hearts. But the reserve is more than a stunningly beautiful part of California’s history; it’s also a prime example of rare mediterranean habitat. Found in only five areas of the world, mediterranean ecosystems, even more than tropical rainforests, are under urgent threat (see page 6).

Mild winters and hot, dry summers make mediterranean climates some of the most desirable places to live. California is no exception: already home to 1 in 8 Americans, the Golden State’s population is expected to grow approximately 30 percent by 2030. In order to help preserve these precious mediterranean landscapes, the Conservancy’s California Program is leading a global assessment with scientists and practitioners to identify conservation priorities and determine how to proceed.

To remain true to our mission to protect the Earth’s natural diversity, we must consider diversity on a global scale. The innovative spirit and political will of Californians places the state at the forefront of global conservation. Actions that are tried and tested in California may have applications in other mediterranean regions as far away as Australia (see page 7).

Over the past 50 years, your tremendous support has enabled The Nature Conservancy to protect more than 1.2 million acres of California’s lands and waters and more than 3.8 million acres of coastal marine habitat. Now, as we continue to protect our state’s precious natural resources, an investment in California is more than ever an investment in the world. As always, we remain grateful to you — our members, partners and friends — for all that you do to support us.

Mark Burget
Executive Director
California Program

Contents

An Enduring Legacy
Irvine Ranch Land Reserve1

Conservation Highlights4

Treasure in California’s Old West
Vina Ranch5

Globally Significant
California’s Mediterranean Ecosystems6

Beyond Our Borders
Australia’s Gondwana Link7

Natural Events Almanac8

Oracle Donation
Protecting the Pacific Flyway9



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Mountain bikers at the Irvine Ranch Land Reserve. Photo by Stephen Francis. © The Irvine Company



Bobcats. © Laszlo Perlaky

Irvine Ranch Land Reserve – from page 1

“We’re very proud of our achievements at the reserve,” says Mark Sanderson, the Conservancy’s director for the South Coast and Deserts. “We got in at the ground level and made a difference.”

Building a World-Class Reserve

The Nature Conservancy’s involvement with the reserve dates back some 20 years, when it was asked by The Irvine Company to develop a stewardship plan for 22,000 acres the company had set aside for open space — part of its master plan for developing the 90,000-acre Irvine Ranch. In 1992 the Conservancy signed a contract with the company to manage the reserve.

“At the time it was called an ‘uncommon alliance,’” recalls Sanderson, “because the conservation and business communities had largely regarded one another with suspicion. It marked a turning point in how conservation was done in southern California.”

Throughout the 1990s the Conservancy focused its efforts on two key fronts: opening appropriate sections of the reserve to the public and coordinating its stewardship programs with the managers of adjoining protected lands to ensure their compatible management. Much of this coordination was achieved through Natural Communities Conservation Planning, a program that brings diverse parties to the table to determine which areas should be protected to preserve threatened wildlife. In Orange County the process resulted in the creation of a 38,000-acre network of protected private and public lands. In 2001 The Irvine Company donated permanent conservation easements on 11,500 acres to the Conservancy, protecting more than half of the historic Irvine Ranch.

An Enduring Legacy

Managing the reserve’s wildlands, the Conservancy made significant gains in fighting invasive exotic weeds and in completing studies that will guide future management efforts.

“Our work with scientists and other land managers has resulted in better knowledge of how various wildlife species use the reserve and adjacent protected areas — be they bobcats, mountain lions or western spadefoot toads,” says ecologist Smith.

Smith is also proud of the program she and the Conservancy developed to connect people with nature. Today, more than 100 volunteer naturalists guide thousands of people annually on hikes, mountain bike tours and equestrian rides. “It’s been enormously effective in building a conservation ethic,” she says. “When I’m out on the reserve, I meet people who want to preserve it, not only for themselves but for future generations.”

What’s Next?

The Conservancy will continue to monitor the ecological health of the 11,500 acres on which it holds conservation easements. It will also be available to advise the trust and other reserve managers.

“The reserve’s landscapes are globally significant — intact mediterranean scrublands that exist only in California and four other places on Earth,” says Sanderson. “With the trust now in charge of management, we can focus on putting more of this rare habitat into permanent protection.”

To find out how to visit the reserve or learn more about the Irvine Ranch Land Reserve Trust, visit irvineranchlandreserve.org or irlrtrust.org.

Conservation Highlights

Proposition 84 Efforts Pay Off

California – Last November, Californians cast their vote for conservation by passing Proposition 84, the largest natural resource bond in U.S. history. “Together, we sent an important message to state leaders: our lands and waters must be protected for the well-being of all,” said Mark Burget, executive director of the Conservancy’s California Program. The Nature Conservancy worked with a broad coalition of more than 700 organizations to pass the measure, which will provide an unprecedented \$5.4 billion to protect California’s drinking water and natural treasures. Now we are working with state resource agencies, the legislature and other organizations to ensure that the funding is spent wisely.

Expanding Our Vision Along the Santa Clara River

Ventura County – The Nature Conservancy has taken another major step forward in its campaign to save one of the last free-flowing rivers in southern California. Having already protected ten miles of the lower Santa Clara River, the Conservancy recently brought together a broad consortium of experts to chart a bold course for safeguarding land around the river’s headwaters in development-pressured Los Angeles County. As a tribute to the collaborative planning process, local partners are helping to accomplish the plan’s objectives.

Protecting Rare Kit Fox Habitat

San Luis Obispo County – Creative problem solving by The Nature Conservancy is resulting in more effective conservation of habitat for the endangered San Joaquin kit fox. In collaboration with county officials and the California Department of Fish and Game, the Conservancy developed a program that pools mitigation fees and directs them to the best available habitat. “It’s a strategic way to ensure the most conservation for the dollar,” explains Conservancy Project Director Tom Maloney. “When officials require developers to purchase and set aside land to mitigate their impacts on fox habitat, they can now contribute to the Kit Fox Fund instead.” Funds were recently channeled to the Bureau of Land Management to protect 600 more acres of the Carrizo Plain, home to the county’s largest remaining kit fox population.



San Joaquin kit fox and pups. © B. Moose Peterson/USFWS

For more information about these projects and others, visit nature.org/california.



Price Creek Ranch. © Northcoast Regional Land Trust

Keeping the North Coast Wild

California’s North Coast is known for lush green forests, rolling oak woodlands, plentiful rivers and streams and working farms and ranches. But pressure is mounting to convert natural areas into housing developments or “ranchettes.” To counter this threat, The Nature Conservancy has teamed up with an outstanding local partner — the Northcoast Regional Land Trust (NRLT).

Since its founding in 2000, NRLT has protected more than 6,300 acres and has established such a good reputation that there is now a waiting list of landowners interested in donating conservation easements — voluntary, legally binding agreements that limit or prevent development on a property to protect its ecological values.

“Residents here recognize that the North Coast is uniquely rich in natural resources like forests and streams, and they want to protect these valuable riches,” says NRLT Executive Director Jim Petruzzi.

Last year, the Conservancy offered its expertise in real estate transactions and scientific planning to help NRLT purchase conservation easements on two Humboldt County ranches covering nearly 6,000 acres. This summer, the two organizations will begin drafting a conservation action plan for the region.

“Conservation easements are our primary tool for protecting habitat and maintaining productive ranches in the Lassen Foothills.” —JAKE JACOBSON

Treasure in California’s Old West: Vina Ranch

Legend has it that pioneer and prospector Peter Lassen buried his fortune in Deer Creek Canyon near the confluence of Deer Creek and the Sacramento River. Although we haven’t found the hidden loot, in September 2006 the Conservancy finished its own version of a treasure hunt by purchasing a conservation easement on the 13,136-acre Vina Ranch.

The ranch was the missing link in a swath of protected lands that now stretches 15 miles eastward from the Conservancy’s Vina Plains Preserve near the Sacramento River to the Ishi Wilderness in Lassen National Forest

“Vina Ranch has the beauty of a national park,” says Lassen Foothills Project Director Jake Jacobson. “It’s a stunning landscape with huge conservation value, including over a mile of frontage on Deer Creek.”

Carving a deep, narrow path through oak woodlands and savannas, Deer Creek — really a small river — is one of the few remaining tributaries of the Sacramento River that still supports runs of wild Chinook salmon and steelhead trout. Forested canyon walls



Looking out over Deer Creek Canyon, Vina Ranch. © Rich Reiner/TNC

tower over the creek. Prairie falcons, burrowing owls, songbirds, yellow-legged frogs and migratory deer make their homes here.

“Conservation easements are our primary tool for protecting habitat and maintaining productive ranches in the Lassen Foothills,” says Jacobson.

The easement allows the ranch owners to continue cattle grazing, but by permanently limiting development and

prohibiting conversion to logging, mining and other incompatible land uses, it protects the ranch’s water quality, habitat and wildlife corridors.

The Conservancy purchased the easement for less than the appraised value. The California Wildlife Conservation Board contributed \$1.5 million, while The Nature Conservancy supplied the remaining \$1.9 million through a grant from the CALFED Bay-Delta Authority.

The Lassen Foothills

Beneath 10,462-foot Lassen Peak lies a landscape of grasslands, oak woodlands, forests and streams that supports remarkable natural diversity, including several runs of Chinook salmon and the largest herd of migratory deer in the state. Here in California’s Old West, the Conservancy has worked for more than two decades to protect open lands, freshwater streams and rural ways of life.

Unlike many of the state’s beleaguered landscapes, the Lassen Foothills remain largely intact, primarily occupied by large cattle ranches and public lands. However, rural subdivision and sprawl from nearby cities threaten to fragment landholdings, which would jeopardize native wildlife and the livelihoods of ranchers. Working with private landowners and partner organizations, the Conservancy has protected nearly 100,000 acres in the Lassen Foothills.

*Help us protect the Lassen Foothills and other natural treasures in California.
Make a donation using the enclosed envelope or go online to nature.org/california.*

California Leads Worldwide Conservation of Mediterranean Habitats

Most Californians think the Golden State is unique, but they may not realize its significance on a global scale. Rebecca Shaw, director of conservation science in California, helps put the matter into perspective.

What's so special about California?

California and northern Baja California comprise the only region in North America with a mediterranean climate, characterized by hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. Only four other places on Earth share this distinction: the basin of the Mediterranean Sea, southwestern Australia, the western cape of South Africa and the central coast of Chile.

What's so special about a mediterranean climate?

Mediterranean climate regions cover only 2.2 percent of Earth's land surface, yet they account for 20 percent of all known plant species. Only the tropical rainforests of the western hemisphere and southeast Asia have a greater density of plant species.

How are mediterranean climate regions similar?

They all share similar landscapes. They're beautiful places with wonderful weather, and people want to live in them. Consequently, they tend to face the same grave problems: habitat destruction and fragmentation due to urbanization and expanding agriculture.

How threatened are mediterranean ecosystems?

Mediterranean ecosystems are among the most threatened on Earth. More than 41 percent of their land has been converted to farmland and urban uses. Worldwide, only 5 percent of their natural area is protected.

Most people understand the plight of tropical rainforests, where habitat loss exceeds habitat protection by 2 to 1. In other words, for every acre of rainforest saved, two have been lost to conversion or development. In mediterranean habitats, the disparity is much greater. For every acre of mediterranean habitat saved, eight acres have been permanently lost. That's worrisome.



Rebecca Shaw. © Karyn Stanley/TNC

What is the California Program doing to counter this trend?

The Conservancy has used a variety of tools — conservation easements, land acquisition, restoration programs, policy work, partnerships and compatible economic development — to help protect 1.2 million acres in California. Although California has the highest population density of the five mediterranean regions, it also has the most land and water in protection — a phenomenal achievement considering the pressure here to develop and convert natural areas.

How is the California Program helping to protect other mediterranean regions?

The California Program is completing a global assessment of mediterranean regions to identify the biggest gaps in conservation. This effort has spawned numerous collaborations among conservation scientists and practitioners around the world. Our goal is to increase the pace, scale and effectiveness of conservation so that a minimum of 10 percent of mediterranean habitat on each continent is protected by 2015.



Mediterranean climate regions occur in only five places on Earth. © XNR Productions



The rugged coast of southwestern Australia. © Ron Geatz/TNC

Beyond Our Borders: Australia's Gondwana Link Project

Rocky, scrub-covered hills curve down to the ocean, where slender ribbons of sand welcome the pounding surf and humpback whales and dolphins play in the waves.

This is a description not of California's Big Sur or Santa Cruz Island, but of the rugged coastline of the Fitzgerald River National Park in southwestern Australia. In fact, California and southwestern Australia have many things in common. Both feature mediterranean-type habitats, including wet coastal forests, scrublands and mountainous woodlands. And both face similar challenges, including agricultural conversion, development pressure, tourism, invasive species and poor fire management, to name a few.

In the years following World War II, approximately two-thirds of the vegetation in southwestern Australia

was cleared for farming. But much of the region proved too inhospitable for commercial agriculture. Today, thousands of acres are of little use to farmers and wildlife alike. In this region alone, 450 plant species face extinction.

Large parks like Fitzgerald serve as last refuges for many native creatures, but they risk becoming ecological islands incapable of sustaining genetic diversity over the long term.

Yet there is hope. In 2002 local and international partners launched the Gondwana Link Project, a mammoth effort to reconnect and restore a 620-mile swath of habitat from the arid edge of Australia's Red Centre to the forests of the southwestern coast.

The project provides a science-driven framework for creating a series of core wilderness areas connected by belts of

natural areas and surrounded by compatible land uses. The Nature Conservancy contributed \$1 million in start-up funding for Gondwana Link and continues to provide support for strategic, business and conservation planning.

Last fall, Australian philanthropist David Thomas designated Gondwana Link as one of three projects to benefit from his \$10 million challenge grant to the Conservancy — one of the largest private conservation gifts in Australia's history. Thomas has challenged fellow Australians to match his contribution to save the country's most at-risk lands, waters and wildlife.

To learn more about donating to the program, contact Catherine Rondinaro at [415] 281.0467 or crondinaro@tnc.org.

Wish You Were Here: A Natural Events Almanac

With summer approaching, now is a good time to start thinking about exploring California’s natural treasures.

Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area

It’s hard to believe that park-starved Los Angeles could be home to the world’s largest urban national park. But it’s there — the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, which straddles Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, covering 153,075 acres and 26 zip codes. The Conservancy is working with partners to protect wildlife corridors that link the recreation area to other large protected areas, such as Los Padres National Forest

From the seashore to inland coastal mountains, the area is a beautiful mosaic of unique mediterranean-type landscapes offering year-round hiking, camping and swimming. Begin your exploration at the visitor center in Thousand Oaks.

For more information:
Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area
[805] 370.2301
nps.gov/samo/index.htm

Andrew Molera State Park

In the 1960s, Nature Conservancy acquisitions along the Big Sur coast and in the foothills of the Monterey Peninsula led to the creation of Andrew Molera State Park and Jacks Peak County Park. The former Molera family ranch is home to a remarkable diversity of native plants and wildlife,



Hiker on the Mishe Mokwa Trail in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area.
© Peter Bennett/California Stock Photo

including reintroduced California condors. From the park’s headlands and sandy beach, visitors can spot sea otters, harbor seals and sea lions in the swaying kelp forests of Monterey Bay.

Overnight camping is available on a first-come, first-served basis. The park includes miles of trails for hikers, bicyclists and horseback riders.

For more information:
Andrew Molera State Park
[831] 667.2315
parks.ca.gov/?page_id=582

Van Duzen County Park

Located in the redwood groves along the Van Duzen River on Highway 36 in northern California, roughly 30 miles southeast of Eureka, Van Duzen County Park is home to a wide range of birds, mammals and plants. Belted kingfishers hover over the river in search of fish, while ash-throated and western

flycatchers dart by in pursuit of insects. In 1969 the Georgia-Pacific Corporation donated the redwood groves that now make up the park’s Pamplin Grove and Swimmer’s Delight to The Nature Conservancy, which transferred the land to Humboldt County in 1981.

Day use is \$5. Camping is first come, first served at Swimmer’s Delight, while reservations are available for groups at Pamplin Grove.

For more information:
Humboldt County Parks
[707] 445.7651
co.humboldt.ca.us/portal/living/county_parks/

The Nature Conservancy has safeguarded more than 1.2 million acres in California. For more information on visiting natural places the Conservancy has helped protect, visit us online at nature.org/california/explore/.

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Oracle Donation Helps Protect Pacific Flyway



MacGillivray's warbler. © www.briansmallphoto.com

For migratory birds, California is an essential link in the vast chain of habitats sustaining the Pacific Flyway. Hundreds of species of waterfowl, shorebirds, seabirds and land birds depend on stopover and wintering habitats in California that are rapidly disappearing. The Nature Conservancy intends to do something about it.

The California Program is working with partners to develop a migratory bird conservation strategy for the California portion of the Pacific Flyway, with the ultimate goal of protecting and restoring migratory bird habitat throughout the state. Using data sets and analytical methods, we are identifying and setting priorities among the most important areas in California.

Complex projects such as this one require innovative tools to organize information and make it available to the broader conservation community. To address scientists' and practitioners' needs, the Conservancy developed ConserveOnline, a free Internet-based resource tool that enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of global conservation by providing a Web site where conservationists can post data, form working groups, and search the databases of many conservation organizations. Through ConserveOnline, the California migratory bird

conservation strategy team has easy access to the most up-to-date and detailed scientific information on any of the 716 bird species nesting in the United States and Canada.

To help these efforts, in 2006 Oracle awarded the Conservancy a \$1-million, two-year grant to develop a new and expanded version of ConserveOnline. Oracle is also making a \$200,000 donation of software that will enable the Conservancy to expand its Geographic Information System (GIS), which allows scientists to visualize, query and layer spatial information on a single screen. These tools permit the Conservancy to do a better job of managing rapidly expanding scientific data and sharing innovative strategies and applications within the organization and with its partners.

"We're proud of the nearly two-decade relationship we've fostered with The Nature Conservancy," said Rosalie Gann, director of global corporate citizenship at Oracle. "We've already seen the success of ConserveOnline and GIS, and we're excited to help the Conservancy improve its technology and conservation communication throughout the world."

For more information about ConserveOnline, visit conserveonline.org/.



In This Issue:

Conservation Partnership
NORTH COAST

Beneath the Redwoods
VAN DUZEN COUNTY PARK

Treasure in California's Old West
VINA RANCH

Coasting Condors
ANDREW MOLERA STATE PARK

A Fund for Foxes
CARRIZO PLAIN

Expanding Our Vision
SANTA CLARA RIVER

Urban Wilderness
SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS

An Enduring Legacy
IRVINE RANCH LAND RESERVE

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CALIFORNIA'S MEDITERRANEAN ECOSYSTEMS

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