

KEEP THE SESPE WILD & FREE

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

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JUNE 2015

THE STATE OF THE SESPE - SUMMER 2015

NEW WILDERNESS BILLS IN D.C.

Rep. Lois Capps has introduced legislation in D.C. to add 245,500 acres of new wilderness and 159 miles of new Wild & Scenic River miles to the southern Los Padres National Forest and to the Carrizo Plain National Monument.

The Central Coast Heritage Protection Act was co-sponsored by Reps. Julia Brownley and Sam Farr, whose districts have some of the acreage included. Senator Boxer has introduced the same legislation in the U.S. Senate.

Rep. Capps' bill would add 20.8 miles to make the entire 51 miles of Sespe Creek within Los Padres Forest a federal Wild & Scenic River. This is the headwaters of the Sespe up past Wolf's Grill/Pine Mountain Inn, and the lowest mile of the creek at the forest boundary near Fillmore.

As to additions to the Sespe Wilderness, the bill proposes to add a total of some 14,815 new wilderness acres.

These are as follows:

- (1) 3,590 acres west of Mutau Flat;
- (2) 1,500 acres west of Grade Valley Road, also in Lockwood Valley, in the Fishbowls area, including the headwaters of Piru Creek;
- (3) 6,525 acres east of Hwy. 33, from the former Beaver Camp up to Chorro Grande;
- (4) 3,199 acres south of Ozena up to the Pine Mountain ridge road, next to the Boulder Trail.

Additions to the Matilija Wilderness would total 29,677 new acres, to the north, the east (Dry Lakes Ridge) and the south (White Ledge, north of Lake Casitas). Additions to the Chumash Wilderness would total 23,524 new acres, most of them (17,522 acres) to the southwest. Check out this website for more details: centralcoastwild.com

CALIFORNIA CONDOR UPDATE

The Sespe Wilderness contains the original Condor Sanctuary, created in 1947 and now comprising 53,000 acres centered on the lower Sespe Gorge north of Fillmore.

California condors now living in the wild in California total over 130 individuals. There are other release sites in Arizona/Utah, and in Mexico, and a new release site is currently proposed for coastal Northern California and Southern Oregon.

The captive breeding program at the Los Angeles and San Diego Zoos results in around 60 eggs per year, of which around 45 hatchlings survive.

There are still challenges to the long-term thriving of California condors introduced back into the wild, chiefly the toxic effects resulting from the condors' ingesting lead from ammunition fragments in the carcasses they eat. California has passed legislation banning lead ammo, but the effects of this change are slow, as lead begins to disappear from the wild.

Wild condor mortality in California from 1992 thru 2012 showed lead at the top of the list with 14 casualties, predators 10 (mostly killing less-wary juveniles), power-line collisions 11, micro-trash ingestion 7, fires 6, shootings 2, & other causes 18.

THE CONDOR TRAIL

The Condor Trail in Los Padres National Forest stretches 411 miles from Lake Piru in the southeast corner of the forest, all the way to Bottcher's Gap near Carmel in the north.

The first hiker to tackle the entire trail all the way through finished her journey around June 20 this year, in more than five weeks. Congratulations!

Brittany Nielsen describes the trip as "by far the hardest thing I have ever done". She encountered heat, snow and lost trails, among other challenges.

The idea for this trail originated with Alan Coles, some 20 years ago. The Condor Trail passes through the Sespe watershed west of Lake Piru, and follows the Pine Mountain/Reyes Peak road.

There is a gap in the middle of the trail, where a number of miles must be crossed over private lands between the Santa Lucia and the Monterey Ranger Districts, where there's a gap between the 2 sections of Los Padres National Forest, near Atascadero. It is expected that the Condor Trail will soon become a popular goal for long distance hikers.



Digging out a tamarisk root on a gravel beach on Sespe Creek downstream from the Sespe Hotsprings in May, 2015.

You have to make sure you cut the entire plant out below the buried stem/root junction, or it will resprout. We had not surveyed this stretch for a number of years, so there were a number of tamarisk which had become buried under a foot or more of recently-deposited sediment.

CALIFORNIA STEELHEAD Q & A.

The following are excerpts from a question & answer session with Mark Capelli, NMFS Recovery Coordinator for the endangered southern steelhead.

Sespe Creek provides some of the finest remaining habitat for steelhead spawning and rearing in Southern California. The major impediment for Sespe steelhead returning from their time in the ocean – which round-trip they can repeat several times – is the Freeman Diversion Dam on the Santa Clara River near Saticoy. There are proposals to make this structure passable to upstream migrating steelhead, but no decision on a new engineering design has yet been made.

What do we know about bringing the steelhead back that you wish you knew 20 years ago?

Our scientific understanding of southern California steelhead has advanced considerably since the fish were originally listed under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1997, though there are many aspects of the fish's biology that would enhance recovery efforts if they were better understood. While we have long understood the basic habitat needs of steelhead (access to spawning and rearing habitat, adequate flows to promote migration, clean, relatively cool water, free from contaminants, including fine sediments), we have now begun to understand better how steelhead exploit the highly variable habitat conditions which are characteristic of southern California watersheds.

Another thing we have begun to better understand is the role of resident rainbow trout in contributing to the viability of the ocean-run steelhead, and the importance of coastal estuaries in the growth and ocean survival of the juvenile fish.

For those who haven't already decided the recovery of the steelhead is important, why should they care?

Steelhead may be the best indicator of the overall health of a watershed, since they depend upon and use every part of the river system, from the uppermost tributaries in the river's headwaters to the estuary at the river's mouth.

Perhaps as much as any single species, the southern California steelhead's adaptations to the unique blend of geology, hydrology, vegetation and climate, reflect the unique qualities of the southern California landscape. While few contemporary southern Californians have had the experience of catching, or even seeing a southern California steelhead, when they become aware of the steelhead's historic occurrence, and their relatively rare contemporary occurrence, they seem to instinctively recognize the fish as a true southern California native, whose recovery is important.

Do we have any idea where steelhead from south coast rivers go, once they return to the ocean as young adults?

Unlike the other five species of Pacific salmon, steelhead do not appear to move in large schools of fish, which makes investigating their ocean habitats difficult. There is anecdotal evidence that some steelhead may stay relatively close to shore within the vicinity of the mouth of streams where they were born, yet tagged individuals have been retrieved hundreds of miles from the stream of their birth. Like most highly migratory species, steelhead likely track abundant food sources in the ocean, which move in response to large ocean currents, and other large scale ocean conditions, such as El-Nino/La-Nina events.

PLEASE KEEP THOSE DONATIONS FLOWING IN TO KSWC!

Your donations pay for all our expenses at KSWC. We are not tax-deductible. Thanks as ever to all our regular donors. We are planning a PayPal account to encourage donations from those who get this newsletter by email, and who therefore do not receive the remit envelopes that go out with the print version.

PLEASE HELP OUR NEWSLETTER REACH NEW SUPPORTERS!

We regularly lose supporters from our mailing list, for a number of reasons – address changes that the Postal Service does not track, email addresses changing, and, after 27 years since we began, yes, some of us are passing on. Please suggest new names that we can send our free newsletters to – with an email address or street address. Thank you.

ACCESS TO MATILIJA FALLS

The court case was filed by KAMFO (Keeping Access to Matilija Falls Open) in early 2015 to request a permanent right-of-way to the much-loved Matilija Falls, across one mile of private property long owned by Buz Bonsall.

Bonsall (and the trustee of his sister's trust which also owns a percentage of the properties) filed a response denying that the public has a recreational easement over the property.

The trial is set for 2/8/2016 in the Ventura County Superior Court. We have signed declarations from seven individuals that they have used the trail to Matilija Falls prior to March 4, 1972.

Anyone else who would sign such a declaration should contact us at once.

ARROYO TOADS IN THE SESPE

The population of federally-listed endangered arroyo toads along upper Sespe Creek is one of the largest in the state.

The main predator threatening the long term health of arroyo toads in the Sespe is the introduced bullfrog. Bullfrogs can eat as many as 125 arroyo toads per month per kilometer of creek, according to a study along the Santa Margarita River. For more info, search Arroyo Toad Final Species Report 2014.



Adult & juvenile arroyo toads sitting camouflaged on sandy beaches in summer are easily stepped on by visitors.

FOREST FEES APPEAL CONTINUES

The court case we helped win against the Adventure Pass forest access fee program was appealed by the U.S. Forest Service. Our team of pro bono attorneys are still working to settle the appeal with the agency.

We remain committed to ensuring that trailhead access remains fee-free at trailheads that are adjacent to developed campgrounds where fees are levied.

The current FLREA forest fee law has been extended by Congress for yet another year, since no new permanent fee legislation has been introduced in either the House or Senate D.C.



Chuck Graham photo

DESERT BIGHORN SHEEP

Desert bighorn sheep were reintroduced to the Sespe Hotsprings area in the mid-1980's, after being gone thereabouts since 1914.

They can weigh up to 300 pounds and the ram's horns alone can be as much as 30 pounds.

Having survived the Day Fire, the herd or herds are hard to count, since they live in very rough terrain, but they likely number upwards of sixty.

With a lifespan of between 10 and 20 years, there are now several generations of desert bighorn sheep thriving in the Sespe Wilderness. They are amazing to watch, climbing steep cliffs at up to 15 mph, on ledges as little as two inches wide.

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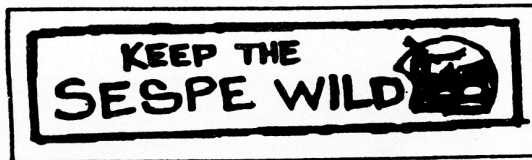
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All prices include tax and shipping. Please include address and a phone number. Allow 2 to 3 weeks for delivery.

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THE TAR CREEK TRAIL CLOSURE

The following is from a story that ran in the Ojai Valley News on June 12, 2015, authored by Perry van Houten:

With its series of descending pools, waterfalls and stone terraces, the Tar Creek Falls area near Fillmore has long been a beloved destination for many. Since 2012, Forest Service officers have documented over 100 people a day entering the falls area on weekends. Weekly, 100-150 pounds of trash have been left behind. People have left dozens of graffiti sites and have also started illegal bonfires.

That's the problem, because Tar Creek is within the Sespe Condor Sanctuary. Established in 1947 to protect vital habitat for endangered California condors, the Sanctuary is heavily used by the birds to nest, roost and

forage. Public entry to Tar Creek exposes condors to human food, micro-trash and direct contact with people. Entry into the Sanctuary can now result in a \$5,000 fine and/or six months in jail. Since January 2015, officers have written roughly 100 citations. Bail for each citation is \$150 or a mandatory court appearance.

Forest wilderness ranger Heidi Anderson believes the 2008 death of a condor strangled in rappelling lines left behind at Tar Creek was a key factor in the decision to strictly enforce the closure. "I think that's really what got the ball rolling to reinstate the Forest Order." In late April, she led a group of 18 volunteers who removed graffiti from 43 separate sites in the Tar Creek area. "It has historically been closed since the late '40s, and it was fine and dandy until it just got blown out of proportion with everybody showing their videos of how pristine it is," said Diane Cross, Ojai Ranger District Resource Officer. "Water is a huge attraction."