

KEEP THE SESPE WILD & FREE

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

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CALIFORNIA CONDOR UPDATE

At the end of 2016, the California condor population managed directly by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in Southern California consisted of 80 free flying condors. Two wild chicks fledged from six nests in 2016.

The field team attempted to trap the population twice during the year to monitor for lead exposure which occurs when condors ingest carrion or gut piles that have been shot with lead ammunition. Trapping has become more difficult as the population's range has expanded and individuals have become more reliant on non-proffered food sources. In 2016, nine condors evaded trapping. Lead exposures continue to occur in the population, with 15 condors (20%) requiring treatment for elevated blood lead levels in 2016. Lead ammo is being phased out in California.



*A group of condors feeding on a tule elk carcass in the Tehachapis.
Photo credit: Kristy Johnson.*

A total of 11 condors were declared dead in 2016. The carcasses of five free-flying condors were recovered, and three went missing in the wild and were declared dead. One condor, an eleven year old male, died of lead poisoning. A newly fledged condor from 2015 was found dead near its nest, but the cause of death could not be determined. Three wild chicks died prior to fledging.

A condor nest camera was again streamed live on the internet. This year, the camera began on the hatch day of a nest and streamed for five and a half months and was viewed about one million times, from over 150 countries.

California condors are among the largest flying birds in the world, with a wingspan of up to 9.5 ft.

They can live to 60, & typically begin to reproduce at six years of age. Condors often form long-lived pairs and fledge one chick every other year.

They forage in the open terrain of foothill grassland, oak savanna, woodland habitats, and on beaches of steep, mountainous coastal areas. Condors at interior locations feed on the carrion of mule deer, tule elk, pronghorn antelope, feral hogs, domestic ungulates, and smaller mammals.

Each fall the field team releases captive-bred juvenile California condors into the wild at Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge near Maricopa.

Condor activity across the S. California landscape spanned approximately 12,795 square miles, ranging from near Santa Maria, down across southern Los Padres National Forest, and across to the southern Sierras. The Tehachapis in Kern County were the area with the largest concentration of condor activity, followed by the southern portion of the Sespe Wilderness in Ventura County (the first Condor Sanctuary) adjacent to Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge northeast of Fillmore.



*Microtrash removed from one condor chick in 2008.
Photo credit:USFWS.*

We thank the USFWS for the information in this condor update, excerpted from their 2016 annual report. There are now over 276 condors in the wild across the U.S. and in Baja, Mexico. The captive condor population was 170 in 2016.

PARKS MANAGEMENT COMPANY CHARGING FEES FOR ACCESS TO UNDEVELOPED RECREATION AREAS ALONG SANTA YNEZ RIVER

The Parks Management Company is a concessionaire that took over almost all of Los Padres Forest's car campgrounds and day-use areas late last year. Along Paradise Road north of Santa Barbara, there is an entry kiosk staffed by Parks Management Company employees where, according to several reports we've heard, visitors are always asked to pay before they drive past.

KSWC recently received a copy of Parks Management Company's permit from Los Padres Forest. It was not easy to acquire – it took nearly a month and the assistance of a local Congressman's staff.

The permit clearly outlines in Appendix D exactly where fees may be charged – each campground and day-use area past the Paradise Road kiosk has its own map. Moreover, Appendix A of the permit states where access fees may NOT be charged: solely for parking, undesignated parking, or picnicking along roads; for general access; and for dispersed areas with low or no investment.

Apparently, Parks Management Company staff are very aware of this distinction. If you drive up and say you will not be using any of the day-use areas, and that you are just going to park by the river and go for a swim, then the staff quickly wave you through, without requiring you to pay.

Should it be up to every member of the public to know these details before they arrive at the Paradise Road kiosk, or should it instead be clearly posted at the kiosk, that the fees are for the use of campgrounds and day-use areas, and that parking for a swim or hike outside of these sites is free of charge?

We wonder how many thousands of dollars Parks Management Company may have taken in at this location this past, very hot summer, by failing to disclose to visitors specifically where fees are required. The company's permit clearly requires all of their employees to be properly trained in the multiple details of their job. If the kiosk staff know the rules but continue to fail to inform their visitors, is that a job-training failure, or maybe an unwritten policy of non-disclosure from the company's executives? This has got to stop.

Please help spread the word to your friends who visit this area, so they are properly informed.

TAMARISK REMOVAL IN THE LOWER SESPE GORGE



This giant tamarisk plant we found in June, growing way back from Sespe Creek in soil that was muddy from a small seep, amongst the spiky juncus plants atop Grassy Flat, just upstream from West Fork Sespe. Fortunately the wet soil enabled three of us to cut, uproot and remove this entire multi-stemmed invasive exotic tree in about an hour, with hand tools. Thanks to KSWC's hard-working tamarisk team! There are a few more tamarisk nearby this one, but they are all much smaller in size. We'll remove them on next year's summer hike down the Sespe Gorge.

EXOTIC INVASIVE FISH MOVE FROM THE ROSE VALLEY LAKES INTO SESPE CREEK

The lakes by the road through Rose Valley north of Ojai were first excavated to provide a water supply for the SeaBee base that was built there around 1954.

They have long been a favorite haunt for day visitors and for fishermen. Many fishermen have over the years brought fish from elsewhere to plant in the lakes, for example catfish. Another introduced aquatic species was the bullfrog. This may seem innocent enough, but what happens when the lake overflows in our occasional very wet winters has been disastrous for the native trout population of Sespe Creek.

The Rose Valley lakes, when they spill, drain into adjacent Howard Creek, a tributary to Sespe Creek. It is by this route that the full length of the Sespe downstream from its junction with Howard Creek

has become infested with these exotic species that were first planted in the Rose Valley lakes.

They all share similar habits – they prey on juvenile trout, and they compete for the same food supply in the Sespe’s pools. In drought years, much of the upper Sespe goes dry by the late summer, but there are enough pools left for these exotics to survive, and they soon repopulate the dry sections of the creek after the winter rains. Check out the pools near the Piedra Blanca Trailhead in Rose Valley - all you’ll see are bullhead/catfish, and bluegill. At night you’ll certainly hear the loud calls of bullfrogs.

Again, many of these exotics will be washed away downstream in heavy winter storm waters, but enough survive to allow their populations to bounce back the next summer. Some of them have few natural predators to keep their numbers in check.

The Sespe never seems to go dry below its junction with Hot Springs Canyon, likely because the hot springs’ water flow comes from deep below the surface, and runs steadily regardless of wet or dry rainfall years. From here on down to Fillmore, the introduced exotic aquatic species are thriving. Over 30 years of hiking the lower Sespe Gorge, we have heard the bullfrogs migrating further down the Sespe each year, and we’ve witnessed the schools of young catfish taking over pools further downstream every summer. Simultaneously, the trout population of Sespe Creek has drastically diminished.

The Sespe has long been renowned for its healthy trout population. With the warm Southern California climate, the insects that comprise the trout’s food supply are plentiful, and young trout grow bigger and faster than elsewhere in California.



Young black bullhead (catfish) above First Narrows, Sespe Creek, June 2011. An exotic invasive species that prey on young trout.

But now the trout are under severe threat from both ends - by the lack of fish passage at the Freeman Diversion Dam on the Santa Clara River for adult steelhead trout attempting to return from the ocean to Sespe Creek to spawn, and by being crowded out of their upstream habitat by fast-growing populations of hungry exotics.

Now that the SeaBee base – later a Sheriff’s Dept. work camp – has been demolished and removed, there is no further need for the lakes as a water supply.



Back in the early 1900’s, the opening of trout fishing season on Sespe Creek would draw hundreds of fishermen to drive up the dirt road along the creek’s steep, west bank from Fillmore. The narrow road meant that the first vehicle in was the last one out. This picture shows adult steelhead, just returned from the ocean to spawn in the lower Sespe in the winter of 1911.

PLEASE SEND KSWC A DONATION!

Donations are our only source of funding. Please keep on sending us a check every so often. This newsletter goes out to interested persons at no cost, and those that choose to support our work keep us going. Thank you for your donations so far this year. They are not tax-deductible.

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FOREST SERVICE FIRE COSTS SOAR

The USFS reports that 2017 fire suppression costs have exceeded \$2 billion for the first time. In recent years these costs have gone from 15% to 55% of their budget – so, there's less money for everything else. U.S. Sec. of Agriculture Sonny Perdue, who oversees the USFS, has again asked Congress to pay for forest fires from emergency funds like FEMA, to resolve this crisis. Locally this funding shortfall has led to Los Padres Forest administrators planning to reduce the forest's 5 Ranger Districts to 3, over the next few years.

KCRW RADIO SEGMENT ON LOS PADRES FOREST CAMPGROUND CONCESSIONAIRE

Aired on June 29, KCRW radio from Santa Monica produced a four-minute story for the nationwide Marketplace program, on the move to concessionaire management of Los Padres Forest's campgrounds and day-use sites. You can hear it at this site: marketplace.org/2017/06/29/business/national-forests-campgrounds-increasingly-operated-private-companies
KCRW interviewed KSWC at Rose Valley. Key point - there is no reason why the USFS could not instead run their own camps for a profit, and keep the funds.