

THE SESPE WILD

The Newsletter of the Keep the Sespe Wild Committee

P.O. Box 715, Ojai, CA 93024

(805) 921-0618 www.sespewild.org

CALIFORNIA CONDOR UPDATE

DECEMBER 2021

The population of California condors continues to grow, but the future of the endangered carrion eater in the wild is not yet secure.

In the December 2020 California Condor Recovery Program's annual population report, the population of wild free-flying condors was 329. Another 175 were in captive breeding programs. The Sespe Condor Sanctuary is the heart of the condor recovery effort.

Of the condors in the wild, 186 were California residents, the remainder being split between Arizona, Utah and Baja California. The total of wild-born condor chicks that survived to leave their nests in 2020 was 10, 6 of which were in California. In 2020, 18 more captive-bred condors were released in California.

Recent and unexpected news about condor reproduction came in October, when the Journal of Heredity published a study showing that two captive-bred condors had been born from unfertilized eggs.

This condition is known as parthenogenesis, and is more common in vertebrates like fish and lizards. Though this was considered to be something that occurred only when species populations were so low that males were hard to find, the female condors in the captive breeding program at the San Diego Zoo that laid viable eggs with no male sperm were actually living in cages where male condors were paired with them for potential mating.

These two births, which took place in 2001 and 2009, were only recently found to be parthenogenetic when condor program genetic analysis showed that the two birds carried genetic material only from their mothers. The chicks were both males; this is further proof, as parthenogenesis in condors can only result in male offspring. Nature continues to surprise.



A California condor in 2021. (Photo from Friends of California Condors. Join them!) Wing tags are attached to condors before they are released into the wild, in order to assist observers in identifying a condor flying nearby. Condors have heads with no feathers, as carrion eaters chowing down on their food are less likely to pick up parasites with a bald head.

California condors are still dying from lead used in hunting ammunition, which they ingest as they eat the remains of hunters' kills. Of 42 condor deaths in the wild in the state in 2020, 12 were from lead poisoning.

Although the State of California banned all lead hunting ammo in 2019, it is taking time to educate all hunters about this. There has also been a shortage of non-lead ammo for sale. As time passes, condor deaths from lead poisoning are still set to diminish. Other condor deaths in the wild are caused by power line electrocution, predation and wildfires.

NEWS on REYES PEAK FORESTS

Nothing to report at present, but there may be new developments ahead in our efforts to help protect these old-growth conifer stands. We shall keep you posted.



THE END OF AN ERA

CalTrans has just announced the end of the road for their Adopt-A-Highway litter clean-up programs on rural highways in California.

Apparently CalTrans' new Clean California program is providing funding for the agency to conduct regular highway litter collections with their own staff instead.

All the signs advertising organizations that have participated in the Adopt-A-Highway program over the years will soon be removed along Ventura County's state highways 33 and 150.

So we thought it appropriate to remind you that for 28 years now KSWC volunteers have been picking up the trash monthly along four miles of Hwy. 33 north of Rose Valley, a stretch that borders Sespe Creek. Well, we have cancelled a few times, particularly on wet winter Sunday mornings.

It has always been a joy to walk along that highway, admiring the views of the Sespe watershed, and enduring the roar of the many groups of motorcyclists that zip past on their Sunday morning rides. Yes, there are many motorcyclists that crash and/or die along Hwy. 33 in that area. Emergency services are called up there pretty much weekly, and we've cleaned up the debris of crashed motorbike parts too many times to count. One motorcyclist even came off on a corner during our clean-up, and he and his bike actually ended up slid under the back end of our vehicle! That time we had to call the emergency services.

The most trash comes during the fall hunting season, which finds some hunters hanging out in highway pull-offs, dropping their cigarette butts and food wrappers where they stand, while waiting hopefully for a deer to stroll by.

Of course some of our crew may still head up there occasionally, as we enjoy doing so, and pick up what the CalTrans workers miss. We do not expect that they will be as thorough as we have been, for instance clambering down a steep bank to retrieve bottles and cans. We have also always separated the trash from the recyclables.

Thanks then to our volunteers, several who have participated for that full 28 years - Roger, Walt, Tom, Jim, Perry, Mike, as well as those who had to call it a day a while ago.

BEAVERS IN THE SESPE

Over twenty years ago, we saw what was clearly a beaver dam in the Sespe, adjacent to Willetts. But recent controversy sees some seeking to introduce the beaver locally where possible, while others question whether the American beaver actually had a historical presence in Southern California's coastal streams.

A new academic paper published on November 18, 2021, in *Frontiers of Conservation Science*, with ten authors and four full pages of academic references, suggests that the American beaver (*Castor canadensis*) was introduced to Southern California in the 1900's.

There is no record of beavers in the Pleistocene fossil record in coastal southern California, nor were any beaver skeletons ever found in any local tar pits. The nearest historical records show beaver in the San Joaquin Valley and in the Colorado River Basin. A number of respected naturalists working in our area from the mid 19th. century listed all local mammal species - but not beavers.

As far back as 1769, Spanish explorers noted furs of seven animal species that were used for clothing by native peoples in the San Diego area - but beaver were not included. In Ventura County a beaver skull was collected from Sespe Creek in 1906, but that may have been from an introduction by more recent settlers.

As to introducing beaver locally, there are instances where the presence of beavers may hinder the thriving of local native species.

For instance, on the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps base near San Diego, the activities of introduced beavers have had harmful consequences for the native and endangered arroyo toad. The potential for the arroyo toad's local

extinction increased sevenfold when a beaver dam and three non-native invasive aquatic species were all present. The two largest populations of the endangered arroyo toads anywhere are along Sespe Creek and at Camp Pendleton.

Currently, California law prevents the movement of beavers to a new locality. The journal concludes that beaver management may be needed where their populations impact a variety of endangered native species.



Spot the camouflaged arroyo toad juvenile on a sandy beach along Sespe Creek. Their natural beach-gravelly disguise keeps them quite still on a beach, but this leaves them vulnerable instead to people tromping around on those same beaches for recreation.

APPEAL of NEW OIL DRILLING PERMIT in SESPE OILFIELD

A decision by the Ventura County Planning Director in the summer allowed Carbon California, a local oil company, to sink new oil wells into the Sespe Oilfield north of Fillmore has been appealed by KSWC, in conjunction with Los Padres ForestWatch and oil industry watchdog group CFROG.

One part of Carbon's application included a permit for oil and equipment storage at a site on the east bank of Sespe Creek, just at the end of Goodenough Road north of Fillmore. Local residents opposed this plan, arguing that it had not been part of the earlier permit for that site. Spills of toxic oil products into Sespe Creek would also have been possible.

Anyway, County staff and Carbon, without real explanation, dropped all of these requests

before the last online hearing.

The other part of the project proposal involves the extension of a County permit to drill new wells and to extract oil from a site named Basenburg "A", some miles up the hill east of Sespe Creek, in the Sespe Oilfield. There, Carbon will, with the County's recent approval, have a permit to operate those oil facilities through 2038.

After the County's approval of the Basenburg "A" operating extension, local environmental organizations, led by LosPadres ForestWatch, decided to appeal this County approval. KSWC and local oil industry watchdog group CFROG have joined the appeal, which will be heard in Ventura in February 2022.

There are a number of reasons upon which to base this appeal. The outstanding reason must be that, in order to minimize the awful consequences of runaway climate heating, the International Energy Agency and the U.N. have both called for the elimination of all new oil and gas facilities, everywhere, worldwide.

PLEASE CONTINUE TO SUPPORT KSWC WITH YOUR DONATIONS

Thanks again to all of you who have supported our efforts in the past year. We continue to depend on your regular donations to fund our work preserving the Sespe watershed. Donations are not tax-deductible. Wishing you all the best for the new year ahead.

REYES PEAK LOGGING PLAN COVERED by THE GUARDIAN

In October of this year The Guardian daily newspaper's U.S. edition ran a story on Los Padres Forest's plan to log many thousands of old-growth conifers along the ridge of Pine Mountain and Reyes Peak north of Ojai, on the rim of the Sespe watershed.

The story mentioned that the Ventura County Board of Supervisors had this fall voted (by 4:1) against the logging proposal. A few weeks later the Ojai City Council voted unanimously against the logging plan; they also voted to support any future lawsuit on the matter.

Forest ecology professor John Battles from U.C. Berkeley questioned the thinning of these coastal forest trees for fire protection.

Brad Shaffer, director of the UCLA Center for

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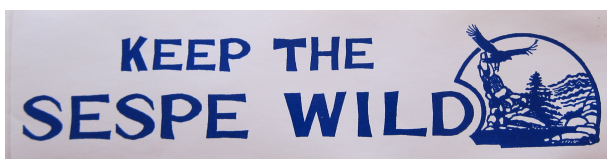
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(contd.) California Conservation Science, noted that how these coastal forests respond to fires is understudied. Chaparral burns differently in a fire, and also recovers differently from conifer forest areas. Since local fires are usually driven by high winds, thinning the trees is much less effective at slowing fires down.

USFS ecologist Hugh Stafford noted in 2018 that it "is not easy to align fuel treatment goals in this vegetation with restoration goals - in fact, you really can't do it."

Local Chumash have also strongly opposed Los Padres Forest's logging proposal at Reyes Peak. Our thanks to The Guardian.

WOLF OR-93 KILLED ON I-5

Wolf OR-93 was born into Oregon's White River pack, managed by the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs, who fitted him a radio collar. As a loner, he journeyed into California twice, the last time in February of 2021. He was the first wolf in the wild in our state for a century.

His collar stopped transmitting, but he was spotted in Ventura County in late September, in the Lockwood Valley area. When a driver called in a dead wolf besides the I-5 in November, his purple collar identified him. He had been hit by a vehicle. In his wanderings - up to 935 miles in three months - he had crossed busy roads before.