

The Butterfly That Roared

An unsung hero of Southern California conservation is a diminutive butterfly. Listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1997, the quino checkerspot butterfly (*Euphydryas editha quino*) does what endangered species do so often: serve as surrogates for the larger scale ecological communities for which humans show so little respect. And ultimately, what is best for other species turns out to be best for people as well.

The quino checkerspot butterfly, or QCB, has a wingspan of one and a half inches, with red, black, and cream coloration. It feeds on native species of plantain — its “host plants” — and can live in grasslands, coastal sage scrub, chaparral, and juniper woodlands. In fact, the QCB was once one of the most common butterflies in Southern California. It is now reduced to small, scattered, and fragile populations in a few locations in San Diego and Riverside Counties. What happened?

No one knows for sure, but a major factor appears to be the QCB’s need for intact landscapes. In this regard, it has much in common with a golden eagle or mountain lion! At any given time, the QCB occupies a network of discrete habitat patches within a landscape. Some of these patches will periodically “blink out,” yet be recolonized years or decades later from another patch. With the habitat fragmentation caused by development, this network, called a “metapopulation,” is disrupted, and re-population cannot occur. Another factor in this butterfly’s decline may be intolerance to exotic weeds and insects, making it susceptible to “edge effects” from surrounding development. Even where its host plants remain, the QCB is likely to have vanished.

The listing of the QCB has had major effects on Southern California sprawl. Due to its large historic range and rigorous survey requirements — the butterfly may not “fly” every year — it is a particularly unwelcome inconvenience for developers. In fact, the QCB, rather than the California gnatcatcher, is the primary motivator for the Riverside County multiple species plan. In San Diego, too little was known about the butterfly to “cover” it in the Multiple Species Conservation Plan, or MSCP, so additional conservation will now be needed. These areas include key habitat areas around the Otay Lakes, which were not otherwise protected by the MSCP. Southern Orange County, one of our great remaining wilderness areas, is a potential recovery area for the butterfly.

Most importantly, conservation and recovery of the QCB will require a holistic, landscape approach. This has already been seen in Riverside County, where the entirety of a property called Johnson Ranch, rather than merely a section, was purchased. The QCB will also drive the establishment of a “core area” around Warm Springs Creek near Temecula. These areas in western Riverside County will provide visual relief between rapidly expanding suburban developments and avert the scenario in Los Angeles and Orange Counties where one city simply merges into another.

Once again, the Endangered Species Act makes people do the right thing for themselves as well as for other creatures.

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A Tale of Two Cities: San Diego and Poway

Since its adoption in 1997, implementation of the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) has been difficult. While overall there has been adequate progress in reserve assembly, some serious problems have arisen. Readers will recall a dispute over vernal pool protection in the City of San Diego; the eventual resolution resulted in the clarification of ambiguous language in the MSCP agreement.

Recently, the City of San Diego came close to approving a project that would have eliminated a major population of a rare plant covered by the MSCP. Thankfully, however, Mayor Dick Murphy and other Councilmembers saw fit to properly enforce the MSCP plan.

The situation is not so happy in Poway, where that city disputes provisions of their MSCP agreement that require strict acreage limitations on development. If the state and federal wildlife agencies do not enforce the agreement, EHL is prepared to file suit.

San Timoteo State Park?

In the mountains north of the City of Riverside lies upper San Timoteo Creek. This river valley is undeveloped, with intact habitat and agricultural uses. Adjacent to the "Badlands" — a series of rough rock formations — "San Tim" is an important part of the future Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSHCP). EHL is part of a coalition seeking monies from Proposition 12 to create a magnificent new state park on this site.

Saddleback Meadows Saga Continues

A critical linkage between habitat reserves in central and southern Orange County, the fate of the "Saddleback Meadows" site in Trabuco Canyon is coming back before the Orange County Board of Supervisors this Spring. Last year, EHL, other conservation groups, and neighboring religious institutions prevailed on appeal and won our litigation against a proposed development project. Previously, the County ignored the advice of the Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that wildlife movement would be cut off by the housing tracts. Because the proposed project is unchanged, the County now has a chance to make a better decision. EHL was represented by attorneys Mary Hudson and Rachel Sater.

Transit Program Advances in San Diego

An important part of EHL's work is in advancing "smart growth," so that population increases are directed into established urban areas, and so that land is used efficiently. The "City of Villages" plan being considered by the City of San Diego is an example of this strategy. A workable transit system is essential to making urban life "livable" and highly desirable.

To that end, EHL has been impressed by the innovative transit concepts of the Mission Group of San Diego. These concepts focus on flexibility, convenience, and amenity value, and identify the network of routes that best serve job and other activity centers. For example, express routes would provide quick transportation to airports. Cost-effective yet technologically advanced rubber-wheeled vehicles are envisioned.

Under the auspices of one of San Diego's transit agencies, the Metropolitan Transit Development Board (MTDB), an ambitious version of these concepts, called TransitFirst, was put forward. With the support of the Citizens Advisory Committee on transit — an advisory group to the San Diego Association of Governments of which EHL is a member — MTDB adopted TransitFirst.

Unfortunately, funds are not yet in place for TransitFirst. In addition, it is not assured that the transit agencies will carry through on effective implementation of this innovative program. EHL will continue to advance new transit thinking.

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Meetings Held on Proposed Foothill Tollroad

If selecting the most environmentally damaging place possible to put a highway in California were the objective, then the proposed Foothill tollroad would achieve this dubious distinction. This highway would cut through one of our most ecologically intact landscapes, the coastal foothills of southern Orange County. It would then follow San Mateo Creek to the sea, degrading the only undammed coastal watershed south of Ventura. In the process, it would impact *seven* federally listed species — California gnatcatcher, arroyo southwestern toad, tidewater goby, southern steelhead trout, least Bell’s vireo, southwestern willow flycatcher, and Pacific pocket mouse. Some impacts would be devastating. If that weren’t enough, it would literally destroy most of San Onofre State Beach, a heavily used state park, and induce sprawl development in a wilderness area.

The Orange County Transportation Corridor Agency (TCA), made up of local governments, is single-mindedly committed to build this road, irrespective of the environmental costs. Scare tactics regarding traffic are commonly used to justify this fiasco. However, an economic study commissioned by EHL and other conservation groups showed the Foothill tollroad to be fiscally unsound, and likely to repeat the disastrous performance of the San Joaquin Hills tollroad, which operates far below predicted usage.

In late March and early April, public meetings were held to gain input on the environmental documentation for the project. In San Clemente, a remarkable 1,000 tollroad opponents converged to make their views known. Friends of the Foothills, a project of the Sierra Club, was key in organizing this grassroots phenomenon. EHL has submitted extensive comments, using information from a traffic engineer that questions the traffic forecasting methodologies employed by TCA. While the Environmental Protection Agency has insisted that alternative transportation improvements be studied seriously, the TCA is allowed to hire its own consultants and write its own documents. On previous tollroad projects, the technical “lead agency,” the Federal Highway Administration, as well as Caltrans, have been rubberstamps for TCA’s misguided projects.

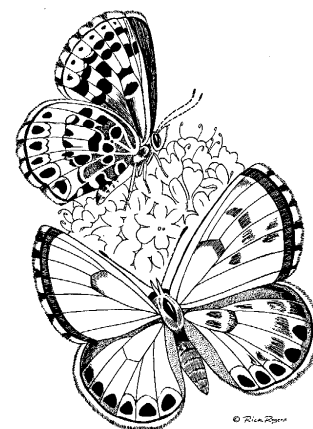
Some good news is that two members of the San Clemente City Council are anti-tollroad and pro-quality of life. Perhaps Orange County will wake up and reject the outmoded transportation thinking this highway represents. Stopping it will continue to be a top EHL priority.

Palos Verdes NCCP Threatened

The NCCP for the Palos Verdes Peninsula has entered yet another phase as speculative development plans pose new challenges to a successful outcome. The process, which had been stalled for nearly a year, was recently revived through positive action by the Rancho Palos Verdes City Council. Now, one non-participant developer, who has eyes on an important piece of publicly-owned habitat at City Hall, is looking at ways to either subvert or avoid the NCCP, and it is far from certain that the City will stand up for the integrity of the NCCP.

The habitat in question, a significant acreage of intact coastal sage scrub, is an important breeding ground for both California gnatcatchers and cactus wrens. It is a crucial habitat linkage between the west and south sides of the Palos Verdes Peninsula, and young gnatcatchers regularly move out from here to fill unused habitat to the north and east. It lies within a one-time Nike missile site which was deeded to the City many years ago to be used for passive activities and as City Hall. But with splendid ocean views, there are those who think it would better serve the public, and bottom line, as a golf course.

One issue that has never been adequately addressed in the Palos Verdes NCCP is that of the El Segundo blue butterfly (ESB). Though this species is known to exist on the peninsula, its status has never been adequately determined. We think now is the time. Both the City Hall site and the developer’s own property have host food plant on them, and it is likely that the ESB occurs on the former, and possibly both. If the developer chooses to avoid the NCCP by creating an independent HCP, he will have to show not only how gnatcatchers and cactus wrens can be preserved, but will also have to provide the first full-scale study of ESB for the region.



Beasts and Botany of the Coastal Sage Scrub: El Segundo Blue Butterfly

From high atop the coastal bluffs of Palos Verdes, the view is breathtaking. Land falls abruptly toward the sea below. Over lacy currents, pelicans glide and dive. Freighters inch at the horizon and the white strand narrows northward, arcing toward Malibu.

The path down the cliff face is rugged. Hardy buckwheat, sagebrush and goldenbush cling to the rocky strata, perfuming summer days. It is then that the El Segundo blue butterflies emerge to feed among the clusters of tiny white and pink buckwheat flowers. For months, they have lain as pupae in the soil at the base of the plants, now bursting forth as winged adults to live out their final few minutes, hours, days. So quickly they mate, lay eggs and are gone, leaving behind the next generation in this one tiny cycle of renewal.

Unlike the ladies, swallowtails, blues and whites that nectar in your garden, these butterflies are rare, so rare that they have been designated an endangered species in an attempt to give them official protection from extinction. Their main population center is at the Los Angeles International Airport and in El Segundo, but on Palos Verdes there is an outpost that may help them survive for our grandchildren to see and appreciate as we do. What makes this Palos Verdes population extra special is that here the larvae use two food plants, not just one as elsewhere.

The co-evolution of butterflies and plants is nowhere better exemplified than in the relationship of blues and buckwheats. Throughout southern California, the larva of the El Segundo blue's close relative, the Bernardino blue, feeds on California buckwheat. The larva of the El Segundo blue feeds on coastal dunes buckwheat exclusively, except on the Palos Verdes Peninsula. Along its sea bluffs, the blue will also use ashy-leaved buckwheat. Away from the immediate coast, there is no coastal dunes buckwheat, and ashy-leaved buckwheat is the sole food plant.

Nowhere on Palos Verdes is the El Segundo blue abundant, but its flexibility and isolation from the Airport area populations, which disease could wipe out at a stroke, make its preservation crucial. Fortunately, the Natural Communities Conservation Plan now being developed has the capacity to afford the needed protection by creating a habitat preserve which encompasses the areas where buckwheat and butterfly persist. Its restriction to the City of Rancho Palos Verdes, and the threats within even that city to a functional plan, however, are not reassuring.

Still, a walk along a summer bluff is always a delight. Huge vistas draw mind and eye. And, who knows, that sapphire flash which draws your attention to a path-bordering shrub, just might be one of those tiny jewels — an El Segundo blue.

—Jess Morton

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