

# CONSERVING CRITICAL HABITAT

## How do we protect native habitat and at the same time provide food and homes for people?

The loss of our open land is not happening by accident. For many decades, our country has created tax laws, zoning, and transportation policy that have fueled rapid sprawl and the development of natural areas. Typical building patterns in America drive us further and further from the center of our communities as we carve up increasingly distant fields and forests.

For many of us, saving the places that enrich our lives is reason enough to support conservation. But much more is at stake. Ensuring that our natural areas are preserved is critical to:

- the quality of the air we breathe,
- the water we drink, and
- the food we eat.

From the Land Trust Alliance [www.landtrustalliance.org](http://www.landtrustalliance.org)



Temescal Wash provides water and a ribbon of habitat for wildlife.

## The Riverside Corona Resource Conservation District connects blocks of habitat by preserving and restoring corridors or linkages.

### Fragmentation

By habitat, we mean homes: space for food, water, nesting and shelter. When native vegetation is cleared or permanently altered, fragmented patches or islands are formed. Populations of plant and animal species within the islands are isolated and severely affected.

Habitat loss and fragmentation lead to a break down in ecological processes such as wildlife migration, seed dispersal, pollination of plants, and other natural functions that are essential for ecosystem health. The result is decline in biodiversity (biological diversity) and local extinction of sensitive species.

### Corridors

A wildlife corridor is a link of land, which adjoins larger blocks of habitat. By providing landscape connections between habitat areas, corridors enable wildlife movement and breeding of plants and animals. As a general rule the wider the corridor, the better. Wider corridors suffer fewer impacts from adjoining land uses and have fewer edge threats from invasive weeds and predators.



## Conservation Efforts

The Riverside-Corona Resource Conservation District (RCRCD) is a non-regulatory local agency that works to permanently protect land that has habitat, scenic, and/or agricultural values. RCRCD conserves open space in three ways.

- **Preservation:** The District protects important areas from future development by accepting donations of land (fee title) and conservation easements.
- **Restoration:** RCRCD improves degraded habitat by removing invasive species, replanting native plants, restocking native animals, protecting the soil from erosion, protecting water from pollutants, and more.
- **Management:** The District continues to maintain and monitor restored habitat for water quality, critical wildlife species, invasion of exotic weeds, trash dumping, Off Road Vehicle (ORV) intrusion, noise and other impacts.



A woven, high performance mat was installed and interplanted with vegetation to strengthen the channel bank.

The RCRCD works with cooperating landowners and the community to conserve land. Numerous agencies collaborate to permit, fund, and monitor the restoration work that is completed on conservation lands:

- Army Corps of Engineers
- California Department of Fish and Game
- Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board
- US Fish and Wildlife Service

These regulatory agencies review plans and proposed actions that might impact waterways and habitat. For example, it's essential that sensitive birds are not disturbed during breeding and nesting season. Therefore, no work is permitted in waterways during spring and into summer.

Counties and cities also have plans and ordinances that are designed to protect wildlife and water quality. There are special requirements for building near waterways to prevent encroachment and limit stream alteration.



Riverside leaders and partners dedicated the Sycamore Canyon Wilderness Park.

*“RCRCD is looking to creatively collaborate with a variety of partners to sustain our native landscapes and vital plant and animal resources, the indicators of watershed health”.*  
Shelli Lamb, District Manager



## What are Conservation Easements?

Land ownership carries with it a bundle of rights—the right to occupy, lease, sell, develop, construct buildings, farm, restrict access, and harvest timber, among others. A landowner can give up one or more of those rights to some other person or entity in the form of an easement for a purpose such as conservation, installing telephone poles, a cell tower, water lines or simply helping a neighbor maintain access to a landlocked parcel, while retaining ownership of the remainder of the rights. In ceding a right, the landowner “eases” it to another entity, such as a Resource Conservation District or land trust. For example, a landowner may give up the right to develop a subdivision while retaining the right to grow crops.

Even though easements are placed on private land, significant public benefits may be realized. Conservation easements can contribute to improved water quality and often protect aquifers and watersheds. They can protect a community’s scenic beauty, vistas and open space by keeping landscapes free of suburban sprawl. They can help keep landscapes in traditional uses, such as farming and ranching, and can keep small family farmers and ranchers on the land in tough economic times such as those we are experiencing today. They are used to buffer national parks and other public lands, keeping development away from the wildland-urban interface, preserving scenic entrances and giving wildlife habitat an “overflow” outlet onto private land. Increasingly, as development approaches sensitive military installations, easements are also being used to buffer military bases around the country. Further, easements are used by Native American tribes to help prevent fragmentation of tribal lands by non-Indians on private holdings.

Many landowners receive a federal income tax deduction for the gift of a Conservation Easement. The Internal Revenue Service allows a deduction if the easement is perpetual and donated “exclusively for conservation purposes.” The amount of the tax deduction is determined by the value of the conservation easement. In addition, the donor may have estate and property tax relief. You should always work with your tax accountant and/or lawyer to understand how to qualify for such a tax deduction.

If you have land that you would like to conserve for quality of life, the preservation of species, and for future generations, please consider dedicating your land. To learn about conservation easement opportunities in the greater Riverside-Corona area, please contact Shelli Lamb at (951) 683-7691, Ext. 202.



# Easement Projects



The most pressing threat to wildlife is land conversion from habitat to other land uses. The Riverside-Corona Resource Conservation (RCRCD) is working to connect remaining habitat lands, to create a network for wildlife movement across private and public lands. In some cases, RCRCD has assumed responsibility for managing conservation easements, and in other cases, has been given ownership of land for management in perpetuity.

Most RCRCD projects are along waterways (streams, creeks, arroyos, and washes), which provide an essential source of drinking water in dry southern California. Water supports an abundance of vegetation and a variety of life, or *biodiversity*. Streamside vegetation, along dry or flowing waterways, is referred to as *riparian*. Riparian habitat is critical for providing suitable food, shelter, nesting sites, and escape-cover for wildlife. Waterways, water quality, and riparian habitat have been greatly damaged by human activities.

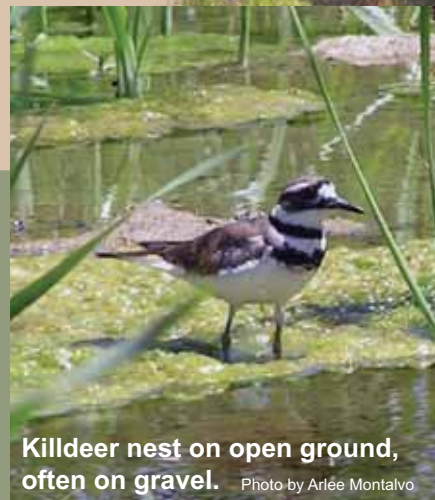


Endangered Least Bell's Vireo fledgling. Photo by Terry Reeser

## Why is it important to restore native species?

Plants and animal species in an ecosystem have developed together and hold complementary roles; they are *interdependent*. Removal of even one species from an ecosystem can disrupt natural interactions and reduce another species' ability to survive.

*The State of the Birds: 2010 Report on Climate Change* explains how the impacts of climate change influence our bird populations and their habitats. Nearly a third of the nation's 800 bird species are endangered, threatened or in significant decline. Learn more at <http://stateofthebirds.org/>



Killdeer nest on open ground, often on gravel. Photo by Arlee Montalvo



One of the RCRC's long-term goals is to connect habitat lands from the Cleveland National Forest, through Temescal Canyon, to the Gavilan Plateau and Lake Mathews.

## The Temescal Trail

The District began by obtaining land and conservation easements in Temescal Canyon:

- Temescal Wash Conservation Easement
- Chandler Conservation Easement
- Department of Water Resources (DWR) Easement
- Lee Lake Conservation Easement
- Temescal Upland Reserve



The waterway easements have required extensive restoration, including removal of exotic weeds and replanting with native willow-scrub species. For the DWR Easement, 6-acres of channel banks comprised of mine tailings were reshaped and protected with erosion-control blankets and silt fences. In some areas, the banks were hydro-seeded, while in other areas cuttings and container plants were irrigated until established.

## The Lee Lake Conservation

**Easement** includes 30-acres of wetland, riparian, and upland-sage-scrub habitat along Temescal Wash. The site contains a small 3-acre pond that serves as a stop for migrating waterfowl. Invasive aquatic species, such as the Red-eared Slider, a non-native turtle, are being removed. The pond is being restored so that it can support a population of Western Pond turtles, a native turtle. The easement provides an important linkage between the Estelle Mountain Reserve and RCRC's Temescal Upland Reserve.

**The Temescal Upland Reserve** is a 135-acre open space that was donated to RCRC by the Dos Lagos development (in fee title). The habitat includes upland and oak-woodland plant communities with small tributaries that flow intermittently to Temescal Wash. It is home to the California Gnatcatcher and nesting hawks.

As funds permit, RCRC is repairing eroded areas, removing weeds, and reestablishing native plants.



The Red-eared Slider turtle out-competes the native Southwestern Pond turtle for food and nesting sites.

Photo by Miles Bintz



## Easement Projects (cont.)

The Temescal Wash Conservation Easement bisects Dos Lagos golf course. Interpretive signs have been installed along the waterway to educate golfers about potential impacts to habitat and wildlife. The stream that flows through Temescal Canyon is the historical home of the Least Bells Vireo, Southwestern Willow flycatcher, Western Pond turtle, and other rare and uncommon plants and animals. More than six pair of the endangered Least Bells Vireo, a songbird, have nested in our project areas following habitat restoration.



## District-Wide Easements

RCRCD has been restoring habitat at its easements along Woodcrest waterways and Springbrook Wash in Highgrove. In some cases, channel banks were reshaped and planted to control erosion. Invasive weeds including tamarisk, pepper trees and poisonous castor bean were removed. Many areas have been replanted with native species such as California sycamore, black walnut, elderberry, and cuttings of coyote willow and mulefat.

## Easement Management

As part of ongoing stewardship, RCRCD coordinates the cleanup of trash and debris and conducts regular water quality testing and wildlife monitoring on easements. The District blocks Off Road Vehicle (ORV) routes and replants disturbed soil with native vegetation.

## Buffers

Sustainable development provides a “living” buffer of vegetation to:


- filter and slow runoff laden with fertilizers and pesticides,
- limit disturbance and predation by cats and dogs,
- reduce noise and erosion, and
- intercept the invasion of non-native plants, such as Bermuda grass.



## Reduce Your Impact

If you are a homeowner, you may be able to help by reducing impacts on native habitats. If you live near native landscapes, remove potentially invasive plants from your yard. Please replant with waterwise plants, especially local natives. Native plants often require less pruning, fertilizer, water and time to maintain.

To learn more about set-backs, buffers, and human impacts, request the booklet *Living on the Edge* (of the Urban-Wildland Interface), which is free to RCRCD residents by contacting Erin at (951) 683-7691, Ext. 207 or [snyder@rcrcd.com](mailto:snyder@rcrcd.com). It is also available on our website at [www.rcrcd.com](http://www.rcrcd.com).



# Tax Benefits of Donating Land for Conservation

## Federal Tax Benefits

There are two main kinds of federal tax benefits available to donors of conservation land: income tax benefits and estate tax benefits.

**Federal Income Tax Benefits.** Donors of land and conservation easements may claim an income tax deduction for a charitable contribution made in accordance with Section 170 of the Internal Revenue Code. The exact amount of tax savings depends on several factors:

- The length of time a donor has owned the property (benefits are generally greater if owned for more than one year);
- How the donor has used the property (residence, investment, agricultural);
- The income of the donor (the higher the donor's income, the more the donor will save on taxes);
- The value of the donated property (the more valuable the property, the larger the deduction).

**Federal Estate Tax Benefits.** A donor may also save substantially on estate taxes if he or she donates a conservation easement. Under Section 2031(c) of the Internal Revenue Code, up to \$500,000 may be excluded from a donor's taxable estate if he or she has donated a qualifying easement. As with the income tax benefits, the larger the value of the donated easement, the bigger the deduction.

## State Tax Benefits

California law generally conforms to federal law with respect to deductions for charitable contributions of a donor's entire interest in real property or a charitable contribution of a conservation easement with some important exceptions, including, but not limited to, limitation of the deduction to a taxpayer's basis in the property.

## Local Property Tax Benefits

In general, property tax reductions are available for donors who donate their entire interest in land or a conservation easement. However, special consideration should be taken before making a request for reduction in property taxes as such a request may trigger a reassessment of the entire property, which could result in an higher overall property tax liability in some circumstances.

*This information is not intended to be legal or financial advice. Please consult your own legal counsel.*



A wildlife corridor follows the Temescal Wash. Note the channel bank restoration and set-back of urban development.

# What Makes a Plant “Invasive”?

From the California Invasive Plant Council

When plants that evolved in one region of the globe are moved to another region, a few of them flourish, crowding out the native vegetation. Invasive plants have a competitive advantage because they are no longer controlled by their natural predators or competitors, so quickly spread out of control.

Invasive plants also damage wildlands by increasing wildfire and flood danger, consuming valuable water, degrading recreational opportunities, and destroying productive range and timber lands. The California Invasive Plant Council works with land managers, researchers, policy makers, and concerned citizens to protect the state from invasive plants. Learn more at [www.cal-ipc.org](http://www.cal-ipc.org).

*Arundo donax*, giant reed, was planted to control erosion, but now has taken over thousands of acres of wetlands.



Photo by Cody Snyder

## Weed Warriors

The beautiful habitats within wilderness parks and other wild landscapes are being threatened by the invasion of non-native plants and animals. A coalition is forming to halt the invasion of harmful plants (weeds) by enlisting the help of Weed Warriors, volunteers who adopt a park and “wage war” against invasive plants. If you are interested in learning about invasive weeds and donating time to eradicate them, please contact Shani McCullough at (951) 683-7691, Ext 223. Training will be provided.

Coalition partners to date include:

Riverside-Corona Resource Conservation District,  
City of Riverside Department of Parks, Recreation, and Community Services,  
California Native Plant Society,  
California Invasive Pest Council,  
San Jacinto Basin Resource Conservation District,  
South Coast Resource Conservation and Development Council,  
Santa Ana River-Orange County Weed Management Area (SAROCWMA).

## What is SAROCWMA?

The Santa Ana River - Orange County Weed Management Area is a coalition that helps prevent and control the spread of invasive weeds on both private and public lands. We call it the Weed Management Area for short. The group has been successful at controlling common invasive plants, including perennial pepperweed, Tamarisk (salt cedar), poisonous and invasive castor bean, and *Arundo donax* (giant reed), in Riverside, San Bernardino and Orange Counties.



Castor bean (*Ricinus communis*)

