

The Island Insider

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A Publication of Channel Islands Restoration



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A Short-Eared Owl flies over the West Mesa of the San Marcos Foothills. This sensitive habitat contains an abundance of rare wildlife. CIR has received over 1.3 million so far to purchase the West Mesa, full story on page 8. Photo by Mark Bright.

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RESTORATION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

At this time of great uncertainty, while our country and the world experiences upheaval, unemployment and a deadly pandemic, events seem to be happening at light speed. For months Channel Islands Restoration has been working hard to adjust to the new reality of operating a non-profit organization during these tumultuous and troubling times.

Although it has not been easy, CIR continues to work on important restoration projects, while keeping our staff safe and healthy. These projects include eradicating *Arundo* from parts of the Santa Clara River, removing invasive weeds in remote parts of the Angeles National Forest and removing Pampas grass at the Ballona Wetlands in Los Angeles. However, the pandemic hinders our ability to work on such places as San Nicolas Island, since we cannot safely transport volunteers there at this time.

This coming winter and spring season, we hope to offer socially distanced volunteer opportunities, emphasizing safety. This means our volunteer groups will be smaller, and people will not work close together. Although we currently are not able to provide the number of volunteer opportunities that we did in the past, we are seeking new ways to reach out to our members and volunteers with environmental education material on our web site, social media and in virtual meetings.

You can expect CIR to offer content regarding ecology and geology and more in the coming months. We are looking forward to reconnecting with our members and volunteers soon as we all navigate the restrictions of the pandemic.

CIR is fortunate to be able to continue our restoration work during the pandemic, and we look with optimism to the coming months. We will continue to carry out our mission to restore nature and educate the public, with the support of our members!

Thank you for your support, and stay safe and healthy,
Ken Owen & the Channel Islands Restoration Team

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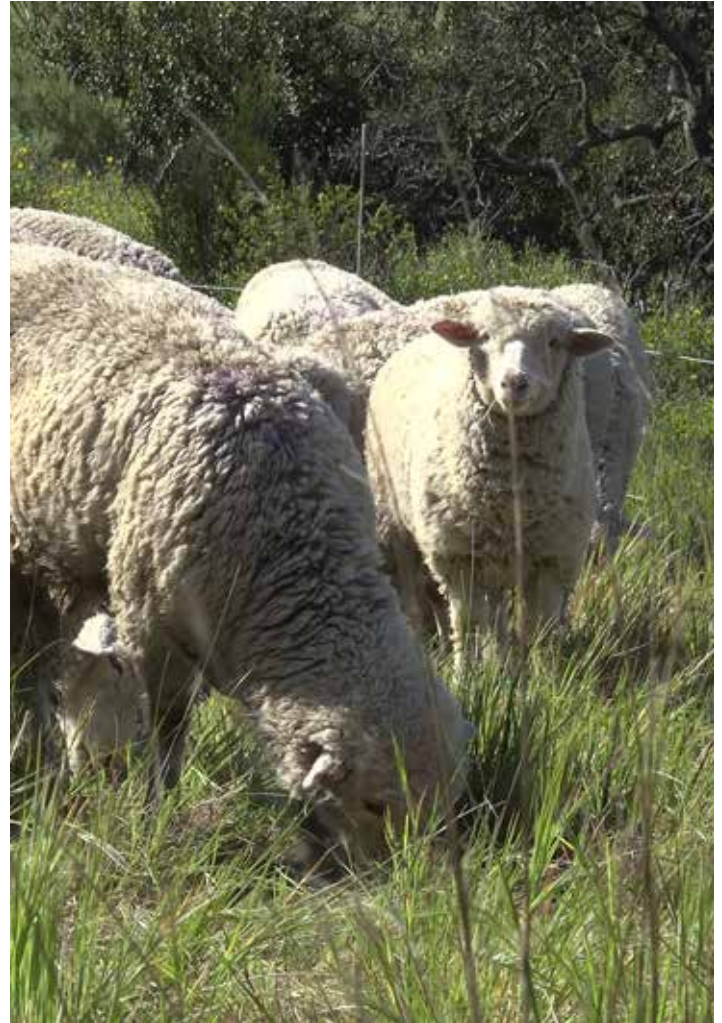
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YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS MATTER, THANK YOU.

We always strive to recognize the generous impact our community members have in supporting us through their hard work and generous donations. Our team has compiled a series of images that showcase how your contributions and volunteer efforts have helped strengthen our mission of habitat restoration over the past year.



Volunteers planting native plants to restore habitat at Carpinteria Salt Marsh.



Sheep grazing in the grasslands of the San Marcos Foothills.



Successful habitat restoration at Carpinteria Salt Marsh.



CIR field technician removing weeds to restore habitat for the endangered species Braunton's Milk Vetch in Thousand Oaks.

Santa Clara *Arundo*: The Siege Continues

Doug Morgan, Operations Manager

Autumn in the Heritage Valley of the Santa Clara River, the area upstream of Santa Paula and down stream of Piru, is beautiful this time of year.

The mornings are cool and damp. The afternoon temperatures often dip to near tolerable double-digit levels and the smell of freshly tilled dirt is prevalent on the subtle breeze.

Orderly rows of petite greens, herbs and celery, begin to emerge in the fields, lovers of the cool damp mornings that dry into bright sunny afternoons, the same growing conditions that have been ideal for citrus the last 150 years.

Occasionally we pass a field prepped for a large amount of parking, dotted with straw bales and pumpkins and we think, “I don’t remember seeing pumpkins growing out there.”

And usually I smile remembering the times I was bussed out to the ‘pumpkin fields’ just east of Turnpike Road in Goleta to ‘pick’ my very own ‘farm fresh’ pumpkin.

Autumn is also a good time to eradicate *Arundo*.

Despite the bucolic beauty of the drive, inside the more active river channel our adversary awaits. *Arundo donax*, giant reed, is an insidious monster of an invasive species (see past issues for some of *Arundo*’s history and negative effects).

The fertile and now consistently wet Santa Clara River is prime *Arundo* habitat and it has grown into impenetrable “monocultures” 30’ tall.

Sprinkled throughout the 200 acre site are a few native species that once the *Arundo* is removed, we’d like to have remain alive to provide food, forage, cover and nesting sites for several of the endangered and sensitive species that have called this area home since way before the pumpkin patches arrived.

Now that restoration has hacked out some of the invasive species and a few islands of natives remain, other desirable species again are rebounding as a result. The process to eradicate *Arundo* gets a bit complicated, but the CIR crews are very experienced in plant eradication techniques and capabilities.

Restoration near to and on this site has been occurring for nearly 25 years and it is evident in the amount of Least Bells Vireo, (LBV, Federally listed as an endangered species) our very experienced bird monitors have identified over the course of this project timeline.

Generally, the nesting season of the LBV’s is between April and October, and no work would be allowed. Not long ago there were estimated to be only a few hundred nesting pairs of LBV left in the world.



Crews work each day to remove the harmful *Arundo*.

Habitat loss and the introduction of the Brown Headed Cowbird have taken their toll (cowbirds lay their eggs in the LBV nest and when the larger cowbirds hatch they kill the LBV chicks and destroy the nest.)

CIR has been selected because of our history, experience and success working in delicate areas alongside sensitive species to remove invasive plants. There are others working on the Cowbirds.

My favorite part of the job is working with experts that have spent a lifetime dedicated to their specific interests.

Our Bird Monitors from the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, (WFVZ) are some of the best in the world, and their museum in Camarillo is an amazing collection that is regularly visited by avian researchers from all over the world, and totally worth a visit. It was an honor to work with them on this project.

They worked very closely with us, teaching our team and ensuring that the LBV's and other species were not disturbed by our presence as we were granted permission to continue our operations during the nesting season. The monitors examined every square meter of the potential work area and located all the nesting sites.

These locations were logged in our data collection app that each crew member carried and physically flagged with 250' radius buffers of strictly enforced no entry rules. They also helped us identify areas of native diversity that would appeal to the returning LBV's and others once the *Arundo* was removed.

They were with us all day, every day, always in sight. We were the "restoration ninjas" stealthily entering and removing threats to the native species all the while preparing for a more aggressive approach once the birds have left the area for the season.

And as of this writing that is where the project is. We have daily crews of up to 20 members hacking trails and sometimes tunnels through the *Arundo* old growth to allow access for our crews. We have cut miles of temporary trails, roads and ladders, set locations through the *Arundo* and poison oak and as soon as access is ready, our team enters.

Because of the delicate work we were able to do, the more aggressive processes are moving much faster and much more efficiently than anticipated. Next April when the LBV's and others again return, I can only imagine them saying to one another...

I love what you have done to this place.



CIR moves supplies and personnel through the Arundo forest with specialized vehicles.



The Santa Clara River is usually wet, prime Arundo habitat.

CIR Raises Over 1.3 Million Dollars to Save the San Marcos Foothills

Ken Owen, Executive Director

In an amazing outpouring of support for the natural world and for the value of open space, CIR has received over 1.3 million dollars in donations and pledges to purchase a portion of the San Marcos Foothills. Most of that funding (\$1,035,556 as of this writing) was donated in cash, while \$263,228 has been “pledged” to the campaign.

All the donations, including a single \$1,000,000 donation from an anonymous donor, will be returned if the sale of the property does not happen.

The San Marcos Foothills is a stretch of undeveloped land, located between Santa Barbara and Goleta, north of the urban boundary, in the foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains.

After many proposals to develop the area were turned down by the County of Santa Barbara, in 2005 the developer at that time donated 200 acres of the property for preservation.

That property became the San Marcos Foothills Preserve, which is owned by the County and protected forever. At the same time, a proposal to develop the adjacent unprotected land to the north and south with upscale condominiums and luxury houses was approved by the County.

Starting in 2010, CIR began restoring habitat on the Preserve, including along creek corridors, and in recent years, in the grasslands. We brought sheep to



*A Western Meadowlark at the San Marcos Foothills.
Photo by Mark Bright.*

the Preserve to control non-native plants, that ruin the ecology of native grasslands. Throughout this process, we were aware that the largest and most biologically important grasslands on the Foothills is actually outside the Preserve (at the north end of Via Gaitero Road) on property slated for development.

In fact, it is one of the largest and most productive grasslands in Santa Barbara County, and the habitat is precious for animal species that depend on native grasslands for survival.

This led CIR to investigate whether the developer

The grasslands of San Marcos Foothills support a variety of native grasses.



would sell the property for conservation purposes. A preliminary appraisal valued the lots at 5.5 million dollars. CIR approached the developer to see if he was willing to sell. He said he would consider selling, but he felt the value of the land was closer to 16 million dollars.

With development imminent, CIR began a campaign to purchase the property. This included producing a video and stories in local media, and we consulted with several professionals in the land conservation field.

Within weeks, we had raised over a million dollars! However, final permits are close at hand and construction apparently will start before the end of the year!

Where does that leave the campaign? The price that the developer wants makes moving forward difficult. However, we have not given up on the dream. CIR will keep working to raise the money to buy the property.

We will keep the web portal online, so people can continue to donate or pledge until we either raise enough money or until construction begins. We are most grateful for the outpouring of support to save the property from the community and from our members.

Please donate or pledge at bit.ly/buyTheSMF.



Above: Northern Harrier hunts in the Grasslands at the San Marcos Foothills. Photo by Mark Bright.



White-tailed Kite perched at the San Marcos Foothills. Photo by Mark Bright.



CIR staff remove non-native weeds to make room for the native chaparral plants of the area. Photos by Holly Wright.

Bold and Difficult Work in the Angeles National Forest

Holly Wright, Crew Leader

From March to July 2020, Channel Islands Restoration worked in the Angeles National Forest northeast of Lake Castaic removing non-native weeds to make room for the native chaparral plants of the area. Plants that we removed include yellowstar thistle, tocolate, and tumbleweed (Russian thistle), all of which are non-native, highly invasive, and highly flammable. In fact, vast areas of yellowstar thistle and tumbleweed contribute to wildfires



because they are light enough to easily become airborne and carry a spark or a flame over a wide expanse and spark new fires. The CIR team worked in a collaborative partnership with Pax Environmental to make sure that every task was done right and that every detail was addressed. Amongst a lot of hard work, there were times to share our mutual love for nature and the jobs that we do.

The native chaparral was a joy in which to work. The scent of yerba santa filled the air and the yucca shone in full bloom. The forest geology is awe inspiring. The Liebre Mountains and the Sierra Pelona Mountains are



the eastern-most part of the Western Transverse Ranges and are transitional to the San Gabriel Mountains to the east, the Inner Coast Ranges (Santa Susana Mountains, Topa Topa and Pine Mountain) to the west, the Tehachapi Mountains to the north, and the Mojave Desert to the northeast. Liebre Gulch is one of the headwaters of the Santa Clara River; and we worked at many sites from which we could look into its depths and down the golden sculptured sandstone walls, decorated with abundant plants living in them. Rancho La Liebre was a 48,800-acre Mexican land grant. Liebre means “hare” in Spanish and the rancho was named as such because of the abundance of hares (erroneously called “jack rabbits”) in the area. In fact, the north and south forks of Liebre Gulch looked to us like they were in the shape of a hare’s ears.

To access the work areas, we would enter from the south or north entrance of the Old Ridge Route. This used to be a highway, first opened in 1915, that linked the Los Angeles Basin and the San Joaquin Valley. At one point along the way, there were inns, hotels, and lookout points. There are now merely footprints of these structures, with stone steps here and a cobbled wall there. It quickly became unused, but a reminder of that history are the tracks of a Model T Ford cast into the road. The sense of history is palpable as is the impressive engineering of the pipelines that go through the mountains providing vital services to the many millions of people in Los Angeles.

Wildlife was ever present while we worked. We came close to bears, rattlesnakes, whiptails, bee swarms and a mountain lion. We worked hard in hot temperatures with long walks up and down steep canyons as we weeded the



restoration areas. The ancient, serene, and vibrant life of the Liebre Mountains and Sierra Pelona Mountains was a wonderful place to work; and the whole crew came away from the Angeles National Forest with this place having a very special place in our hearts.



Tamarisk in the Santa Ynez River and Sisquoc River: Meeting Today's Challenges

Doug Morgan, Operations Manager

The good news is that once again, CIR is working on eradicating tamarisk in the rugged and beautiful watersheds of the Santa Ynez River and Sisquoc River.

Those familiar with the two rivers know how difficult they both are to access. Once off the “more easily” traveled roads and trails, we enter a world that only a small number of people have ever visited. It is a wild and largely untouched world back there, and yet just a few miles away as the condor soars.

The bad news is that the tamarisk populations in these river watersheds are extensive and well established. In the Santa Ynez watershed, the fires and floods have created a fertile nursery for emerging Tamarisk that is capitalizing on the lack of competition and all the available nutrients and water.

These valuable ecosystems might be just a few seasons from becoming a Tamarisk-dominated system like many of the riparian systems in the southwestern United States and Baja California, Mexico. The battles to eliminate the tamarisk in the Santa Barbara backcountry are exceedingly difficult; but if we wait, it may be nearly impossible

Both grants require large amounts of matching money contributed from our end. The matches can be actual dollars or in-kind services from us or our friends. We accepted this challenge when we wrote the grant proposal; but now the world is a bit more challenging. The highly



Removing tamarisk is essential to preserving this beautiful backcountry.

contagious Covid-19 requires us to be physically distant, which is not hard in the wilderness, but is hard when it comes to transporting staff and volunteers in vehicles, and when it comes to feeding everyone.

Widespread fires in the National Forests have necessitated forest closures, and East Camino Cielo will be closed for repairs soon. When something is impossible, it only means that it takes a while longer, right?

Our original plan was to maximize the potential for volunteer participation. We planned volunteer-friendly trips with needed and valuable tasks being done by all levels of skills and physical abilities.

We planned greater flexibility in trip

duration, potentially allowing volunteers to enter a trip for 3-5 days, and we included weekends in all the trips to make it easier for people to get time off. All of these plans are severely compromised by Covid and the lack of mobility.

With the added challenges the simplest thing would be to walk away from this project. But the work is important, and our staff and volunteers are best suited to do the work. So, what can we do? We have completely redesigned the trips to accommodate the challenges.

We are working on turning the projects from one year to two years in duration. We are investigating other potential matching funds, and we

are working out the details to provide volunteer opportunities on these trips that are just a few days long to fit them in on long weekends.

We are also working on transportation and camp kitchen details that would keep everyone socially distant and healthy. And most importantly we are offering what might be a once in a lifetime chance to access some of this amazing territory in a safe and valuable way.

What can you do? Volunteer to go on one of the trips, or volunteer to provide critical support from home. Things you can do from home include monitoring the weather reports and communicating daily with the team in the wilderness.

There are also other ways you can help without joining us in the wilderness. [Please sign up here to volunteer.](#) Remember, we have valuable work for all levels of interest and ability.

Donate so others may go and do this valuable work. Inform as many of your friends and family to do the same. The rivers need us, and we need you to help save them.

Can we count on you?



CIR is working on eradicating tamarisk in the rugged and beautiful watersheds of the Santa Ynez River and Sisquoc River.



CIR crew overlooks Jameson Lake in the Santa Ynez River watershed.

Restoring the Ballona Wetlands

How CIR is Helping a Generational Landmark



Pampas grass is an invasive species in the Ballona Wetlands.

Cindy Kimmick, Board President

The Ballona Wetlands, in the coastal area of Los Angeles, were once an extensive expanse of marshes, mud flats, salt pans and sand dunes that covered about 2,000 acres and stretched from Playa del Rey to Venice and inland to the Baldwin Hills. Ballona Creek originally meandered through willows and native habitat, but was cemented into a straight, concrete channel nearly 100 years ago.

I grew up in West Los Angeles, and my father worked in Culver City at Hughes Aircraft (adjacent to Ballona Creek) in the 1960's.

My mother learned to drive in the extensive Hughes Aircraft parking lots (they bordered a 1.8 mile private runway), and I vividly remember watching the numerous burrowing owl population miraculously

appearing in front of their dens as we made endless loops around the huge, empty lot on the weekends.

The owls seemed to pop into existence out of nowhere as we drove by, and by the time we'd been around the loop a few times, all of the myriad burrows on the hillside had little feathered sentinels silently watching our progression.

The Ballona Wetlands today look very different than when I was a child in the 1960's when the western portion of the wetlands – once home to abundant fish and waterfowl – was being filled in to build Marina del Rey.

Development continued, and while the owls seemed to do alright next to the parking lot, I remember wondering where the owls were going to go when the Culver City Hughes aircraft facility was slated for development.

Part of the area was preserved, and today, the Ballona Wetlands Ecological Reserve, owned by the State of California and managed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife is about 600 acres in size. Invasive plants, or weeds, are present in much of the Reserve, crowding out native plants and providing little sustenance for local wildlife.

My daughters went to summer camp at the Star EcoStation in Culver City, first as campers, then as councillors, and one of their favorite activities was trekking to the nearby Ballona Wetlands.

Because of this, we were all very pleased to hear that Channel Islands Restoration recently completed Phase I of a project to remove pampas grass the Reserve.

Pampas grass has a striking appearance and has been a popular ornamental in California. It can



Above: The Ballona Wetlands before our work began.

grow to 10 feet tall, with large showy plumes. Native to the plains of Argentina, pampas grass is invasive in California, producing thousands of seeds a year, and is difficult to remove because of its sharp, sawlike blades.

CIR will return to the Ballona Wetlands in about a year,

to plant native willow trees and other native plants to complete the project.

We are hopeful that rare birds such as least Bell's vireo will utilize the wetland habitat after the native vegetation has become established.

Below: The wetlands after brush work has been completed.





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