



The Post

News from the Claremont Wildlands Conservancy

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CWC Leads Efforts to Expand Wilderness Park

In 1995 almost all of the 3000 acres of Claremont's foothills were in private hands. Today only 500 acres are. The Claremont Hills Wilderness Park provides approximately 2500 acres of protected public open space for passive recreation and enjoyment of nature to residents of the region.

A primary goal of Claremont Wildlands Conservancy since its founding in 2000 has been to expand the park across Claremont's foothills by working with the City of Claremont, the nonprofit Trust for Public Land, and private landowners to negotiate donations or fair-market-value purchase agreements for the remaining parcels. We have had many successes.

We recently facilitated a private land donation to the park of 20 acres along the western edge of Johnson's Pasture. It is currently in escrow. But our major focus in the last four years has been adding to the park the 103 prime acres of Clara Oaks Estates, as named by its owner and developer, Randy Lim, and his partners.

Clara Oaks bridges the slopes between between Claraboya and Webb Canyon Road just north of Webb Schools. It is a beautiful natural landscape, the site of the eastern headwaters of the San Gabriel River watershed and home to numerous species of native plants, birds and animals. Its location also helps form a link between Claremont's Wilderness Park and Los Angeles County's Marshall Canyon Regional Park, which extends toward the green corridor



Photo: Paul Faulstich

A view of Clara Oaks, a potential addition to the city's Wilderness Park.

along the San Gabriel foothills.

In 2016 Clara Oaks Estates, LLC acquired these acres with plans to build 40-47 luxury homes on the southern half of the property and donate the northern portion to the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park. But in 2018 the partners offered Claremont Wildlands Conservancy the opportunity to purchase the entire site, which would be added to the park. Since then, we have been actively exploring funding sources and applying for grants to raise the necessary funds to meet the independently appraised value. It's a heavy lift.

Currently Clara Oaks Estates, LLC is applying for entitlements to the City for development of the property. However, as a first priority, the partners are still open to an outright sale of the entire parcel for the park if terms can be agreed upon. We are

working closely with Trust for Public Land to acquire funds from two voter-approved measures. One is California's 2018 Proposition 68 funds, which are allocated to this region through the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy. The other is L.A. County's 2016 Measure A. These funds are finally about to be released.

If we fail, it is likely that 40 or more luxury homes will be built on the Clara Oaks property. If we succeed, we will save this splendid natural preserve for foxes and mule deer, for laurel sumac and western sycamores, and for hikers and nature lovers now and in future generations.

~Lissa Petersen is a past president of the CWC, currently a Board member and chair of the Acquisitions Committee.

Cougars in the Claremont Hills

Let's take a look at cougars, also called mountain lions, pumas, and panthers. Cougars survive at low population densities, and the size of their territories depends on terrain, vegetation, and abundance of prey. In Southern California, the territory for male lions is about 100 square miles; the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park is just under 4 square miles.

With remote trailcams, I've documented three generations of a single cougar lineage in the CHWP in the last five years. Females have two to four kittens. They nurse for about two months, then start to travel with their mom, at which time she teaches them to hunt. They remain together for up to two years.

Cougars favor habitats with underbrush and rocky areas for stalking. They are ambush predators, hunting species as small as rodents and even insects. But their primary food is deer. Without cougars, deer will multiply and overgraze, depleting plants used as habitat and food for other animals. In healthy ecosystems, herbivores are kept in balance; trees regenerate, which reduces stream bank erosion, increases water retention, and boosts biodiversity. These ecological connections are called trophic cascades, and respecting them is

critical to good management of protected areas.

I once happened upon a cougar feasting some thirty yards below me in a CHWP canyon. I could hear it chewing and purring, and I tried to get close enough to observe it, but it scaled a tree and leaped eight feet to the rim of the canyon before I ever caught a glimpse.



Photo: Paul Faulstich

Keep in mind that these big cats are essentially no threat to humans. I love the statistic that a person is more likely to be killed by a vending machine than a mountain lion. California has the most cougars of any state, yet one of the lowest rates of cougar conflicts with humans.

Probably, this is because California hasn't allowed cougar hunting since 1972. Here's the correlation: hunters prize adults as trophies. When mature cougars are killed, young cats become orphaned, or move into the emptied territories, closer to human contact. These inexperienced cougars are more likely to engage in conflict with people. Ironically, heavy hunting results in more frequent conflicts with people—the opposite of what one might expect.

Protecting wildlife is critical to healthy and resilient ecosystems. Trees, wildflowers, and butterflies increase with healthy cougar numbers. Even water retention increases. So too, I believe, does human fulfillment.

~Paul Faulstich is a Claremont resident, professor of Environmental Analysis at Pitzer College, and trailcammer extraordinaire.

Nancy Hamlett, Citizen Scientist, Pilots Two Projects in CHWP

The Claremont Hills Wilderness Park is a great place for volunteer and citizen scientists to explore and learn about Southern California's native plant and animal species. Within the park there is an abundance of invasive, nonnative species. These can often disrupt native habitats. An important focus of the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park Master Plan is monitoring the natural environment to ensure that native and sensitive species survive and minimize the introduction and spread of nonnative species.

Nancy Hamlett, a retired professor of biology and a longtime resident of Claremont, is piloting two collection projects with the Friends of the Wilderness Park (FWP), the citizen support group established in the Master Plan. She (photo opposite) and the FWP

have created a collection project using an online network tool called iNaturalist. The project, called "Biota of the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park," focuses on everything that lives in the park. So far, this project has documented nearly 1,200 observations and 358 species. A second CHWP collection project, using Calflora, another networked online application, is called "concerned with weeds"; its name speaks for itself. These online networks are helpful tools that allow us to combine our efforts in the Park and provide a mechanism to help scientists and naturalists share information. They have mobile phone apps that make it easy to upload photographs and quickly record observations.

Nancy's work also includes finding and documenting sensitive species within the park, such as the crotch bumble bee

(*Bombus crotchii*). This bee is one of many species that have suffered a decline in population; it is now listed as a candidate endangered species. To bring awareness to its plight, California Department of Fish and Wildlife's website featured a photograph of the crotch bumble bee taken by Nancy in the CHWP, their "photo of the month" for February 2020.

In addition to her work with the Friends of the Wilderness Park, Nancy has been the volunteer coordinator and webmaster for the Claremont Colleges' Bernard Field Station for over ten years. Nancy's knowledge and tireless volunteer work is invaluable to the CHWP and the City of Claremont.

~Vicki Salazar is a CWC Board Member and volunteer with the Friends of the Wilderness Park.

Letter From CWC's President

As I complete my third year as president of the Claremont Wildlands Conservancy, I am grateful for the vision set out twenty years ago by our founders—Nancy Wing, Suzanne Thompson, and Ellen Perry—as well as the organizational foundation established by our previous president, Lissa Petersen. We have an exceptional volunteer board dedicated to achieving our purpose of expanding the amount of accessible and protected open space in the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park and surrounding area.

Our monthly board meetings have historically been a time to share news, ideas, and project progress while reinforcing our friendships and passion for open space. Our gatherings were limited to zoom calls during the pandemic, but we still made progress on several fronts as you will read in this newsletter, particularly in the effort to acquire Clara Oaks for the Wilderness Park.

It is important to celebrate accomplishments, and even more so in times of uncertainty and discord. Since 1964 the Land and Water Conservation Fund has helped to conserve thousands of acres across the United States. It was a bipartisan commitment to safeguard natural areas, water resources, and our cultural heritage and to provide recreation opportunities to all Americans. All fifty states have

benefited from the annual \$900 million in royalties paid by energy companies drilling for oil and gas on the Outer Continental Shelf. This funding was not protected from diversion to other uses until August of 2020, when the Great American Outdoors Act was signed into law. CWC wrote letters of support to our legislators, and we can now celebrate this promise fully kept into the future while also celebrating that this act had bipartisan support.

The Trust for Public Land states, “The COVID-19 pandemic underscored that close-to-home parks are crucial to a community’s quality of life.” Many people in our region turned to the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park for fresh air, exercise, meditation, solace, and a break from the isolation and stresses of the pandemic. During this period of economic instability and quarantine, public land and parks are seeing historically high usage and are an essential part of how many cope and recover.

Larry and I coped by spending a week backpacking on the Rae Lakes Loop in Kings Canyon National Park. We encountered considerate and masked hikers of all ages. Unfortunately, rangers in our Wilderness Park have not always found visitors willing to wear masks and to maintain social distancing. We certainly appreciate

their efforts and encourage all who visit the Park to express thanks to our rangers.

Access to the CHWP was restricted more than people would have liked due to a combination of the pandemic and fire-related red-flag warnings. Lack of parking fees re-

duced the income necessary to pay salaries of rangers and other Park expenses at the same time that rangers were asked to spread their efforts to enforce mask-wearing to other parks within the City. These are challenging times that require flexibility and balance.

In 2017 the Wilderness Park expanded by 463 acres when Pomona College donated Evey Canyon to the City. There have been significant challenges to integrating these acres into the CHWP, including security at the parking lot at the entrance to the Evey Canyon trail and safety for pedestrians parking across Mt. Baldy Road. There is no continuity between the fire road at the CHWP and Evey Canyon since a portion of the fire road crosses private land. We advocate for access while acknowledging that this is another area in need of flexibility and balance.

The City continues to implement the CHWP Master Plan and to foster a culture of respect for wildlife in and neighbors living next to the Park. The Friends of the Wilderness Park, the City’s volunteer support group, continued to contribute to establishing this culture. They greeted visitors and picked up litter on the second Saturday of every month, mapped invasive species, and established an overall plan for signage until the pandemic restricted gatherings of people at the Park.

I hope that all of you receiving our newsletter feel welcome to join our efforts by serving on one of our committees or joining us at our booth on Earth Day or Independence Day when pandemic conditions allow. Please take a look at our web site and let us know if you can find all that you hope to see. We welcome your comments and contributions of stories or photos. If you would like to contribute photos to our gallery, please email them with the photographer’s name and captions to: info@claremontwildlands.org. I hope to see you on the trails!

Don’t forget to “like” us on Facebook



Photo: Vicki Salazar

Nancy Hamlett documents plants in her CHWP project.

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www.claremontwildlands.org

The Claremont Wildlands Conservancy (CWC) is a non-profit, grassroots organization dedicated to keeping the foothills wild and free for all.

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Sycamore Canyon Gets Repairs

Good News! Restoration work has begun on the Sycamore Canyon portion of the CHWP.

Phase 1 has been completed with the reconstruction and relocation of the stairs at the trailhead near the Thompson Creek Trail.

Phase 2 will focus on the rest of the trail, including the addition of "landing pads" on switchbacks. The hope is to get this second phase completed before the end of this fiscal year.

Phase 3 will address erosion. This will be ongoing and will include the Friends of the Wilderness Park and the help of Scouts and reserve Rangers.

~Meg Mathies is a CWC Board member and a volunteer with the Friends of the Wilderness Park.



New stairs at Sycamore Canyon.

Photo: Vicki Salazar