



Ventana Wildlife Society

2023 ANNUAL REPORT





Cover photo and this page: Jade (1204), at seven months old, leisurely perches just beyond her nest, stretching her wings and observing the world from the safety of her home.



Dear Supporters,

Each year, it seems we face new challenges. In 2023, the emergence of the highly pathogenic avian influenza presented a serious threat to bird populations, particularly the iconic condors that are at the heart of our conservation efforts. We begin this annual report with the story of how we have worked with our recovery team collaborators to prepare for the potential spread of this disease to the central California population.

We are used to meeting the challenges involved with recovering a critically-endangered species, whether it is avian flu, major wildfires, or the ongoing threat of lead poisoning. We are proud of how we have rebounded from the catastrophic Dolan Fire, which destroyed our beloved condor sanctuary in 2020. Thanks to your support, we have made fantastic progress this year on rebuilding the physical structures and ensuring that the sanctuary remains a haven for native wildlife. This winter, we also look forward to releasing 10 young condors to the wild - this large cohort will help bring the population size back to where it was before the fire. On the lead front, our team has developed exciting new web applications to increase the impact of our non-lead ammunition outreach.

While navigating these conservation strategies, we have intensified our commitment to education in

our local communities. We believe that educating youth about the importance of wildlife conservation is crucial for the future of our planet. Our programs aim to inspire and empower young minds, instilling a deep respect and love for nature that will drive future conservation efforts. We are excited to share with you in this report how we are using new grant opportunities to provide a richer offering of programs that engage our communities.

Your unwavering support, no matter what the challenge, has been nothing short of inspirational. Your commitment, whether through donations or volunteering, has been the cornerstone of our efforts to rebuild and recover from the ashes of the Dolan Fire. Your contributions have not only helped in the physical reconstruction but have also bolstered our spirits, reminding us of the community's resilience and dedication to wildlife conservation. Whatever the new year brings, we know that together, we will continue to make strides in our mission to conserve native wildlife and their habitats.

With heartfelt appreciation,



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Executive Director



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See page 10

EDUCATION & OUTREACH

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PHOTOS BY TIM HUNTINGTON AND VWS STAFF
SPANISH VERSION ONLINE AT VENTANAWS.ORG



A New Strain

For a condor flock afflicted by lead poisoning and a recent wildfire, the emerging threat of avian flu is a scary prospect. The threat practically reached a defcon status among biologists when a highly pathogenic strain of avian influenza (HPAI) decimated wild bird populations in Europe in 2021, and then spread to the United States in 2022. Experts think the H5N1 strain of HPAI has killed millions of wild birds.

It didn't take long to discover that the critically-endangered California Condor was clearly in the crosshairs of the virus. In March 2023, the Peregrine Fund noticed a condor acting strangely among the flock they manage in Arizona and Utah. By mid-April, they had a full epidemic on their hands with the confirmed deaths of 21 condors due to HPAI. Thankfully, the virus did not spread to other populations over the summer, but the reverberations of these losses were felt by everyone involved in the condor recovery program. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) set up an incident command team to coordinate a response to the outbreak as it developed.

Ventana Wildlife Society sprang into action, with the condor crew devoting 100% of their effort to preparing for the possibility of an outbreak in central California. "HPAI is now all around us, so it is not a matter of if, but when, an outbreak will occur," Kelly Sorenson stated. He was right. In the spring, a Turkey Vulture was confirmed to have died from HPAI in Big Sur, not far from the Condor Sanctuary. **To deal with the impending threat, we began minimizing supplemental feeding at the sanctuary to limit condor groupings. We purchased quarantine pens to provide greater flexibility for isolating condors and providing vaccinations.** We also arranged veterinary support and coordinated with Monterey SPCA to site the pens if quarantines became necessary.

We think of these scavengers as nature's clean-up crew, and perhaps more robust than other birds when it comes to withstanding disease, but the spread of HPAI in California Condors

makes sense. Condors are highly social, living in extended family groups that feed and roost communally. Just like flocking species of waterfowl, which are prone to avian flu, condors can easily come into contact with fecal matter from another individual, thereby spreading the virus from an infected bird. Although the transmission of HPAI from birds to humans is infrequent, the condor crew adopted personal protective equipment early on to ensure their own safety.

Time was our biggest ally as the summer passed without HPAI reaching condors in California. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) approved emergency authorization for use of a vaccine that had been developed for poultry. Could this vaccine be the answer for condors? Trials were developed by USFWS, USDA, and the U.S. Geological Survey to determine the safety of the vaccine for condors and test the level of vaccine-induced immunity. For that, they turned to a more common and widespread vulture species. Twenty Black Vultures were used as surrogates, and results indicated strong protection with the vaccine, with no adverse effects.



With the vaccine now set to provide protection for California Condors, we are more hopeful that we can avoid an outbreak here in central California. The stakes are high, considering that HPAI impacted nearly 20% of the Arizona population in a matter of weeks, including eight breeding pairs. The Peregrine Fund believes that because of HPAI, their recovery efforts have been set back a decade or more. We think the impact could have been even worse. With the vaccine now providing some reassurance that we can avoid another epidemic, we continue to monitor the flock on high alert as the temperatures fall and we settle in for another winter on the coast.



While vaccinations and testing should provide greater protection, our new quarantine pens offer the chance to isolate condors if needed to prevent the spread of avian flu within the population.

The Non-Lead Web

With lead poisoning still a threat to California Condor recovery, Ventana Wildlife Society remains committed to helping hunters and ranchers make the switch to non-lead ammunition. The transition has been a challenge for many, because market availability of copper ammunition has been limited since 2020, when the pandemic and widespread social unrest combined to create a supply and demand imbalance. Availability has been especially poor for non-lead .22 and .17 rimfire, the ammunition widely used to control small non-game mammals on rural ranches.



Derek Witmer

We became a licensed ammunition vendor to help facilitate access to non-lead ammunition, and we distributed over 2,000 boxes of free non-lead ammunition in 2022. With the addition of Derek Witmer to our staff, we are on pace to exceed that total in 2023. A retired Cal Fire Chief, and a hunter himself, Derek is well connected to the communities in our highest priority areas. With ammunition availability a concern, our goal is not just to distribute a lot of ammunition. We want to distribute ammunition to the individual hunters and ranchers who have the greatest potential impact for condor conservation.

The condors themselves help determine where the impact is greatest. We use GPS transmitters to remotely monitor condor movement patterns, and

we can identify locations where the birds are likely scavenging, and possibly ingesting lead. Condor field biologist Evan McWreath, working with us from his new home in West Virginia, designed an automated web application to streamline this process. We use the application to easily identify landowners at parcels of interest and keep track of our contacts with those individuals. “Evan has simplified the GIS analyses for us, allowing us to be more proactive and focused in our approach,” says biologist Mike Stake, who has led our non-lead outreach since 2012. With the additional staff and resources, we have been able to increase distribution of non-lead ammunition in our highest risk areas in 2023, yet stay within our grant budgets.

While our focused outreach helps conserve wildlife in central California, we are also using the web to help hunters and ranchers reduce lead exposure all across the continent. In summer 2023, we launched Rimfire Round-Up, a website designed by specialist Tim Huntington to identify non-lead rimfire brands and connect hunters and ranchers to the stores providing them in stock. For California residents, subject to state regulations requiring face-to-face ammunition transfers, we periodically update local store inventory, showing where they can go to purchase

non-lead rimfire. For hunters living outside of California, where shipping is not restricted, we provide links to online retailers with the selected product available and ready to ship.

Rimfire Round-Up not only tackles the availability issue but benefits local businesses by directing customers to their stores. We will help fuel this traffic by teaming up with local stores to host sales events for non-lead products. In these ways, Rimfire Round-Up can be a win for hunters, businesses, and wildlife. We hope that Rimfire Round-Up will grow with additional funding and encourage more stores to maintain a strong inventory of non-lead products on their shelves. The hunting community and the retail industry will play a prominent role in reducing lead exposure for condors and other wildlife. Ventana Wildlife Society looks forward to bringing them together.

We thank US Fish and Wildlife Service, Monterey County Fish and Game Advisory Commission,

Marisla Foundation, and private donors for their funding support of non-lead ammunition and outreach.



RIMFIREROUNDUP.COM

Rebuilding and Retooling

August 1, 2023 was a special day for Ventana Wildlife Society and the condor recovery project. For the first time since the Dolan Wildfire destroyed the Condor Sanctuary in 2020, we were able to trap and handle condors. “I feel like breaking out the champagne!” joked Joe Burnett, as he watched several condors waiting in the brand new pen. “We got five of the big dogs here!” he exclaimed, referring to a group of birds with a cumulative 84 years of life experience.

This trap-up event was about more than just testing out the new release facility. Handling these birds again is critical for maintaining transmitters and monitoring the health of the flock. “I felt like we were doing our job again,” said Kara Faddon, who spent 14 straight hours in the adjoining blind trapping the birds with fellow biologist Danaé Mouton. While there has been no shortage of work for the crew since the fire, they are quick to point out the value of Pinnacles National Park trapping condors at their facility while we focused on the rebuild. “Pinnacles had our back big time,” Joe affirms.

Results for the first five condors demonstrate the importance of being able to trap birds again. Three of the five had been living in “stealth” mode, meaning that their transmitters had stopped working. All were equipped with new transmitters, allowing the crew to finally resume monitoring their movements in the field. Each bird was tested for avian flu and found to be negative. This was also an opportunity to give each bird a fresh numbered tag. “We can actually read Minerva’s tag again,” laughed Kara.



For the crew decked out in their personal protective equipment, the new release facility was a marked improvement. “It was a relief to see how well it worked,” says Joe, commenting on the increased working space. The extra space allows more room for equipment like the centrifuge for handling blood samples. “We used to have to walk all the way up to the truck and plug it into the cigarette adapter,” Joe remembers with a smile. **The new release facility will allow more flexibility in conducting research, like studying avian flu, and the added space will maximize bird comfort during what can be a stressful process for wildlife.**



This grand opening of the release facility was just one milestone in the Condor Sanctuary rebuild process, which will culminate with the completion of the research facility and bunkhouse in 2024. Once again, extra space will be one of the chief improvements, presenting exciting opportunities for expanding our conservation efforts and collaboration. Some things will never change, though, like the sight of condors in flight, framed by that spectacular ocean view. With material and labor costs increasing our original budget in the aftermath of the pandemic, we thank our many donors who are making this rebuild possible.

Trending Up

Condor productivity isn't what it used to be - and that's a good thing.



Fifteen years ago, biologist Joe Burnett ventured into the Big Sur backcountry and discovered something that changed condor recovery on the central coast. Expecting the worst for a condor nest that took a direct hit from the brutal 2008 Basin-Complex Wildfire, Joe scaled the burnt redwood tree and was surprised to find the chick alive in its cavity among the ashes. Phoenix, as the chick became known, was the first condor in central California to be raised in the wild by its biological parents. His survival was proof that condors could produce young on their own in the wild, and provided hope for the future growth of a self-sustainable population.

Do we still have that hope 15 years later? A quick look at the condor nest data over the years tells us that we should indeed. While we feel a certain nostalgia remembering the remarkable story of Phoenix, productivity was

actually slow during the first 10 years from 2008-2017. Condors in Big Sur and Pinnacles National Park successfully raised a combined average of 1.3 chicks per year to fledging during that time, with no chicks recorded at all in two of those years. By comparison, condors raised a combined average of 3.8 young per year in the last five years from 2018-2022.

More than 30 condor chicks have fledged in the wild here in central California, and productivity is trending upward. This positive trend comes even after we scaled back some nest management activities, such as nest entries and health checks.

Greater nest productivity gives the condor population a better shot at withstanding the periodic surges in mortality, like what we have experienced with wildfire and lead poisoning in the last few years. Meanwhile, the birds continue to inspire with their stories. We have Iniko surviving the Dolan Wildfire in 2020. We have 26-year-old Traveler raising a chick for the first time in 2022. And of course we have Phoenix coming full circle and producing a chick of his own in 2018. You can follow stories like these by tuning into our monthly Condor Chat, or checking out our latest films. Yes, the condors are giving us every reason to maintain hope for a self-sustainable population. They are doing their part. We humans just have to do ours.



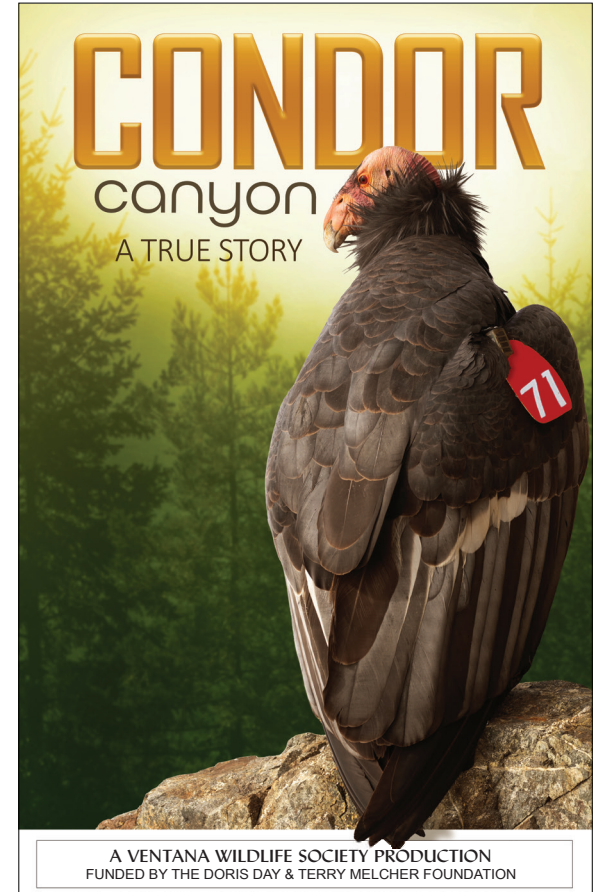
VENTANA AT THE MOVIES

In a world where condors are the stars, Ventana Wildlife Society is now presenting feature films aimed to inspire broader support for this critically-endangered species. Our first feature, *Giants of Big Sur: California Condor Stories*, premiered on December 10, 2022 at Lighthouse Cinemas in Pacific Grove. The showing of this three-part documentary was followed by a question and answer session with our staff and the House of 8 production team. Of course, the audience understood that true A-listers like Redwood Queen (190), Phoenix (477), and Traveler (171) had other commitments and were unable to attend.



Coming soon is another documentary film in the works, *Condor Canyon*, delving deeper into the lives of these iconic birds. Funded by the Doris Day and Terry Melcher Foundation, *Condor Canyon* will let the birds tell their true stories through film. We are sure these stars will shine with 6K resolution and an original music soundtrack.

Condor Canyon will show condors like you have never seen them before. We will take you to a condor nest high in a redwood, fly you over the central coast after a wildfire, give you a front seat with the scavengers at a fresh carcass, and show a myriad of wildlife big and small that make the central coast unique. Look for *Condor Canyon* to premier in 2024.



As Condor Canyon nears completion, we are exploring networks and viewing options to generate the best reach possible.

A Helping Hand

For some of us, the day begins by gathering up the radio telemetry gear and a spotting scope. And a cup of coffee. But the condor trackers are not necessarily condor biologists. They are Ventana Wildlife Society volunteers who have completed a rigorous training program and now donate their time and travel to collect condor tracking data.

Biologist Danaé Mouton coordinates the volunteer crew, a group of 14 strong and growing. “They are an awesome and special group,” she says, “and give us a more consistent tracking presence on the coast. They save us a lot of time,” she adds, “freeing up the biologists for other essential tasks.” That contribution can’t be overstated. Volunteers contributed 762 hours of work during the first nine months of 2023.

This is a dedicated crew, coming from as far away as the San Francisco Bay Area to spend at least one day per month along the Big Sur coast. While some are retired or in the workforce, Danaé is proud of the opportunity that the program provides for students. It is the kind of field experience she wishes that she had as a student. She designed the program to reimburse students for their travel costs, so that they can better afford the opportunity.

Once the antennas are up, the volunteers listen for the steady beeps indicating the presence of a nearby condor. A signal is great information, but a visual is even better. **The volunteers pay attention to any behavior they observe, such as feeding, breeding displays, and signs of injuries. Each morning, they are provided a (hopefully short) list of focus birds, or individuals that haven’t been seen in a while.** “They are super on top of missing birds,” observes biologist Kara Fadden, “there are times when they pick them up really quickly.”

The volunteers are also the face of Ventana Wildlife Society when they are tracking in the high-traffic areas of Big Sur. Tourists often see our volunteers and stop to ask about condors, hoping for a



once in a lifetime encounter. Volunteers can often relate to the public in ways that seasoned biologists do not. “They’ve brought a lot to the table that I don’t think any of us really anticipated. It’s been cool to see everyone get so engaged and be so involved” says biologist Darren Gross. This level of engagement makes Danaé feel certain that the volunteers can eventually train new volunteers as the program expands.

For now, she looks forward to expanding the role for each volunteer, rather than just recruitment. An enhanced role could include nest monitoring for what we hope will be an increasing number of pairs, and providing outreach at local tabling events. We are proud to have such a talented group and appreciate how they have stepped up our conservation impact.

→ Volunteers contributed **762 HOURS OF WORK**
during the first nine months of 2023!

Volunteer Priscilla Tracy is a part of a strong volunteer team tracking California Condors along the central coast.

Facing page photo:

Volunteers gather at our office to enjoy an afternoon of gratitude and recognition. Left to right, top row - Darryl Zimmerman, Paul Ferguson, Elizabeth Ferguson, Jan Loomis, Anthony Duggan, Kelly Lance, Priscilla Tracy, and Mary Kenney. Bottom row - Adam Molnar and VWS biologists Danaé Mouton, Kara Fadden, and Darren Gross. Not pictured - Tim Huntington, Jen Nagel, Libby Rouan, Richard Ruh, and Cheryl Thiele.

Deepening Local Connections

The past year has been one of incredible growth for our Education and Outreach Program, and we are still settling into and filling out the corners of our new footprint. With new grants funding the expansions of our existing programs, and new partnerships continuing to be developed, we are reaching more folks and building deeper connections within our local communities. But before we dive into the new developments, let's put them in perspective and take a look at the strong foundation that they are being built upon.



Our first education program took place in 1992 and consisted of just four weeks of summer camp for youth in Big Sur. Activities included visiting our bird banding and mist netting research station along the Big Sur River, hiking through Creamery Meadow (before our habitat restoration

team planted it with riparian species), and learning about the Bald Eagles VWS released between 1986 and 1994. It was provided not by educators per se, but our staff of biologists, with none other than our own Executive Director Kelly Sorenson –



then field biologist – in the lead. Over the coming years, various education coordinators added their flair and expertise to the growth of youth programs, including Stephanie Lee, Susan Sachs, Holly Barnes, Sarah Margolis and Sheila Foster.

Fast forward to 2004, when our current Education & Outreach Manager Alena Porte joined the organization, inheriting a full suite of programs serving Monterey County, including ten weeks of Natural Science Discovery Camp and Outdoor Leadership Training; five weekly nature classes; a Natural Resource Recruitment Workshop program for teens incarcerated at the Monterey County Youth Center; community outreach; school presentations and events. Between 1992 and 2012, the VWS Education and Outreach Program was mostly a one-woman show, with seasonal instructors to assist with the busy summer camp season, and 1-2 instructors helping the rest of the year.



Bursts of growth occurred in 2012 when a second full-time position was added, and again with a third full-time employee in 2016.

Then in late 2022, the program exploded in growth. We were awarded three large grants that all started at the same time, and our full-time education crew doubled overnight. In addition to our Education and Outreach Manager, we quickly found ourselves with five program coordinators and upwards of 15 part-time instructors, interns and service learners! So, what are all of these educators up to? Well, our original programs still live on through our expanded Youth & Outreach Programs and our Teen & Teacher Program, while our young Wellness Through Nature Program gets a cameo on Page 14. Read on to learn about our two newest “community hub” programs.

COMMUNITY HUBS

The first community hub began in Salinas and stemmed from our humble nature prescription program, which was started in 2019 with Dr. Pedro Moreno, a family physician in East Salinas. Now in partnership with the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) the fully-funded Alisal Farmworker Family Nature Prescriptions Program focuses on removing barriers to experiencing the outdoors for families and encourages making the outdoors a regular part of a healthy family lifestyle. Participants are recruited through WIC, as well as the weekly Alisal Farmer’s Market and FreshRx Program.

Our second community hub - Community Bird School & Nature Program at La

Paz Middle School in Salinas, focuses on nature awareness through bird observation. Students attend a series of bird watching classes during the school day with Bird School Project, one of our partnering organizations, and have the option to also attend off-site birding trips with our educators. Multi-generational programming provides opportunities for students to share their knowledge with, and lead activities for, their families.

Both community hub programs are funded by the Outdoor Equity Grants Program (created through AB 209 and administered by California State Parks, Office of Grants and Local Services), and provide multi-generational, and multi-lingual experiences. By participating in these experiences, youth and families develop a deeper connection to the outdoors and increase their knowledge of nature and parks, with the hope of sharing that spark with their communities. Teen leadership and regular community club gatherings inform the direction of programs and add depth to the experiences.

Although we are still navigating some growing pains and settling into a new and improved groove, we are so excited to be able to make a deeper and more meaningful impact in the communities we serve. Check out our community hub program pages on FaceBook to see what they are each up to.



Wellness Through Nature

We stopped in our tracks one morning at Moss Landing as a Snowy Plover ran across the sand. Five kids and four adults trained their binoculars on the little bird as it paused. This was just what we were looking for. “Sometimes they like to hide in the footprints,” biologist Mike Stake suggested, widening his search. **Sure enough, a closer scan of the beach revealed the heads of 10 more Snowy Plovers crouching low in small divots. “That is so cool,” said one of the boys quietly.**

Education Coordinator Graciela Rodriguez had to smile. These were some of the first words she heard from the shy youngster since he arrived that morning for his first class with Ventana Wildlife Society. We were there to connect with nature, and the threatened Snowy Plovers were not the only attraction. Dolphins lunged over the ocean surface, sea otters floated on the surf, and Sanderlings played tag with the tides. By the end of our walk, the once reticent young man was drawing Snowy Plovers in his journal and joining the other kids in a nature art competition. It was a wonderful start to the day.

Nature can have that effect on our well-being. Spending time in nature is linked to improved mental health and emotional well-being. According to ParkRx, there are more than 400 studies that demonstrate the numerous health

benefits that nature provides. Since our first collaboration with Dr. Pedro Moreno in East Salinas on ‘nature prescription programming’ in 2019, we have continued to grow specific ‘Wellness Through Nature’ and community-based programming in the communities that have historically been marginalized.

Today, our foundation-building work with Dr. Moreno has blossomed into a full, stand-alone program serving the East Salinas community, and utilizing the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) center as its hub. This, and our second community hub program, are both highlighted in another article. We are also piloting Wellness Through Nature programs in Soledad. This past year, Yulissa Ochoa, one of our five Education Coordinators connected with Registered Dietitian Julia Snell through their mutual involvement with the Fitness and Nutrition Collaborative of the Central Coast. At the time, Julia was overseeing The Food Smarts Program at the Soledad Medical Clinic, teaching the local community about making healthy food choices and providing patients with food boxes delivered to them. Julia knew this was the perfect collaboration of programs for her patients to have a healthy balance of food security and nature access. Out of this connection, a small community-based program has begun to take shape, with a weekly youth class, and weekend family programs.



Above photo: Senior Wildlife Biologist, Mike Stake, joins the North Monterey County youth program helping to locate Snowy Plovers on Moss Landing State Beach.



Snowy Plover

We know that there are many health care professionals that would like to become involved in utilizing nature for patient wellness – many more than we can reach through our own programs – which is why we are also involved in local efforts to bring the ParkRx model to Monterey County. Ventana Wildlife Society is collaborating with Blue Zones Monterey, Monterey Peninsula Regional Park District, Salinas Valley Health and others

"Yulissa was always quick to respond and coordinate with. I felt safe referring my 8-12 year old clients to this field trip experience where they could learn and thrive." Julie Snell, Dietician

on the development of a shared vision and messaging, with a webpage for Monterey County Rx to go live in 2024. The page will house a calendar of events and a map of local accessible green spaces, as well as provide a platform to share best practices, toolkits, and case studies. The platform will extend our reach, facilitate networking between agencies, and strengthen our own Wellness Through Nature programs. The start of a Monterey County Rx collaborative working group has the capacity to really add additional depth to the programs we now offer.



Wellness Through Nature Coordinator Yulissa Ochoa peeks into the frame during a group photo taken of Soledad participants during an unforgettable Family Campout in Big Sur.

Back at Moss Landing, the plover-filled morning dissolved into a hot afternoon, and the birds disappeared amid the growing crowd of human visitors. The youth class was replaced by a group of older students from La Paz Middle School. They took their time on the walk, even though there wasn't much wildlife for Mike and coordinator Cece Gutierrez to point out this time. The Snowy Plovers had moved elsewhere, and even the gulls had become scarce. But the kids didn't seem to mind. A few peered toward the horizon hoping to glimpse the spout of a whale. Some examined seashells and invertebrates in the sand. Others simply gazed into the sparkling brilliance of the ocean. They were happy just being there.

When people have meaningful outdoor experiences, their health, quality of life and social well-being improve, and in turn our communities become stronger and more sustainable.

ParkRx is an effort of the Institute at the Golden Gate and the National Recreation and Parks Association, with support from the National Park Service. This group of park agencies, healthcare providers, and community organizations were inspired by the emerging trend of prescribing nature to improve mental and physical health, and developed the National ParkRx Initiative with the goal of supporting the emerging community of practitioners who were prescribing nature to their patients.

Teaching Educators

Companies always want to know how many people they serve. Professional sports teams post the game's attendance, often providing an exact number, even if tens of thousands file through the turnstiles. Some totals are less exact, like the billions served at a fast food restaurant. Even non-profit organizations, like Ventana Wildlife Society, will keep a clicker within reach at a tabling event to keep track of visitors. For years, we have been proud to serve more than 1,000 youth annually with outdoor education programs, and we have increased our strategic plan goal to serve 1,200.

But as fascinated as we are with numbers, our education impact goes far beyond attendance at our youth programs. That's because we are teaching teachers, through a grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). **Using their educational framework - the Meaningful Watershed Education Experiences (MWEEs) - we are training teachers to introduce students to local environmental issues.** Through engaging activities, teachers provide practical lessons on how humans impact local watersheds.

Teen and Teacher Coordinator Samantha Schmitt is at the forefront of this innovative curriculum. Any weekend might find her gathered with teachers at a local pond,



demonstrating how it can be fun to measure water quality. She helps educators create their own mini ecosystems in the classroom, with toy houses, tractors, and a pitcher of water for rain. She shows them how their students can even create an ecosystem in a jar. "It is a way to hit all your state standards in a fun and engaging way," she tells the teachers, "to intertwine outdoor education into your curriculum."

In 2023, Samantha worked with educators in a variety of venues. She presented a program on creating climate conscious communities at a literacy summit in early spring. At a state conference sponsored by the Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education, she led a workshop that showcased the mini ecosystem activity that has become a staple of the VWS-MWEE curriculum. Locally, she has led educator campouts and field trips, strengthening our organization's relationship with the California Association of Science Educators.

By providing outdoor education programs for teachers, who share these lessons with students, we can expect exponential growth in the number of youth we reach. It might not be billions served, but the VWS Teacher Development program is changing how we measure our impact. The extra contact we have with students through their teachers might mean that we don't know exactly how many we serve every year. Just imagining what that number could be, though, is an exciting thought.



What to expect?

Your job is to create an ecosystem in a closed jar that can take care of itself. You can expect to see plant growth, different stages of the water cycle, and have the ability to recreate other self-sustaining jars at home.

Materials

- Clear glass jar
- Popsicle sticks
- Rocks
- Moss
- Soil
- Decorative coarse sand & rocks
- plants & moss

The Breakdown

The layers in your jar should be visible

1st Layer: Larger Rocks & Gravel

2nd Layer: Moss

3rd Layer: Soil

4th Layer: Decorative Rocks & Sand

5th Layer: Plants & Moss



Education Funders

- Big Sur International Marathon
- California Natural Resources Agency
- California State Parks
- Community Foundation for Monterey County
- Environmental Resources Management
- Harden Foundation
- Monterey Peninsula Foundation
- Nancy Buck Ransom Foundation
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)
- Parks California
- Pebble Beach Foundation
- State Coastal Conservancy
- The David & Lucile Packard Foundation

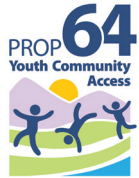


Education and Outreach



COMMUNITY HUB PROGRAMS are funded by the Outdoor Equity Grants Program, created through AB 209 and administered by California State Parks, Office of Grants and Local Services.

VWS works with two different communities to provide monthly on-site Community Outdoor Club Meetings, as well as off-site programs that include transportation. Weekly off-site nature classes for youth occur during the school year while club meetings, single-day field trips and overnight campouts for multigenerational participants occur year-round.



YOUTH PROGRAMS use funds provided by the Control, Regulate, and Tax Adult Use of Marijuana Act (Proposition 64) for the Youth Community Access Grant Program.

Using nature as a classroom, VWS fosters understanding and appreciation of wildlife and natural processes, encouraging children to contribute personally in everyday life to the protection of our precious, wild ecosystems. Whether it's journaling in the shade of a giant redwood tree, watching sea lions from a kayak, exploring tidepools, or watching a condor take flight, our programs generate memories that will last a lifetime.



WELLNESS THROUGH NATURE, is supported by the State Coastal Conservancy to provide coastal experiences for people and communities who face challenges to accessing or enjoying the coast.

VWS introduces youth and families to the health benefits of spending time in nature - which research shows can increase physical, mental and emotional wellbeing - and empowers them to make healthy choices. We work with healthcare providers, assisting them to 'prescribe nature' and then focusing on overcoming their patient's barriers to filling those prescriptions by providing bilingual instruction, transportation, outdoor training and opportunities to spend time in nature.



NATIONAL MARINE
SANCTUARIES

WATERSHED EXPLORATION PROGRAM FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS is funded by NOAA California Bay Watershed Education and Training (B-WET) grant program promoting Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences (MWEEs). The MWEE is a learner-centered framework that focuses on investigations into local environmental issues and leads to informed action.

Weekly teen classes in partnership with local alternative education students and their teachers allows VWS to provide opportunities for watershed literacy to be integrated directly into classrooms, while teacher development workshops extend our reach throughout Monterey County and beyond.





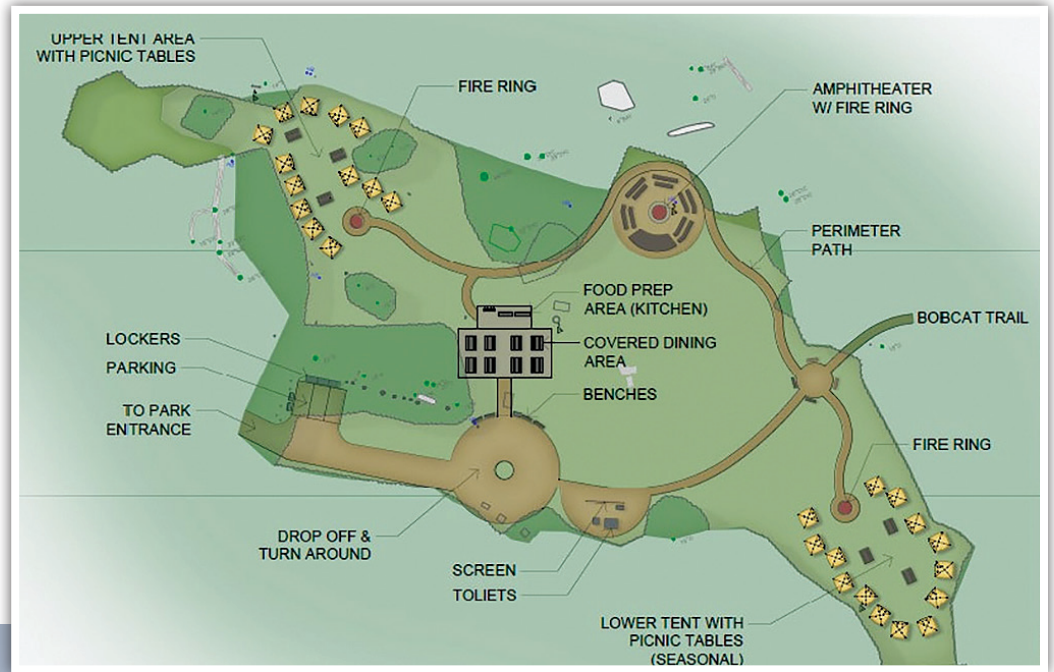


Ventana Wildlife Society

S'MORE

Space for Meaningful Outdoor Recreation and Education

in Big Sur



We are currently developing the proposal for a Space for Meaningful Outdoor Recreation and Education (S'MORE), located at Andrew Molera State Park in Big Sur, to create equitable access for members of our community to enjoy and learn about the outdoors.

For more information go to <https://www.ventanaws.org/smores.html>. Funding provided by:





Male Western Tanager

A Toro Summer . . .

For some people, summer means vacation. For volunteers at the Toro Creek bird banding station, summer means early mornings and lots of birds. Ventana Wildlife Society and Monterey Audubon Society teamed up this summer to lead a volunteer crew for a sixth year of bird banding at Toro Creek, a recreation area on Fort Ord National Monument. We captured 153 birds of 31 species in nine sessions from May to early August 2023.

With ridiculous pre-dawn meeting times corresponding to the sunrise, like 5:19 AM, and hours of walking in a sandy creek bottom, our all-time Toro roster of 89 different volunteers is staggering. For some, the chance to handle birds is the biggest draw. For others, it is the chance to learn about the subtle differences in bird plumages. We can study a Hairy Woodpecker, like we did one Saturday morning in July,

and determine that it is a second-year male molting into its third-year plumage. We can measure the bill of a non-descript passerine to confirm that it is a House Finch and not a Purple Finch. These sessions have the feel of an advanced ornithology class. Just spending time in a circle with other bird lovers is incentive enough. “This is my social activity for the week!” laughed one volunteer.

The volunteers were not the only ones who enjoyed the birds at Toro Creek. We hosted groups during seven of the nine sessions, and these were our first outreach programs here since the pandemic. In addition to our own youth education programs, the groups included the Monterey Audubon Young Birders Club, a CSUMB summer ornithology class, and groups from Pacific Grove Natural History Museum. We loved watching the reactions as we pulled a bright yellow Wilson’s Warbler out of a holding bag, followed by a tiny Bushtit. One bright, young birder correctly called out “Oak Titmouse” when we revealed a little tufted gray bird.

Beyond inspiring bird enthusiasts young and old, banding birds at Toro Creek provides a better understanding of bird populations on multiple scales. Our banding data helps determine how local habitat conditions and environmental factors impact bird populations through time. Collaboration with other banding groups provides an even greater payoff. **The Institute for Bird Populations coordinates more than 1,200 banding sites, including Toro Creek, in their Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) program. By contributing to the MAPS program, Monterey Audubon Society and Ventana Wildlife Society are fueling studies to evaluate avian trends on a continent-wide scale.** Such wide-ranging impacts are definitely worth getting up early for.

We thank Bureau of Land Management for providing access to the site and supporting the Toro Creek banding effort. We also thank Monterey Audubon Society for providing funding support, and the volunteers, without whom this project would not be possible.

All Creatures Great and Small

When it comes to conserving native wildlife and their habitats, we cover more than just North America's largest flying land bird. This summer, we conducted surveys for another federally-endangered species that is much smaller. The Smith's Blue Butterfly measures in with a one-inch wingspan, and weighs less than one-tenth of an ounce. This little gem exists only where buckwheat occurs in dunes, chaparral, and grasslands along the central coast. Santa Lucia Conservancy contracted



Male Smith's Blue Butterfly

Ventana Wildlife Society to conduct surveys for Smith's Blue Butterflies at the Santa Lucia Preserve in Carmel Valley.

To find Smith's Blue Butterflies, you need to be quick. Adults emerge in the heat of summer and live for only about a week. **Their short life is timed to coincide with peak buckwheat bloom, and the pretty pink flowers provide nectar and substrate to deposit their eggs.**

Biologist Mike Stake found that you also need to be in good shape to hike to these buckwheat patches on some of the steep slopes of the Preserve. "They may not live a long time, but they sure have a nice view!" Mike huffed, wiping his brow as he and Sarah Jeffries arrived at one of the survey plots atop a grassy hill overlooking the ocean. Sarah, the Stewardship Associate for Santa Lucia Conservancy, was partnering with Mike on the surveys.

The plot, one of 36 established on the Preserve, was slightly bigger than a boxing ring and included a patch of buckwheat in bloom. Mike and Sarah mentally sparred with the butterflies,

waiting for each fluttering blue to pause long enough to identify the subtle markings that separate the endangered Smith's from the more widespread Acmon's Blue Butterfly. The females of both species are a coppery-brown and lack the lustrous blue of the males. The two surveyors worked together, pointing out individuals to avoid double counting. They ended their survey after 10 minutes and recorded the number of butterflies and estimates of buckwheat coverage.

Although quite a bit is known about Smith's Blue Butterfly, there is very little information available on population sizes and trends. Mike and Sarah found a few dozen Smith's during their 36 surveys on the Preserve, and noted that they were present in some areas, but not others. Santa Lucia Conservancy can use data like these to determine how habitat and land use impact the butterfly through time. They can manage accordingly, using grazing and prescribed fire to control the invasive species that are encroaching on the buckwheat, and even expand habitat by seeding new patches and corridors. With habitat loss being the key threat to the recovery of Smith's Blue Butterfly, the Santa Lucia Preserve is at the forefront of conservation for the species. We were proud to be a part of this effort in 2023.

Where the Rubber Meets the Road

We now own and operate four, 15-passenger vans!

Our fleet allows us to overcome transportation barriers facing many individuals when it comes to experiencing the spectacular natural areas of Monterey County.

A huge thanks to the Tanimura Family Foundation, Carmel Rotary Club, and many individuals including the VWS Board of Directors, who contributed a total of \$34,420 in 2023 so that we could buy a fourth van and increase our capacity to serve!



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Financials

APRIL 1, 2022 - MARCH 31, 2023

SOURCES OF FUNDS

Grants and Contributions	\$1,400,122
Government Grants	\$ 715,687
In-Kind Contributions	\$ 100,676
Investment Income, Net	\$ 18,281
Merchandise Sales	\$ 17,128
Fees for Service	\$ 13,332
Other Income	\$ 200
*Change in Value of Split Interest Trust	\$ (227,814)
	\$2,037,612

USES OF FUNDS

Program Services	\$1,849,445
Management and General	\$ 196,186
Fundraising	\$ 117,580
	\$2,163,211

NET ASSETS

Net Assets, Start of Year	\$4,639,863
Change in Net Assets	\$ (125,599)
Net Assets, End of Year	\$4,514,264

** The 2023 fiscal year felt better than the numbers indicate, thanks to strong funding through grants and contributions. But a downturn in the market resulted in a reduction in value for a trust held by the Community Foundation for Monterey County. As a result, we report an overall loss in assets.*

Ventana Wildlife Society - Tax ID 94-2795935. Our office is located at 9699 Blue Larkspur Ln, Ste 105, Monterey, CA 93940.





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