



Ventana Wildlife Society

# 40-YEAR Report 1977-2017

# Dear Family, Friends, and Supporters,



Kelly Sorenson,  
Executive Director  
Ventana Wildlife Society

*Endangered species  
recovery and protection  
is critically important.  
We focus on determining  
causes of decline and  
cost-effective approaches  
to solving underlying  
problems.*

*Can you believe it's been 40 years?* In this special anniversary report, we reflect on our achievements and the support along the way that enables us to accomplish our mission of conserving native wildlife and their habitats. As you will see on our timeline and program updates, there has been tremendous growth in our three main areas of focus: Species Recovery, Education and Outreach, and Ecological Services.

The staff and board are proud of what we have achieved and recognize that none of it would have been possible without the generous support of donors and volunteers. Bald Eagles, once nearly extinct, are now thriving. We had a lot to do with that on the central coast, where we released 66 young eaglets in the 1980s and successfully recovered a breeding population that continues to grow today. Success with Bald Eagles led us to devote the next 20 years to condor recovery in central California, where the local population went from 0 in 1997 to 89 free-flying condors in 2017.

Our work has expanded over the years to research and monitor many other species in peril, such as Peregrine Falcon, Tricolored Blackbird, Spotted Owl, and Snowy Plover, to name a few. Endangered species recovery and protection is critically important. We focus on determining causes of decline and cost-effective approaches to solving underlying problems. Collaboration and finding win-win solutions are very important, and now a cornerstone of our approach. We believe it is equally important to educate young people and adults about wildlife conservation and encourage them to act as ecological stewards. Our education programs now provide unique, meaningful experiences for over 1,300 youth annually.

On behalf of the staff and board, I hope you *enjoy this 40-year review*, and that you are just as proud as we are to have accomplished so much together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kelly Sorenson". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Kelly Sorenson, Executive Director



CONSERVING NATIVE WILDLIFE AND THEIR HABITATS  
*through science, education, and collaboration, since 1977*



# Ventana Wildlife Society

## A 40-YEAR GLANCE

1977

### VENTANA WILDLIFE SOCIETY IS FOUNDED

Originally calling ourselves the South Coast Wilderness Sanctuary, we focused on conserving native wildlife on a 240-acre property in Big Sur. This sanctuary started as a foothold for the successful recovery of a Bald Eagle breeding population, then became the site for California Condor recovery efforts. We changed our name to Ventana Wilderness Sanctuary in 1999, and then Ventana Wildlife Society in 2006. The society part of the name represents our current success developing a growing network of collaborators for expanding wildlife conservation and education opportunities in California.

1985

We track a Prairie Falcon released at our sanctuary for two months and 300 miles to test release methods and telemetry transmitters in preparation for a Peregrine Falcon recovery project.



Our newsletter, *On The Wild Side*, hits the press for the first time, keeping members informed of our conservation efforts. In 1985, the first issue offers hats for the low price of \$6. The printed newsletter would continue for 25 years, until it was replaced with digital newsletters.



### CENTRAL CA BREEDING BALD EAGLE PAIRS

1986 = 0  
1996 = 4  
2006 = 13  
2016 = 25

1987

Our first computer is a sleek IBM XT.



1986

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issues the Pacific Bald Eagle Recovery Plan with a goal of four breeding pairs in central California, from San Francisco to Santa Barbara counties.

We release our first eaglets at our Big Sur sanctuary. We would release 66 by the end of 1994. Our team monitors the eaglets and follows them as they disperse.

We release three young Peregrine Falcons at the sanctuary. These releases helped populate the Big Sur coast and provide important data on behavior and movement patterns.

1987

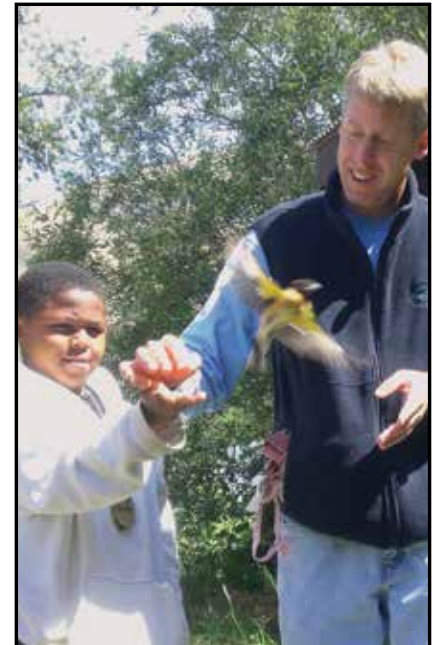
With rugged 4WD vehicles being essential throughout the decades for work at our remote sanctuary, we receive our first vehicle donation . . .

a 1978 Dodge Powerwagon.



1992

Nets are opened for the first time at a bird banding station at Andrew Molera State Park. Widely known as the Big Sur Ornithology Lab, this research project would become a premier resource for avian population trend data over the next 18 years.





1992 - Kelly Sorenson starts his VWS career as an intern. Ten years later, he becomes Executive Director.



### 1997

- We release the first California Condors in Big Sur, bringing hope for the recovery of a central California population.

### 1992

- We begin Natural Science Discovery Camps for ages 8-12. These summer camps along the central coast would remain a trademark of our education programs 25 years later and counting.

### 1993

- We celebrate the return of nesting Bald Eagles in central California.
- Our recovery efforts pay off, as two of the released eagles pair up and produce young at Lake Nacimiento.

In May, we receive a Chevron Conservation Award at a banquet reception in Washington DC.



### 1995

- We begin a four-year habitat restoration project at Andrew Molera State Park by planting more than 3,000 trees in Creamery Meadow along 100 acres bordering the Big Sur River.
- We monitor six Bald Eagles with satellite telemetry in the mid-90s. One of the eagles spends the summer of 1995 in Alberta and Saskatchewan, approximately 1,400 miles from the sanctuary.

### 1994

We get our feet wet by monitoring steelhead in the Big Sur River.



### 1998

- All hands on deck at the banding lab! El Nino brings in the birds. On one memorable morning in May, we catch 319 birds in the mist nets, our busiest day in the 18 years of the lab.



## 1992 - Inaugural Year: EDUCATION PROGRAM REACHED 24 YOUTH





## 2001-2008

Monarch Butterfly tagging and tracking.



## 1999

- Our education programs are boosted by new funds that allow youth in underserved communities to attend our Natural Science Discovery Camps. Enrollment reaches 200, doubling the number of youth in 1998.

- We move our main offices to Salinas.



## 1999

Condors at Big Sur are observed scavenging sea lion carcasses for the first time in the modern era. By scavenging marine mammal carcasses, condors reclaim a historical niche of coastal feeding documented by early explorers.

## 2003

- A grant helps us establish our Natural Science Awareness Program, which provides weekly classes during the school year and career workshops for at-risk teens.



## 2003

- We collaborate with National Park Service to establish a second condor release site at Pinnacles National Park.
- Condors are tracked for the first time with satellite GPS transmitters. Satellite GPS would become a standard in monitoring movement patterns and potential exposure to threats such as lead poisoning.



## Bringing the Condors Home

Originally created for the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History, this exhibit tells the story of condor recovery through our work at Ventana Wildlife Society. After the time at the museum, it spent six years in different venues in California. *Lead Developer, Terra Focus*



## MAR 2003 - AUG 2003

Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History  
Pacific Grove, CA

## SEPT 2003 - DEC 2003

Pacific Gas & Electric Headquarters  
San Francisco, CA

## JAN 2004 - MAR 2004

Morro Bay State Park Museum of Natural History  
Morro Bay, CA



## 2006

- Condors attempt to breed along the central coast for the first time in at least 100 years.
- The first successful nest would be a year later.



## 2006

- Wings Over The World begins a cherished 10-year tradition of annual fundraising events. While great food and an exclusive scenic location were the mainstays, early events were highlighted by the once in a lifetime opportunity for guests to release a condor back to the wild.

## 2006

- Capping the successful recovery of breeding Bald Eagles, we acquired an 80-acre property at Lake Nacimiento, which would serve as an eagle sanctuary.



## 2007

- Bald Eagles are removed from the federal list of endangered species.
- That year, the growing eagle population in central California reaches at least 12 active breeding territories, and doubles in the next five years.



## 2007

- The inaugural Condor Wilderness Camp gives teens an opportunity to work side by side with condor biologists.
- The first successful nest in Big Sur in over 100 years. The chick was aptly named Centennia.



### APR 2004 - JUN 2004

Berkeley College of Natural Resources  
Berkeley, CA

### APR 2005 - APR 2006

National Geographic Theater at Hearst Castle  
Cambria, CA

### MAY 2006 - SEPT 2006

Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History  
Santa Barbara, CA

### DEC 2006 - APR 2007

Oakland Museum of California  
Oakland, CA

### MAR 2008 - JUN 2008

Lindsay Wildlife Experience  
Walnut Creek, CA

### JUL 2008 - SEPT 2008

The California Museum for Women, History and the Arts  
Sacramento, CA

### SEPT 2008 - DEC 2008

Oakland Zoo Education Center  
Oakland, CA

### DEC 2009 - PRESENT

VWS Discovery Center  
Big Sur, CA

## 2008

The Ridley-Tree Condor Preservation Act bans the use of lead ammunition in the condor range in California. A second Assembly Bill would extend that ban to the entire state by the year 2019.



## 2009

Post-fire Spotted Owl surveys.

## 2011

In November, condor field crew leader Mike Tyner was killed by a falling limb while working at the sanctuary in Big Sur tracking a newly released condor. We will always remember Mike and what he gave to the condor recovery project.



## 2008

The Basin Complex Fire burns more than 160,000 acres in Big Sur, destroying the condor flight pen in the sanctuary. Thanks to the Coast Guard, we were able to reach the site and evacuate all 8 pre-release condors in the pen just in time.

Despite the fire sweeping past a nest site, condor chick 477 (Phoenix) survives, becoming a symbol of condor survival and our hope for their full recovery.



## 2009

Ventana Wildlife Society establishes a new brand. We unveil a new name, new logo, new website, and new letterhead.

The Discovery Center is opened at the renovated research and education building at Andrew Molera State Park. The center hosts the display Bringing The Condors Home and serves as a staging site for field staff, outreach, and tours.



## 2011

Ventana Wildlife Society acquires the 80-acre condor sanctuary in Big Sur.

A substantial condor threat is eliminated as PG&E buries approximately 3 miles of power lines near the condor sanctuary.



## 2012

A .22-caliber lead bullet is recovered from the stomach of condor 318 after he died of lead poisoning. Although we understood by this time that spent ammunition was the primary source of lead poisoning, this event compelled us to take a closer look at the potential impact of small-caliber lead rimfire, like .22, used to control ground squirrels. In subsequent years, we would redoubled efforts to support local ranchers in finding and switching to non-lead rimfire.



## 2013

Tricolored Blackbird post-breeding dispersal study with Santa Lucia Conservancy





## 2012

Our first Wee Ones in the Woods provides summer adventures for ages 4-7.

## 2014

A trail camera catches Condor 597 on a trip near Pescadero, just 35 miles south of San Francisco. This was the first confirmed record of condors in San Mateo County since 1904.



## CENTRAL CALIFORNIA CONDOR POPULATION

1997 = 6 condors  
2007 = 41 condors  
2017 = 89 condors

## 2012

With private funding, we distribute over 1,200 boxes of free non-lead ammunition to hunters in the condor range. Over the next five years, this program would grow in popularity, distributing 5,800 boxes, assisting hunters with the switch from lead, promoting the high quality of copper ammunition, and engaging the hunting and ranching communities as allies for wildlife conservation.



## 2013

The first ever live-streaming condor webcam allows us to monitor the flock remotely from our computer screens. Oakland Zoo, FedEx, and CamZone fund cameras on our feeding slope and later in a redwood nest cavity, where the world watched the successful fledging of condor 799. The cam would become our most visited page on the website.



## 2015

We establish a third condor release site in San Simeon to support the expanding distribution of birds along the central coast.



## 2016

Natural Science Discovery Programs serve 1,300 students.

Bald Eagle breeding population reaches 25 known pairs in central California.

## 2017

Another milestone for condor recovery, as we discover our first nest by two wild-fledged birds. Young breeders at the ages of 8 and 7, this pair is an example of successful recruitment of breeding birds, and growing momentum toward a self-sustainable population.



## 2017

To meet the demands of an increasing education program enrollment and more conservation projects, our fleet grows to 12 vehicles.



# Program Updates

Ventana Wildlife Society has three core programs . . .



## Species Recovery since 1985

Fresh from our success recovering a Bald Eagle breeding population in central California, we began releasing California Condors in 1997. In 20 years, the central California population has grown to nearly 90 condors, and we have documented a growing number of breeding pairs. We continue to manage survival threats, while our non-lead ammunition outreach program in the last five years has engaged hunters and ranchers in the goal of reducing lead exposure for condors and other wildlife. On page 13, Senior Wildlife Biologist Joe Burnett shares success stories over the last 20+ years, and his hope for the future of species recovery.



## Education and Outreach since 1992

While we celebrate our 40th anniversary, we also celebrate the last 25 years of providing outdoor youth education programs along the central coast. Enrollment for our Natural Science Awareness Programs, Natural Science Discovery Camps, Condor Wilderness Camps, Single-day Adventures, and Wee Ones in the Woods now exceeds 1,300 students per year. Through the support of our collaborators, we have provided an increasing number of scholarships, allowing many youth from underserved communities to attend our programs free of charge. On page 14, we share the impact of our outdoor programs, through the experience of a Ventana Wildlife Society education alumnus.



## Ecological Services since 1992

Our role providing ecological services developed while operating a bird banding lab in Big Sur from 1992-2010. During those 18 years, the project attracted many bright young biologists, whose talents shaped the way we address our conservation goals. These talents include expertise in project design, wildlife identification, survey techniques, scientific reporting, and collaboration. In recent years, numerous agencies, companies, and organizations have consulted with Ventana Wildlife Society to conduct surveys for species of concern and prepare conservation planning documents. On page 17, we share some of our recent highlights.

# Species Recovery

since 1985



*Senior Wildlife Biologist Joe Burnett - Condor Joe - started with Ventana Wildlife Society in 1994 as an intern on the Bald Eagle Recovery Program. In a recent conversation, he shares with us a little about himself, some keys to success in species recovery, and his hopes for the future.*



**Q: What was it about central California that lured you from West Virginia?**

**Joe:** Growing up back east in West Virginia I never saw scenery as spectacular as central California. The mountains meeting the sea in Big Sur are just so stunning, I immediately knew this is where I was supposed to be.

**Q: What is so special about this organization that makes you proud?**

**Joe:** I was immediately drawn in by the passion exhibited by all staff, board and volunteers, it's so contagious. I'm also very proud of the major milestones we have achieved in restoring Bald Eagles and California Condors and educating the local youth along the way. I'm especially proud of the Ventana work ethic and our "can do" philosophy. It's really been the catalyst to everything we've accomplished as an organization.

**Q: What currently are your biggest challenges in recovering the condor population?**

**Joe:** Lead poisoning is still the top threat to condor survival. Our biggest challenge will be achieving sufficient compliance with the use of non-lead ammunition in California. Fortunately, our free non-lead ammunition program is leading the way in helping hunters and ranchers make the switch.

**Q: You've been here through tremendous advances in technology. How have these changed the way VWS is protecting and managing condors?**

**Joe:** GPS transmitters have revolutionized how we track movements and monitor condors. As

a result, we have been able to precisely identify important flight corridors, feeding locations and nest sites.

**Q: How do you feel that VWS is unique among conservation organizations in collaborating?**

**Joe:** Condors are a dynamic species and you need to be able to adapt quickly to keep up with the flock. This ability to adapt has become a Ventana trademark. This has also led us to multiple innovations which, in turn, have greatly benefited our partners as well as expedited condor recovery.

**Q: How do you see your role in conservation changing as the condor becomes self-sustaining?**

**Joe:** I see us continuing to monitor the survival of the flock, but with less management action required. We want to ensure their survival continues and that no new threats arise that could jeopardize the flock.

**Q: One of our strategic goals, in the framework of species recovery, is to serve as a nationally-recognized model of success. Do you think we have accomplished this?**

**Joe:** Not quite yet, but once we achieve a full recovery of the condor and they are delisted, I think we will reach that goal.

**Q: How confident are you that the condor can make a full recovery?**

**Joe:** Very. The condors are doing all the right things on their own - foraging and nesting. Continued non-lead outreach and the full implementation of the statewide ban in 2019 will be a boost.

# Education and Outreach

since 1992

## Meet Alexandra Ramos



More than 1,300 youth enroll in our outdoor education programs each year, but we still focus on the individual, their unique discoveries, and the potential they have to shape the lives of others. Alexandra Ramos, a senior psychology major at CSUMB and one of our instructors, understands this approach from the perspective of both teacher and student. "I am so proud of working for this organization," she explains, "because Ventana has played a role in shaping who I am today."

That role started when Alexandra was 11. She attended our Natural Science Awareness Program with several of her friends and saw Monterey Beach in Carmel for the first time. "I remember looking at the scenery and thinking this is such a beautiful place,"

she recalls, "I was surprised to hear that the creek we had discovered actually flowed under the highway and rose once more at the mouth of the beach. It was a new concept that illustrated how connected the world is." That night, she went home and told her parents about it.

Since then, Alexandra has developed an interest in working with children. She volunteered for the child development center in Seaside while she was still in middle school. Later, she helped provide after-school learning programs with Think Together, a group that prepares kids for college and careers. It was then that she realized that educational outreach itself was a career, and one that paralleled her own personal values. Graduating with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in May, she is considering a graduate program and a career helping children both academically and socially.

Alexandra fits in well with our education staff, because she feels that passion is the key to working with children. "When teaching kids," she reflects, "they need to see genuine enthusiasm for deep and meaningful learning." Alexandra credits the enthusiasm of Education Manager Alena Porte for fostering her love of the planet as a child. That enthusiasm was returned, says Alena, in the way Alexandra engaged classmates and instructors alike with discussion during classes.

We are so proud of Alexandra, not just because of her accomplishments, but because of the role model she has become in her community. "As a Mexican-American woman," she tells us, "I want to encourage and empower Latino children to become leaders themselves and improve their way of life." She also wants to encourage young girls, feeling that they are under-represented in science. "It is rewarding to see girls enjoy learning and developing an interest in conservation and environmental science."

While not all of our students come full circle like Alexandra, others just like her catch that first spark with us and spend a lifetime spreading their light.

*Once attending our Natural Science Awareness Program, Alexandra now encourages young girls to pursue fields in science.*





*“When teaching kids,” Alexandra reflects, “they need to see genuine enthusiasm for deep and meaningful learning.”*

# Ecological Services

since 1992





## *Working with clients and collaborators to monitor and protect wildlife in central California*



Although we are well known for our work with California Condors, we have conducted projects to benefit a variety of species of conservation concern, including Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Spotted Owl, Snowy Plover, Tricolored Blackbird, and grassland birds. We have used data for some field projects to prepare conservation planning documents for our clients, such as Avian Protection Plans and Eagle Conservation Plans.



Sometimes when the sun sets, our work is just beginning. We conducted Spotted Owl surveys at 250 locations for the U.S. Forest Service in 2006 and 2009 to document changes in their distribution and abundance following the Basin Complex Wildfire in Big Sur. We have since conducted other owl projects, such as presence/absence surveys at project sites (PG&E) and nest surveys (California Department of Parks and Recreation).



In the last decade, we have become a leader in wind energy assessment studies for birds and bats in the Salinas Valley. With a database including millions of California Condor satellite GPS locations, we have worked closely with Foundation Windpower and the Monterey County Planning Commission to help wind energy developers avoid sites that are regularly frequented by condors and other sensitive wildlife.



Since the inception of the Big Sur Ornithology Lab in 1992, we have maintained an active federal bird banding permit, and have used our banding skills and experience to monitor landbird populations at a variety of sites. Over the years, we have used mist nets to study bird population trends along the Carmel River (Monterey Peninsula Water Management District) and Camp Roberts (California Army National Guard). Last year, we collaborated with Monterey Audubon and BLM to establish another banding station at Toro Creek in Salinas.



**Thank You for Supporting Ventana Wildlife Society.** Members like you are so important to us. You make it possible for Ventana Wildlife Society to conserve native wildlife and their habitats here in central California. We are grateful! In recognizing donors in our annual reports, we typically group names by financial categories. We love to show our appreciation for those of you who have given so much.

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**Members supporting us for 10 or more years, appear here in BOLD.**

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Many companies have matching gift programs through which they will "match" the charitable contributions made by their employees/retirees. Check with your company's HR office to see if they offer gift matching. Many of our members take advantage of this opportunity through their employers:

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# Leaving a Legacy

We appreciate those supporters listed below who have remembered Ventana Wildlife Society in their wills. The most recent bequest that has matured was that of Howard and Elva Elliott. A trust was created in their name at the Community Foundation for Monterey County, which provides an income for a total of 20 years. The funds are restricted to the purchase of tangible assets. This unique approach to legacy giving will surely give Ventana Wildlife Society a boost in infrastructure and long-term stability.

In addition to bequests, a charitable remainder trust, particularly when managing highly appreciated assets such as real property, can be an excellent way to reduce one's tax burden and receive an income while benefiting wildlife conservation and education.

Another way you can make a lasting gift is to name Ventana Wildlife Society as a beneficiary in your life insurance policy or IRA. Outright gifts of stock and other assets can be made at any time. If you would like to speak with someone about planned giving options that benefit you and the mission of Ventana Wildlife Society, please contact Kelly Sorenson at 831-800-7420.

We appreciate those who have remembered Ventana Wildlife Society through bequests or by naming us as a beneficiary in a life insurance policy or IRA:

Barbara Baldock	Karen Mortillaro
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Margaret Maas	Kris Trottingwolf



Ventana Wildlife Society  
will forever remember  
the following  
Legacy Members:

Valerie Borton  
Elva Elliott  
Howard Elliott  
Helen Jack  
Dorothy Kamow  
A Hadley Osborn



9699 Blue Larkspur Ln, Ste 105, Monterey, CA 93940

*With Howard and Elva's generosity in thinking about Ventana Wildlife Society's future, their bequest enabled us to purchase our very own office space (shown above)! An upgrade in space, we welcome you to visit, if you're ever in the neighborhood.*



*Howard Elliott played a vital part in constructing the Bald Eagle release tower in 1985. Howard helped build our infrastructure during his lifetime, and now he and Elva's legacy is living on.*

# Working Through The Elements



*Condor Joe ascends an ancient redwood tree more than 50 feet from the ground to inspect a condor nest and check the status of the young chick.*



*(above) Ashes from the Basin Complex fire surround our remote Big Sur field cabin.  
(right) Condor field crew faces winter challenges on its way to the condor sanctuary.*

To go where the condors go can be a formidable task without a 9-foot plus wingspan. A hike to a condor nest, for example, might take us through dense chaparral and poison oak, and finish with the vertical ascent of a redwood tree. We are reminded that the condors are more at home and better equipped to flourish in the Ventana Wilderness than we are, even if we do sport the name Ventana Wildlife Society. When the elements conspire in their greatest severity, and the chips are down, we have always been fortified by the generosity of our members and supporters; the Coast Guard rescue of pre-release condors during the 2008 Basin Complex Fire and the donations that helped us rebuild the sanctuary facilities after that fire are just two memorable examples. We thank you for rising to the occasion when the elements have humbled us the most.







# Financials

April 1, 2016 - March 31, 2017

In 2017, Ventana Wildlife Society's devoted supporters contributed almost \$2.5 million for species recovery, education and outreach, and ecological services. Program and support services represented 96% of total expenses and only 4% on fundraising. Total net assets increased from \$1.9 million to \$3.2 million thanks mainly to the generosity of Howard and Elva Elliott (see page 23) and their bequest, which recently matured. The bequest can only be used for the purchase of tangible assets and cannot be used for operating costs.

## SOURCES OF INCOME

Grants and Contributions . . . . .	\$ 736,949
Bequests, Trusts, and Split Interests . . .	\$1,284,938
Fees for Services . . . . .	\$ 167,718
Government Grants . . . . .	\$ 138,519
Contributed Goods and Services . . . . .	\$ 89,751
Special Events (Net) and Misc . . . . .	\$ 49,643
	<b>\$2,467,518</b>

## USES OF FUNDS

Species Recovery . . . . .	\$ 483,899
Education and Outreach . . . . .	\$ 427,153
Ecological Services . . . . .	\$ 154,419
Management . . . . .	\$ 115,944
Fundraising . . . . .	\$ 54,449
	<b>\$1,235,864</b>

## NET ASSETS

Net assets, Start of Year . . . . .	\$1,939,266
Change in Net Assets . . . . .	\$1,231,654
Net Assets, End of Year	<b>\$3,170,920</b>

*Ventana Wildlife Society is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)3 organization tax ID 94-2795935. Complete financials are available at [ventanaws.org](http://ventanaws.org). 9699 Blue Larkspur Ln, Ste 105, Monterey CA 93940 • 831-455-9514*



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# 40-YEAR Report

1977-2017

Ventana Wildlife Society  
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