



An artist's rendering of the Liberty Canyon Wildlife Crossing that will span 10 lanes of the 101 freeway and provide safe passage to a variety of mammals, reptiles, and birds.

On March 11, National Wildlife Federation California Regional Director Beth Pratt discussed the proposed wildlife bridge at COSF's Speaker Series. See highlights from her talk in related story below.

A Few Words from Our President

Greetings!

I'm writing this just as the news breaks that the federal government is accelerating vaccinations for Covid-19 and that by mid-summer we may reach a point where we can return to many of our past social activities without fear. At last!

The pandemic has changed so many of our routines and impacted our lives so directly. With gyms, pools, dance studios, and other inside exercise options no longer available, more and more people discovered the value of getting out into our open space on the 150 miles of trails COSCA manages.

But with the more visitors have come a few problems such as increased litter. Mountain bike sales have grown and we've seen concerns raised about some bikers riding too fast, creating potentially harmful encounters. Let's all be responsible and remember trail courtesies so we can all enjoy our time in the open space.

As in the past, we hope we are continuing to offer useful information and updates in the newsletter. Below you'll see a profile of Steve Johnson, COSF's Treasurer and an avid hiker. There's also a review of our first and very well-received 2021 Speaker Series talk with Beth Pratt of the National Wildlife Federation who has been a driving force in the planning and future construction of the wildlife bridge over the 101 at Liberty Canyon. Anna Huber of COSCA talks about the spring-bloom forecast. Finally, we are announcing the two local college-bound students—Daniel Conway and Naomi Lin—who have been chosen for COSF's \$1,000 scholarships for 2021.

I'm also pleased to announce we have a new slate of officers and new COSF Board members: Alberto Huerta Salazar and Katie Morgan join as Directors. I'll remain President, Brendan Callahan is our new Vice President, Katie Morgan is our new Secretary, and Steve Johnson continues to serve as Treasurer. We have a Board that is committed to our mission and the open space, while bringing new skill sets we will all benefit from. We're looking forward to more achievements to benefit us all in 2021!

As the weather warms and hillsides bloom this spring, on behalf of the COSF Board of Directors we wish all our donors, volunteers, and Speaker Series attendees good health and happy trails!

All the best,



President, Conejo Open Space Foundation

We Couldn't Do It Without You

[COSCA](#) relies on volunteers to help build and maintain trails, act as extra eyes and ears for the rangers, carry out educational programs and support the open space in many other ways. Please consider volunteering for a program that interests you.

[COSF](#) depends on open space supporters for donations that help fund COSCA volunteer programs and so much more. We greatly appreciate your generosity.

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Daniel Conway

With a focus on the importance of pollinators, COSF scholarship winner Daniel Conway says, "I want to be on the front lines of the fight against climate change."



Naomi Lin

Painter, poet and debate team winner, COSF scholarship winner Naomi Lin says, "My passion resides in environmental law, pursuing a BA in Political Science with a minor in Environmental Studies."

First COSF Scholarship Winners Selected

The announcement of a new COSF scholarship program for Ventura County high-school seniors drew a remarkable slate of candidates in its first year. It was a very tough decision for the scholarship panel to choose two recipients.

In the end, the two \$1,000 continuing scholarships went to Daniel Conway and Naomi Lin, both students at Oak Park High School.

"We think the scholarship program is a perfect way for us to realize that goal by investing in the next generation, many of whom may return to the Conejo Valley after college," says COSF President Jerry Westby. The scholarship is open to seniors pursuing environmental studies-related majors at two- or four-year colleges or universities, starting with the fall 2021 semester.

The application process included a 500-word essay detailing the applicant's reasons for pursuing a career in environmental studies.

Daniel Conway's essay focused on his successful campaign to raise awareness of the declining numbers of insect pollinators with the founding of a "Save the Bees" club, the planting of a native garden to support them, and doing educational presentations at local elementary schools. "The parasitic relationship we have to Earth is unsustainable, and I am eager to find alternative ways to interact with our world with sustainability at the forefront," Conway wrote.

Naomi Lin wrote about her commitment to environmental justice and how she hopes to practice environmental law. She has served as a project leader at Oak Park High School's environmental club and a volunteer for Forever Found, an anti-human

trafficking group."With my experiences, attributes, and this scholarship, I will achieve more than just a degree in environmental law; I am committed to fiercely challenge the imperfections of the status quo," Lin wrote.



Photo Courtesy of Anne M. Russell

Large-flowered phacelia (*Phacelia grandiflora*) bloomed in profusion in 2019, the spring after the Woolsey and Hill Fires.

Spring Wildflowers: Bloom or Bust?

You've probably noticed that we haven't had much rain so far this year. Rainfall in most of Ventura County has totaled less than 3 inches, which is less than a third of what we normally would have gotten. That doesn't bode well for the spring wildflower bloom, says Anna Huber, COSCA analyst and resident plant expert: "I think [the bloom] might be a little on the slim side. I'm hoping we get some rain this month [March], but the long-range forecast doesn't look hopeful."

Moisture levels in the soil right now, says Huber, are very low, which means less growth and smaller plants. Although the Conejo Valley's flower display is likely to be disappointing this year, Huber says she's more worried about the effects of long-term drought on the area's large, venerable oaks. "We haven't had adequate rainfall to

replenish the ground water,” she says. “The water table gets lower and lower. Last year was a good rain year, but it wasn’t enough to get back to healthy soil-moisture levels.”

Besides precipitation, wildfires also play a role in triggering exceptional bloom years and it’s been three years since a major fire burned through COSCA’s parks. So the display of fire followers like fire poppies, large-flowered phacelia, and white eardrops will be more subdued.

Huber says to watch for lupines, California poppies, mariposa lilies, wild hyacinths, and clarkia in the grassland areas and expect monkeyflowers, some phacelias, and penstemons on the north-facing slopes. She thinks your best bet this year for sighting flowers may be the Hidden Meadows Trail off Pathfinder Avenue. (She also reminds everyone that no matter how excited you are about your flower quest to please not disturb the residents around the trailhead.)

Some resources to help you with wildflower location and identification:

- Theodore Payne Foundation Wildflower Hotline (March through May): 818 768-1802 ext 7
- COSCA’s [downloadable guide](#) to common native wildflowers.
- COSF’s [guide to native plant environments](#) and what you’ll find there, with a [downloadable guide to flora and fauna](https://cosf.org/files/flyers/o.s.-2-sided-color-photos.pdf). <https://cosf.org/files/flyers/o.s.-2-sided-color-photos.pdf>
- And if you’re really stumped, consult COSCA’s [guide to non-native invasive plants](#).



Photo Courtesy of National Park Service

You voted for COSF blogs about mountain lions and environmental protection with your clicks. (Seen here is P-61, who was killed in 2019 on the 405.)

Most Popular COSF Blogs of 2020

What are the top interests of Conejo Valley open-space enthusiasts? After reviewing website usage stats for last year, we found to our delight that the most popular posts concerned protecting the environment. We're glad to see our members and followers are committed to saving native flora and fauna and keeping our trails in good shape!

Here's a countdown to #1 of the top 10 blog posts from 2020, as chosen by our visitors:

- 11: [Please stay off the wet trails!](#)
- 10: [Where in the Conejo contest for May 8](#)
- 9: [Conejo Valley Trails to partially reopen on weekdays](#)
- 8: [Join us for the last COSF Speaker Series event of 2020 – Wildfire in the Open Space: History, Recovery and Climate Change](#)
- 7: [The 50th anniversary Earth Day is today, April 22, 2020](#)

- 6: [The California Wildlife Conservation Board to give \\$5 million for the wildlife crossing at Liberty Canyon](#)
- 5: [Announcing the July 30th talk “Challenges for humans and wildlife coexisting in a developing world”](#)
- 4: [A video summary for students who missed Trails Education Days](#)
- 3: [Beautiful, aromatic white sage is now endangered with its trendy use in burning smudge sticks](#)
- 2: [Paradise Falls in Wildwood Park to close until further notice starting May 29th](#)
- 1: [Why mountain lions should be protected under the California Endangered Species Act – a video](#)

It is worth noting that the #1 blog received three times as many views as the second most popular one!—*Steve Clark*



Construction on the Liberty Canyon Wildlife Crossing will begin in November if the National Wildlife Federation hits its fundraising goals.

Speaker Series: Liberty Canyon Wildlife Crossing Draws Closer to Reality

The proposed wildlife bridge spanning 10 lanes of the 101 freeway at Liberty Canyon in Agoura Hills is tantalizingly close to starting construction. The effort to build a safe connection between the Santa Monica Mountains and the Simi Hills began in 2016. Now, Caltrans is completing its final design and engineering plans for the 165-foot wide, 210-foot long structure that will also span Agoura Road.

Spearheaded by Beth Pratt, California executive director for the National Wildlife Federation, the #SaveLACougars fundraising and public-awareness campaign has to date raised \$18 million in private donations from around the world (including a [\\$10,000 pledge from COSF](#)). On March 11, Pratt was COSF's first guest in the 2021 virtual Speaker Series.

Pratt discussed the importance of connectivity and wildlife crossings. Affecting not just mountain lions, but also smaller creatures like lizards and even small birds, the 101, 405, and other major roadways essentially trap animal populations in an island environment, possibly dooming them to extinction via loss of genetic diversity. "Limiting wildlife to protected islands of space doesn't work," says Pratt. "Even in the best-protected places, ecosystems still struggle. The long-term impact is isolation and genetic decline. We're trying to connect ecosystems to make them more resilient."

In the coming 6 months, Pratt and other crossing supporters will need to raise an additional \$60 million for construction costs. If they hit their goal, building will get underway in November and continue until 2024. "As you get closer to the finish line," predicts Pratt, "the fundraising increases exponentially." The effort is a public-private partnership, with Caltrans, the National Park Service, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, and the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains also participating.

Living Habitats, a landscape architecture practice, recently joined to the team to design and construct a natural environment on the crossing's planned one-acre surface. The goal of the native plantings is to provide the shelter, food, and water that individual species need. Nine acres on either side of the crossing will also get additional plantings to blend the structure with the contiguous Liberty Canyon open space.

To learn more, please [watch Pratt's talk](#).



Spotlight on...

COSF Treasurer Steve Johnson is an Amgen alumnus, having worked for the Conejo Valley-based biotech company in information technology. He holds undergrad degrees in physics and mathematics (with a minor in music), and a graduate degree in computer science and engineering.

He may be best known on the local trails, though, as the organizer of the Weekday Trailblazers, a Meetup group that hikes mainly on COSCA and SMMNRA trails. The group's flagship Tuesday morning hikes are 7-10 miles with 1,500-3,000 feet of elevation gain. Thursday morning "gentler" hikes are 5-6 miles with 750-1500 feet of elevation gain. Currently on hiatus, the Trailblazers will resume when Covid restrictions ease.

When did you join the COSF board and why?

While at Amgen, I had participated in a number of trail-work days, and had taken some advocacy positions at COSCA meetings, particularly after the Woolsey Fire, regarding trail access. [Board member] Steve Clark invited me to consider joining the board in February 2020. After having made use of the trails for more than a decade, I was happy to give back.

What do you like to do in the open space?

Mainly, I like to hike. I also very much enjoy photographing wildflowers, and am interested in the geology, culture, and history of the places I visit.

Why is open space important to you?

For a handful of reasons, from very concrete to quite abstract: About 10 years ago, over the course of a year I completely turned around my health as a result of hiking and doing yoga three times a week. Having previously lived on a lake next to a wildlife sanctuary in Kalamazoo, MI, my wife and I were attracted to Thousand Oaks because of the huge area of the city that is allocated to open space. And, as our climate changes, species take refuge in the reservoirs of open space that we haven't overwhelmed with parking lots and shopping malls.

What advice do you have for open-space visitors to get the most out of their time?

Spontaneity is fine to a degree, but preparation is key to enjoying your outing and getting home safely. Familiarize yourself with the area through maps, books, Google Earth or at least Google Maps. Bring clothing and supplies to accommodate colder and warmer weather. Bring snacks and plenty of water in case you find yourself on the trail longer than you anticipated. Let people know where you're going and how long you expect to be out. Be polite and helpful. Pack out your trash

What's your favorite Conejo open space?

My favorite is the Lynnmere Trail, well away from the bustle of central Wildwood.

Is there any "secret" or underused open space that you think people should know about?

Yes, but if I tell you ... Seriously, while hiking in Pt. Mugu State Park, get off the Sycamore Canyon trail and explore the trails to the east and west.

What are your hopes for the future of COSF and/or the Conejo Open Space?

COSF's role in helping manage area trails is not well-understood. It would be great to help publicize COSF's relationship with COSCA, COSTAC, and the City of Thousand Oaks.

Also, I am really looking forward to the time, hopefully in the near future, when we can safely return to group activities, including Trails Education Days.



Hugh Warren, president of the Conejo Group Sierra Club and longtime COSF supporter, in his COSF mask. "The masks have been a real hit!" he reports.

News In Brief

- COSF distributed nearly 500 **custom face masks** as a gift to donors and volunteers.
- The **2021 Conejo Open Space Challenge has started** and runs March 1 to May 31. The Challenge involves hiking, running or riding 10 specific trails in the Conejo Valley. The objective is to have fun while exploring trails that you may not know well. Those who complete all 10 sections can win prizes! Learn more at [Challenge](#)
- There's a **new Wild Rootz** video available! Local naturalist Laura Pasetta tells you all about California's amazing [Coast Live Oaks](#) (*Quercus agrifolia*) in this 13:40-minute video. Find out why the oak is so important to our Conejo Valley ecosystem, both historically and today, and how you can help them flourish in your garden.
- Congratulations to our Spring 2021 "[Where in the Conejo](#)" winners! Our knowledgeable entrants correctly identified 4 local trails and 1 native plant. This season's winners of a \$25 gift card are: **Kristine McCardle, Tamara Napier, Dorothy Voelker, Maricar Weeks, and Bradley Yocum**. Held every 2 weeks, "Where in the Conejo" tests participants' knowledge of Conejo Valley trails. If you would like to be added to the "Where" email list, drop a note to news@cosf.org to let us know.



If you would like to have this newsletter emailed to you quarterly, along with other occasional messages about our activities, subscribe here.



Want to Volunteer? Here's How!

The COSCA Volunteer Corps has many ways for residents to help maintain and preserve the open space that surrounds our beautiful Conejo Valley. By joining with others, we can make sure that the trails, canyons, and ridgelines will be enjoyed by visitors for generations to come. You can read about the specific volunteer opportunities below, and you can submit a request to volunteer, noting your specific interests, [here](#).

- [Adopt-a-Trail Program](#)
- [Trail Watch Program](#)
- [Trail Ambassador Program](#)
- [Trail Work Days](#)
- [Trails Education Days](#)



The Conejo Open Space Foundation was formed in 1995 to promote and maintain the open space and trail system of the Conejo Valley and to educate residents as to their roles as custodians and protectors of the open space and the environment. Our [web site](#) illustrates ongoing Conejo Open Space programs supported by the Foundation that help preserve and protect our precious open space.

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