

# THE CONEJO OPEN SPACE FOUNDATION NEWS

Winter 2024



**COSCA is committed to stepping up the battle against invasive nonnative plants that degrade biodiversity and increase fire risk. Here, a volunteer removes milk thistle at Hill Canyon during the 2024 Spring Trail Work Days.**

## A Few Words from Our President

Hello COSF Family!

It's been quite the year for the Conejo open spaces! As we roll past Thanksgiving and into the holiday season, we have much to be grateful for and a lot to look forward to in the coming year.

A big part of that gratitude is owed to you, our donors, volunteers and followers. In 2024, with your support we were able to:

- Leverage available public funding to start cleaning up the Arroyo Conejo;
- Introduce over 1,000 4th grade students from the Conejo Valley School District to the wonders and respectful use of the open spaces;
- Provide scholarships to two more amazing local students to support their studies in environmental stewardship.

This is only the tip of the COSF iceberg but is a good segue to the newsletter...

We expect many applications for our two **COSF environmental studies scholarships for 2025**. You can learn more below about the requirements and application process. Please note that the deadline to apply is February 15—good luck to all the applicants!

Related to this, see "Spotlight" on Molly McNulty, a COSF scholarship awardee who's at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.

Taking our mission to heart, we have some big plans for improvements in the Conejo Valley open spaces. **The Arroyo Conejo clean-up is just getting started, addressing damage done in the last heavy winters, and dealing with the perennial problem of invasive species are on the list.** Keep your eyes and ears open, there will be **plenty of volunteer opportunities in 2025.** We are looking forward to your help to make a real difference!

Last, **we had a GREAT Plantpalooza Fest this year.** A hearty thank you to the all the volunteers, exhibitors and attendees for making this a great way to spend a fall day. Plus, the tacos were stellar!

Enough of my rambling. I hope you are all enjoying some peace this holiday season and finding solace in the open spaces. The winter solstice is December 21, let's all look forward to longer days together.

Please consider making a gift to COSF today and thank you for Connecting Community & Nature!

**Bill Miller**  
**President, Conejo Open Space Foundation**

P.S. Do you have the time and energy to be a part of our team? Let us know today! If you're interested in serving on the COSF board, [please reach out to me.](#)

## We Couldn't Do It Without You!

[COSF](#) depends on open-space supporters like you for donations that help us fund volunteer programs, education, scholarships, and so much more. COSF is an entirely volunteer nonprofit dedicated to protecting and promoting the Conejo Valley's beautiful open spaces that are owned and managed by COSCA for the benefit of all trail users.

**Please consider giving a gift to keep our efforts going. And ask your employer if they will match your contribution!**

Thank you for your generosity. It makes a difference.

Donate

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**COSF is awarding two ongoing scholarships to outstanding local high school students who plan to pursue environmental studies in college.**

## **Seeking Students for 2025 Eco Scholarships!**

Do you know a high-school senior who wants to pursue an environmental studies-related major at a two- or four-year college or university? **COSF is looking to award two Conejo Valley or Greater Ventura County college-bound students \$1,000 in continuing scholarships, so let them know!** Each scholarship recipient will receive up to \$4,000 in support from COSF.

Now in the fifth year, COSF Environmental Studies Scholarships pay out for up to four years of study, as long as the student remains full-time, maintains a grade-point average of 3.0 or higher, and stays with an environmental studies-related major.

A panel comprised of local environmental leaders will choose two new scholarship recipients from the pool of applicants. This year's panel, who put in hours of work reviewing the applicants' essays and supporting materials, was Jen Kremser, Kathy Strong, Joanie Burns and Elizabeth Brown. A big thank-you to all!

The Scholarship Committee looks for candidates who want to enter a career directly related to sustainability, ecology, and preserving the natural environment. In addition to environmental studies, relevant majors include, but are not limited to: ecology; environmental engineering; environmental policy; natural-resources management and conservation; and sustainable agriculture.

The deadline for applying, which requires a 500-word essay, an academic transcript and two letters of recommendation, is February 15. [Interested seniors are encouraged to apply now.](#) The awardees will be announced in April 2025.

*Photo credit: Vecteezy*



**In September, volunteers removed more than 3 tons of garbage from the Arroyo Conejo. COSCA plans to expand its efforts to clean up the creek next year.**

## **COSCA Previews Major Projects for 2025**

COSCA's final board meeting of the year focused on priorities for 2025, including ambitious plans for infrastructure repair and habitat restoration. The work will be fueled in part by COSCA's Woolsey Fire Recovery Fund, which still contains \$7,624,660 of the original \$8,461,034. Three of COSCA's 2025 key proposed projects are:

### **Continue the Arroyo Conejo Clean-up**

In 2024, a 2,000-foot section of the Arroyo Conejo was the focus of a pilot project to test the feasibility and cost of a larger clean-up of the trash-plagued creek. COSF contributed \$10,000 toward the effort and helped recruit volunteers.

"This happened relatively quickly at a pretty reasonable cost," says COSCA Administrator Brian Stark. "The first phase ended up costing a little over \$87,000, which sounds like a lot, but we also took out 13.4 tons of garbage. The COSCA rangers followed up with a volunteer project where 20 volunteers and took out another three to four tons of garbage in one day. So, for the year, about 16 tons of trash has been removed from the creek and floodplain."

COSCA is now looking toward another 4,300-foot section of the Arroyo Conejo where an estimated 35 to 40 tons of garbage still lie. "The Thousand Oaks Public Works Department has identified some funding sources that will be taken to the city council for a request coming up in the spring. We'll be working on bid documents throughout the winter," Stark says.

### **Repair the Wildwood Washout**

The significant amount of rain during the last two winters created an area of significant erosion on the north fork of the Arroyo Conejo in Wildwood Regional Park. One particularly bad washout near Paradise Falls, caused when the creek jumped its banks and cut into the fire road, has made it a challenge to navigate for maintenance and emergency service vehicles.

"We're anticipating the solution will involve importation of some graded fill and some upstream work, which will help deflect high flows to keep the water off the road," Stark says. The first step is putting together request for proposals (RFPs) and then evaluating the bids; Stark adds that COSCA probably won't be able to begin work until mid-September due to ecological constraints and required permitting.

## Expand Invasive Plant Management

Invasive non-natives like Russian thistle, fennel, Russian knapweed and Italian thistle are the focus of COSCA's current work. In 2025 the extent of treatment areas will be expanded.

A large pilot project is planned for the grassland region of Rancho Potrero, where new infestations of bristly ox tongue, prickly lettuce and Italian ryegrass are threatening the area's biodiversity. By controlling the invasive species, COSCA hopes to facilitate the expansion of the existing bunch grasses. The bunch grasses are less dense than the invasive grass species, so provide better hunting habitat for raptors. Notes Stark: "This is a grassland area that's pretty important for our local birds, including raptors. Protecting and expanding these areas will improve habitat."

After controlling the invasive species, the project may transition to additional native species reintroductions, which may include Valley oaks. —*Sean Crommelin*



A young visitor checks out the hands-on display from the UCCE Master Gardener Pollinator Team at Native Plantpalooza & Eco Fest in September.

## Third Successful Native Plantpalooza Complete

Under the umbrella of COSF's popular Speaker Series, **Native Plantpalooza & Eco Fest 3** was held **September 28** at the Conejo Creek North Park in Thousand Oaks and was blessed with mild, sunny weather. A special presentation by **Animal Actors of Hollywood** introduced both kids and adults to native wildlife ambassadors, including a red-tailed hawk, a fox squirrel and a charming porcupine.

More than 30 exhibitors were on hand, some selling or giving away native plants and other eco-related products, while others offered crafts and eco-related activities for kids. New this year was a roll-off container of clean compost, courtesy of **Athens Services**.

Many attendees came prepared with containers to take advantage of the free nutrient-rich soil amendment. Also new this year was a taco bar.

COSF launched Native Plantpalooza & Eco Fest in the fall of 2022 with the goal of producing a free outdoor live event to celebrate and support the Conejo Valley's rich biodiversity. The community festival is intended to educate and inspire attendees about native plants, water-wise gardening and more sustainable living. The festival, which this year featured a beekeeper, pollinator experts, herpetologists, climate activists and other exhibitors committed to the environment, drew a crowd of several hundred adults and children.

COSF extends a special thank you to marquee sponsor the **Calleguas Water District**, returning as a sponsor from last year as well! Plantpalooza is also grateful for a grant from the **Coalition for Clean Air**.

*If your organization would like to exhibit at next year's event, please contact us at [info@cosf.org](mailto:info@cosf.org) to reserve a free booth.*



## Spotlight on...

**Molly McNulty**, who was the winner of one of COSF's two environmental studies scholarships in 2022, is currently enrolled at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. Molly (seen here at the Carrizo Plain holding a fence lizard) demonstrated her commitment to environmental stewardship early, educating her community about the harmful effects of rodenticide on wildlife while she was still a student at Newbury Park High School. She expects to graduate in 2026. Here, she shares what she's been doing recently and where she sees her future.

**What is your major and why did you choose it?**

I'm majoring in biology and minoring in environmental science. I chose biology because it's a subject I've always excelled in and felt passionate about. The major offers lots of versatility and a variety of unique, engaging classes, allowing me to explore topics that excite me.

**Why is environmental stewardship important to you?**

Environmental stewardship is important to me because it reflects our responsibility to protect the planet and its resources for future generations. Preserving natural habitats, protecting wildlife and combating environmental degradation are crucial for maintaining the health of our ecosystems and ensuring the well-being of all species, including humans. It's about creating a sustainable balance between human progress and nature's resilience.

**Do you see yourself pursuing an advanced degree post-college?**

I do plan on pursuing an advanced degree after I graduate, but my exact path is still undecided.

**What has been your best college experience relevant to environmental studies so far?**

My favorite has been being a volunteer researching elephant seals along California's central coast. Each week, my team and I would spend early mornings collecting data on seal populations by taking surveys, marking and tagging seals and weighing weanlings. It was an incredible opportunity to contribute to conservation efforts and gain hands-on experience.

**What is your dream job?**

My dream job would be working as a wildlife photographer.

**Any other thoughts or words of wisdom?**

I am so grateful to live near such beautiful natural space!



**Niki Stokols is the winner of the autumn Four Seasons photo contest with this image she took at Wildwood Regional Park. Thank you to all who entered their own cactus "heart" snaps. Don't miss the winter challenge: Acorns!**

## **News In Brief**

**Niki Stokols** won the fall edition of our **Four Seasons photo contest** with this charming heart-shaped cactus pad. Niki takes home an eco-friendly COSF t-shirt and a \$25 gift card to a local business. The next challenge, which begins now and runs through February 28, is to photograph one or more acorns. To be eligible, make sure you're on COSCA land when you snap your oak tree seed photo. [Visit our website to see the rest of the rules and to learn out to submit your photos.](#)

Sneak preview of our 2025 Speaker Series: **Our first event will be January 15 and will feature Dana Stangel, executive director of Teranga Ranch,** talking about co-existing with coyotes and what you should know about this misunderstood canid. Mark your calendars!



It's the time of the year that we like to **thank to local businesses that have supported COSF** with supplies, donations or other generous assistance. Much gratitude is due to:

- **The Alamo, Newbury Park**
- **Bottle & Pint, Newbury Park**
- **Cakebread Cellars Winery**
- **Calleguas Water District**
- **Carhartt Winery, Los Olivos**
- **Coalition for Clean Air**
- **Fess Parker Winery, Los Olivos**
- **Growing Works, Camarillo**
- **Island Packers**
- **Pearl District, Westlake, in particular Andrea Knox Vasquez**
- **REI, Oxnard**
- **St.Helena Welcome Center**
- **Trader Joe's, Newbury Park**
- **3 Amigos, Newbury Park**

**Join a free Open Space Appreciation Hike**, held monthly on the second Saturday, starting at 8:00 a.m., courtesy of Conejo Recreation and Parks! No pre-registration required. Rain, fire, or red-flag alert cancels. A responsible adult must accompany hikers under 18. For more info call CRPD at (805) 495-2163. This season's hikes will be:

- **January 11, Conejo Canyons—Western Plateau, Peninsula, Hawk Canyon Lollipop.** There will be a lot of ups and downs, but the views will be worth it! on this moderately strenuous 5-mile loop hike. (3 hours)
- **February 8, North Ranch—Hillcrest Open Space Loop.** Moderately strenuous 5-mile hike has panoramic and spectacular views. (3 hours)
- **March 8, Backbone Trail (BBT) from Kanan to Zuma Out & Back.** Strenuous 7-mile hike. This is a beautiful section of the BBT. It should be filled with wildflowers and the views are terrific. (4 hours)

Have a comment, correction, story idea or other **input for the newsletter**? Let us know! Email us at [news@cosf.org](mailto:news@cosf.org)

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The Conejo Open Space Foundation (COSF) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation formed in 1995 to promote, support and help maintain the open space and trail system of the Conejo Valley, and to educate visitors as to their roles as custodians and protectors of the open space and the environment. We support and help fund ongoing programs sponsored by the Conejo Open Space Conservation Agency (COSCA)  
P.O.Box 2113, Thousand Oaks, CA. 91358

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