

THE CONEJO OPEN SPACE FOUNDATION NEWS

Winter 2025



As the winner of our Autumn "Four Seasons" photo contest, Marilyn Wells captured this iconic oak tree. If you'd like to enter our Winter contest, [please see our website for details.](#)

A Few Words from Our President

Hi everyone,

As I sit down to write this quarterly letter, **I am overwhelmed with gratitude.** The Conejo Valley reminds me every day how thankful I am to the leaders who showed up so many years ago to ensure that our open spaces would remain protected and looked after.

I know that you too value our open spaces and, in this season of gratitude, I cannot express enough how much **your support of COSF is appreciated.** I hope you've had a chance this year to participate in one of the events we support—such as a trail work day, Trails Education Days or one (or all) of our virtual Speaker Series. Of course, the COSF Environmental Studies Scholarship is our crown jewel, as we hope to lay a foundation of conservation combined with action through our scholarship recipients.

Of course, none of this is possible without you. Whether you volunteer, donate or both, it is your support that is so critical to supporting our mission to

preserve, promote and protect open spaces through community education and involvement. Our cup overflows: Thank you!

As the COSF Board President, **I'm also grateful to have a dedicated team of Directors.** Their combined knowledge, history and passion to serve continues to amaze me. The unpaid work that goes on behind the scenes, I think, is pretty incredible. Whether preparing for our Plantpalooza & Eco Fest, organizing trail-work volunteers or even putting this newsletter together, this crew cannot be beat. Thank you, team! I am looking forward to 2026.

This year, we celebrated a big milestone—30 years of being the Conejo Open Space Foundation. As we look toward the projects we have lined up for 2026, your ongoing support is appreciated. Please consider making a donation today and I hope to see you at a trail work day or out on the trails.

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 volunteering with a COSF board committee, [please reach out to me](#).

We Couldn't Do It Without You!

[COSE](#) 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

Volunteer



A record crowd turned out for our free annual community event on October 11 to take home native seeds and plants and meet experts.

Fourth Year of Native Plantpalooza & Eco Fest Was Best Yet for Exhibitors and Attendees

In October, Native Plantpalooza & Eco Fest returned for a fourth year to its location at Lakeside, Conejo Creek Park North in Thousand Oaks. Balmy weather graced our **free educational festival**. Focused on sustainable living and gardening, the event drew around **800 attendees who enjoyed interacting with the 35+ exhibitors**.

We were delighted to welcome back dozens of previous years' eco-related exhibitors as well as many exciting new ones.

Returnees included:

- Athens Services
- Byron's Bees
- California Wildlife Center
- Conejo Valley Audubon Society
- Conejo Valley Garden Club
- Food Forward
- National Wildlife Federation representing the Annenberg Wildlife Crossing
- Theodore Payne Foundation
- UCCE Master Gardener Pollinator Team
- Woods Forest School

Debut exhibitors included:

- California Native Plant Society
- Dana Brynn Jewelry
- Firewise
- Organic Garden Club of VC
- Paloma Native Plants
- Planet in Mind
- Thousand Oaks Acorn Co.

- Wild Birds Unlimited
- Xerces Society

We hope all who exhibited and attended had a great time and that we'll see you again in October 2026! For those who missed it, we hope you'll be there next time.



Jaclyn DeSantis, education program manager at the Ojai Raptor Center, joined COSF on November 19 for our last 2025 Speaker Series.

Final Speaker Explored Perils Raptors Face

The final talk in COSF's 2025 Speaker Series featured **Jaclyn DeSantis, education program manager at the Ojai Raptor Center**. She presented **"Wild Neighbors: Raptors, Rehabilitation, and the Human Connection"** in November.

As a licensed wildlife rehabilitator, DeSantis has seen a lot of injured birds. From her 15 years of experience at the Ojai Raptor Center she reports that most of these heart-breaking injuries are from anthropogenic (i.e., human) causes. Most of the damage is done unintentionally, with the leading causes of injury being car strikes, window collisions, poisoning from a variety of sources including rodenticides, and entanglement with fencing, fishing line and netting. She notes, however, that the Center receives on average of two patients a month that have been shot.

She observes as well that good intentions combined with a lack of understanding about natural bird behaviors can lead to what she terms "birdnapping." Red-tailed hawks, for example, go through a "hawkward" phase as juveniles when they prefer to sit or walk on the ground, making it appear that they are injured or disoriented. She strongly encourages anyone witnessing what they think is odd raptor behavior to check in with a rehabilitator before whisking the bird away.

If you find a nestling that may have fallen or an adult with suspected injuries, please call the Ojai Raptor Center before attempting to intervene. **You can reach the hospital unit at: 805-649-6884.**

To learn more about visiting the Ojai Raptor Center's on its twice monthly Saturday community days, or to learn more about raptors, please check the [Center's website](#).

If you missed Jaclyn's talk or any of our other Speaker Series presentations or would like to watch them again, please visit and subscribe to our [YouTube channel](#).



Maryland native **Brittany Schiefer** says she's happy to be joining **COSCA** as the newest Ranger.

Latest COSCA Ranger is Brittany Schiefer

COSCA's newest recruit, Brittany Schiefer, joined the agency in October.

"I am thrilled to be a part of Conejo Valley team, and to learn about the local ecology and wildlife!" she says. Originally from Maryland, she previously served as an interpretive ranger.

"I'm looking forward to serving the Conejo community and supporting our natural and recreation spaces," Schiefer adds.

With Schiefer's hiring, COSCA now has a full complement of rangers—a goal that's been a long time coming. Supervising Ranger Kory Prindle says he's delighted to finally have a full bench for the team.



Spotlight on...

Brian Stark, who has served as COSCA Administrator for over six years, grew up spending time outdoors, camping with the Scouts and visiting his grandparents' cattle ranch. Before joining COSCA, he worked with nonprofit land trusts in Ojai and San Luis Obispo. He says his career in conservation began somewhat accidentally when he was seeking to utilize the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) skills he had built as part of his master's degree in geography. In early December, he was honored by the Conejo Recreation and Parks District with the first-ever Lorax Award. Says CRPD General Manager Jim Friedl, "Brian, as a local resident and COSCA administrator, has been a remarkable advocate for the Conejo Valley open space, which many of us consider the best part about living here."

What's your reaction to winning the Lorax Award?

I appreciate the recognition by my conservation colleagues and friends because I respect them all so much. It's funny because I didn't think I was old enough to be a Lorax; but being an honorary Lorax is like achieving a higher plane of existence.

What does it mean to "speak for the trees?" What's going on in the Conejo Valley that requires trees to have an advocate?

I hadn't thought about *The Lorax* for a long time, but it distills so clearly the need to help people care about nature before it's too late. Dr. Seuss wrote it in 1971 when the environmental movement was young and as a kids' book it kept the issue simple enough to engage generations in the fight for a healthier planet.

My recent recognition has much to do with my role in balancing community safety and habitat conservation around the issue of wildfire safety. It might seem logical that removing wildland vegetation would reduce home ignitions—and to a limited extent it does—but "more" is not necessarily better.

COSCA's guiding principle is that we should use the best available science to direct land management decisions. By committing to scientific principles and

communicating these to the public, we are speaking for the trees.

What advice do you have for people about mitigating fire risk to their properties, especially those that abut open space?

Homes ignite either through radiant heat exposure, direct flame contact, or blowing embers. The first step is to ensure that you have 100 feet of defensible space around your house to prevent ignitions from radiant heat and flames and provide a safe space for firefighters to stage defense. But in Southern California the primary cause of home ignitions is blowing embers. Embers can travel up to several miles ahead of the fire in windy conditions and ignite homes well ahead of the fire front. Preventing ember ignitions involves practices that stop embers from entering the home through vents and gaps and to make the home exterior and surroundings less flammable. Collectively, these practices are called home hardening.

The Ventura County Fire Department has excellent resources through their [Ready, Set, Go](#) program. The [Ventura Regional Fire Safe Council](#) is also a valuable resource. Working with your neighbors on common defense is the fastest growing area of community fire safety.

What are your hopes for the future of Conejo's public lands and specifically for COSCA?

COSCA's primary mission in the coming years will be addressing ecological challenges associated with invasive plant species, a changing climate, growing wildfire concerns and damage associated with illegal trail construction. Our hope for the future is that we can continue to develop and offer formative outdoor experiences for new generations. We are actively working on expanding volunteer programs and will be open to working with other local organizations to broaden community participation in stewardship.

Any other thoughts or words of wisdom?

All it takes to be a Lorax is to care deeply about something, learn all you can about it, and share what you know.



COSF President Bill Miller (kneeling, left) and Director Tom Becker (kneeling, gray hat) joined four COSCA Rangers and 13 Amgen staffers to clean up the Arroyo Conejo on November 11. Ranger Joe Neary reports the group pulled out 750+ lbs of trash.

News In Brief

Calling all high-school seniors (and parents)! **COSF will again award \$1,500 scholarships to two graduating students** in the Conejo Valley and surrounding Ventura County communities. Students who will be enrolled in college full-time in 2026 to pursue environmental-studies-related majors are eligible. The COSF Environmental Studies Scholarship will continue for the four years of study as long as the students remain full-time, maintain a grade point average of 3.0 or higher, and continue with an environmental studies-related major.

To learn more about COSF's commitment to the next generation of environmental stewards and to find the application form, [please visit our website](#). Completed applications are due no later than **February 15, 2026**. Share the news with graduating seniors you know who may be eligible!

On January 17 from 3:00 pm to 4:00 pm, join Ventura County Master Gardener Terry Garman at the Newbury Park Library for **Composting 101: Turn Green Waste into Gold**. Learn how to make your own compost, nature's best soil amendment, as Garman discusses tools and techniques needed to easily convert your food scraps and green waste into nutrients for your garden. [Advance registration recommended.](#)

Our **2026 Speaker Series** is in the works and we'll be focusing on a theme of "Nature and Mental Wellbeing." We look forward to welcoming you to our virtual discussions. We also plan to add some in-person outdoor events in the coming year. If you have suggestions about speakers or topics for the coming year, please [contact us at the newsletter address](#).

Join a free Open Space Appreciation Hike, held monthly on the second Saturday, starting at **8:00 am sharp**, courtesy of Conejo Recreation and Parks District! No pre-registration required. Rain, fire, or red-flag alert cancels. For more info call CRPD at (805) 495-2163.

This season's hikes will be:

- **January 10, Wildwood.** Moderately strenuous 6.5-mile (4 hours) loop hike going over Mont Clef Ridge into Santa Rosa Valley returning via Box Cyn. *Meet in the main Wildwood Park parking lot at the western terminus of Avenida de los Arboles.*
- **February 14, Dos Vientos.** Moderately strenuous 5.5-mile lollipop hike (3 hours) starting at the Potrero Ridge trailhead on S. Reino Rd. continuing to the Sumac, Cotton Tail, Las Brisas and El Cerro trails. *Free parking in the lot on S. Reino Rd between Kimber and W. Lynn.*
- **March 14, Bowfield and Saddle Pass Trails.** Moderate 4.5-mile out-and-back (2.5 hours) with 750-ft elevation gain. *Trailhead is on Bowfield St., about ½ mile off Lindero Cyn Rd.*

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

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



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)
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