

WILDLIFE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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wild news Volume 7

Growing Our Grasslands

Ramona Grasslands: Historical Perspective

by Dave Bittner

Ramona Grasslands 1800s to 1985:

The Ramona Grasslands have been grazed since at least the 1850s by European settlers. Prior to that, Mexican Rancheros allowed cattle and horses to roam freely throughout the area. Sometimes the density of cattle and horses exceeded the carrying capacity and during drought years, great numbers of animals, especially horses, were slaughtered to assure that some, especially cattle, would survive the droughts. In the 1860s one such drought occurred and as a result of the animal losses many of the Mexican Rancho owners sold out to settlers and land speculators. Pamo Valley, Ballena Valley, Warner Ranch and Santa Ysabel Valley were also known to be grasslands at the time of these settlers arriving in San Diego County. Historical records indicate that significant Pronghorn populations existed in these grasslands, further demonstrating that these lands existed as grasslands for long periods prior to recorded times.

Native Americans used fire to maintain the grasslands. Whether intentional or accidental the result was the same with grasslands being maintained. Indian settlements existed in and around the Ramona Grasslands. Published books on the history of the area recorded that Mr. Etcheverry, an early rancher, grazed 15,000 sheep in the 1850s throughout the

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Pronghorn populations formerly inhabited the Ramona Grasslands.

PHOTO: DAVE BITTNER

History of the Ramona Grassland Preserve: 1988 to 2008

by Dave Bittner

From the first days of the initiative to preserve the Ramona Grasslands, it has been about Birds of Prey. These Raptors still are a driving force for all the people working many thousands of volunteer hours to make the Ramona Grasslands a Preserve.

The Wildlife Research Institute's Hawk Watch is about public education by observing these raptors. Our grasslands support a wide variety of birds of prey, such as the wintering and migrant Ferruginous Hawks, Prairie Falcons, White Tailed Kites, Northern Harriers, Merlins, our resident Red-tailed Hawks, our Red-shouldered Hawks, Kestrels and of course the magnificent Golden Eagles. These birds of prey, along with all the species that live in, and depend on, the Grasslands make up the unique ecology here in San Diego's backyard that is becoming the Ramona Grassland Preserve.

In 1988, I arrived in Ramona looking for a house. Being totally unfamiliar with the area I was just driving around when, on what is now Esquilago, I observed two juvenile Golden Eagles foraging and being attacked by Red-Tailed Hawks. Across the road two adult Golden Eagles were soaring over the Oak Country Ranch and proceeded to fly to the Cagney Ranch where they were then joined by the two juveniles. All four eagles then departed for the Davis-Eagle Ranch. Further down Highland Valley Road, we saw four more Golden Eagles on the Cummings Ranch (2 adults and 2 juveniles). This total of Eight (8) Golden Eagles in the Ramona Grasslands hasn't been seen since.

The year 1988 appears to be the last year both the Bandy Canyon Golden Eagle nest and Iron Mountain Golden Eagle nest pairs fledged two young each, in the same year. This day marked the beginning of my passion for the Grasslands and eventually WRI's passion for saving the Ramona Grasslands for future generations of people and wildlife.

Simultaneously, in the late 1980s Fred Sproul, botanist and naturalist and Tom Stephen, a falconer, started a "Raptor Watch" in the Ramona Grasslands. This modest public event started with four people and grew because of the passion that Fred and Tom shared with the Ramona public. In 1990, I joined them in their public program.

As the crowds grew, the press started to pick up on our combined efforts. The seeds of public awareness were being planted.

In 1996, my wife Leigh, Jeff Lincer, Ph.D., and I launched

the Wildlife Research Institute, Inc. (WRI) with myself and Dr. Lincer as a wildlife biologists. We were soon approached by Fred Sproul to take over the Raptor Watch under WRI. The name was changed to "Hawk Watch" and is now conducted 16-20 times a year. In 2006, our public attendance had grown to as many as 219 people at a single Hawk Watch Event. Newspapers, TV and radio all cover the event each year. Because hawks and eagles are visible to the public during daylight hours, Hawk Watch has become the principle public awareness vehicle for preserving the grasslands. Each year public awareness of the grasslands and our membership grow.

In the early 1990s, the County of San Diego proposed an expansion of the Ramona County Airport. This included an expansion of the airports' infrastructure, expansion of service levels of the airport, an extension of the runway, and building of a new industrial park complex, new roads that would traverse the grasslands, and other developments that were found by the local people of Ramona to be very objectionable. Carol Angus, a local resident, organized a citizens group to fight this development by the County and hired Marco Gonzales, an attorney to help fight the expansion. The runway expansion was a good move for the safety of our firefighting aircraft, but the proposed industrial park complex was an issue with serious negative impacts. Mike Beck, County Land Planning Commissioner



PHOTO: J. NEWLAND

Bow net demonstrations at our annual Hawk Watch event. Local Boy Scout learns how the bow net safely catches Golden Eagles.

brought the facts about the proposed industrial park to the County Board of Supervisors. The facts clearly demonstrat-

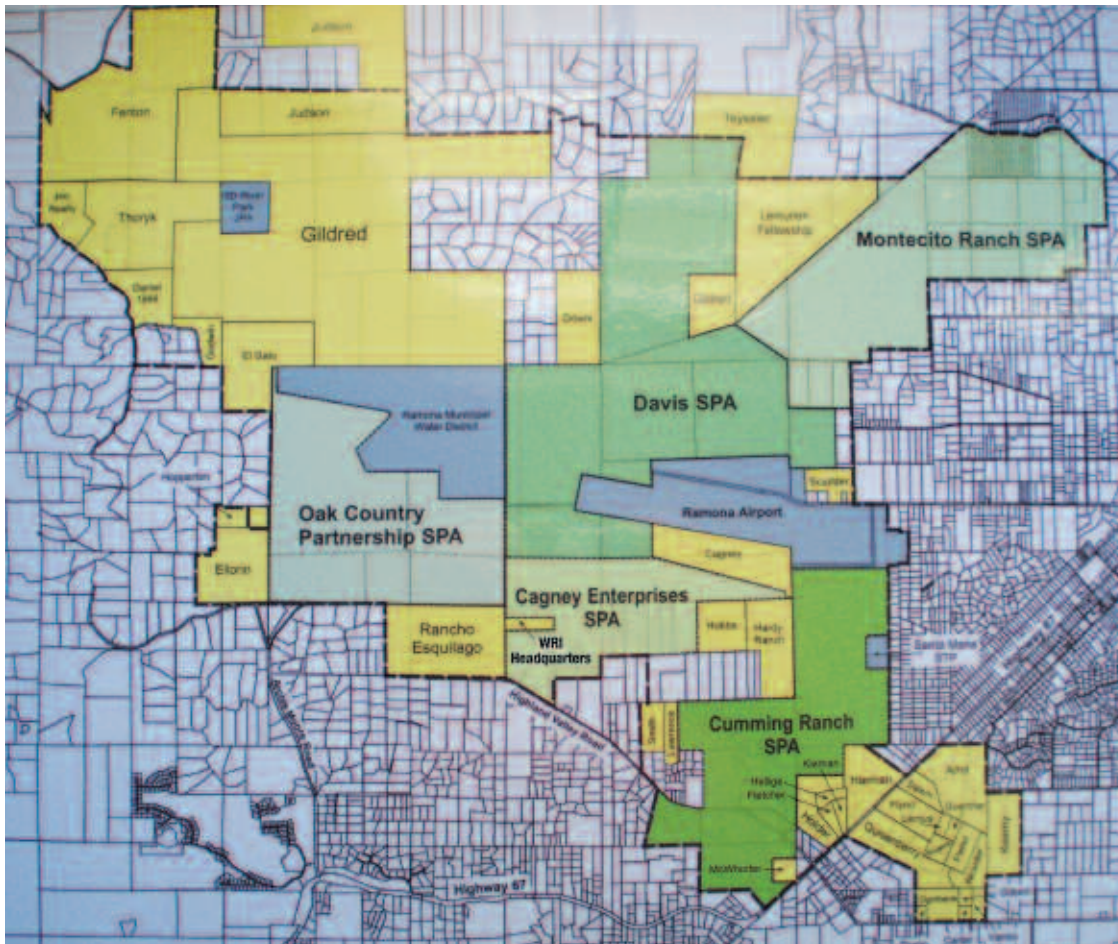
Hobbs Parcel Deeded to WRI



The Hobbs Property is a 40-acre parcel adjacent to the Santa Maria Creek and surrounded on three sides by the 619-acre Cagney Ranch parcel. (The Cagney Ranch was preserved by The Nature Conservancy in 2003 and sold to San Diego County in 2006.)

Beginning in 2006, Jim Carter and Glen Smith, of Environmental Solutions, worked with the Wildlife Research Institute (WRI) to place a 40-acre parcel called the Hobbs Parcel into permanent protection. It took 2 years of diligent work from Environmental Solutions, a property mitigation firm, overcoming many county, state and federal red tape hurdles. Several of you in our volunteer corps helped during this process by lending your support. WRI will be the owner and manager of this property. An endowment will be placed by Environmental Solutions with The San Diego Foundation as part of our cooperative program with the Foundation called Endow San Diego. The endowment will yield annual interest allowing WRI to manage the property in perpetuity.

WRI will continue to acquire small parcels and add them to the Ramona Grasslands Preserve in an attempt to bring cohesion to the many large parcels already acquired. WRI and the County are working to expedite the process in the future. In total, more than 4,000 acres of Ramona's grassland have come under some type of protection preserving it for future generations of San Diegans. The emerging Ramona Grasslands Preserve is a golden opportunity for the community of Ramona to leverage this ecological jewel as a reason to promote local eco-tourism.



Map of Ramona Grasslands courtesy of 805 Properties.

Parcels currently purchased and/or protected totalling 4,440 acres.

Parcel	Acres
Hardy Ranch	70
Cagney Ranch	419
Davis Ranch	1231
Gildred Ranch	1400
Oak Country Rch	700+
JPA Park	40
Hobbs	40
Ramona Airport	230
Ramona spray fields	300
WRI	10

Still need to acquire and protect over 1,000 acres.

Hawkwatch 2008



PHOTO: R. AUSTING

Red-tailed Hawk in attack stoop.



PHOTO: D. BITTNER

Ferruginous Hawk chicks in a Montana nest.

"Let's go to the Ramona Grasslands for the winter."

Hawkwatch 2008 Season began with much needed rainfall. Although we try to never cancel a Hawkwatch, our first crowds were moderate due to heavy rains. The Ramona Grasslands were soaking it up and the Vernal Pools were coming to life. Soon we were sharing the ecological wealth and beauty of the Ramona Grasslands with close to 200 people every Saturday.

The ever-magnificent wintering Ferruginous Hawks showed up like clockwork hunting the Ramona Grasslands. Our resident raptors, especially the Red-tailed Hawks gave us their version of Cirque de Sol in the skies as they chose mates and used their flying ballet to chase competing suitors away. Even the secretive Golden Eagles made an appearance to thrill us all.

We are also happy to report we saw American Kestrels, Merlins, Peregrine Falcons, Prairie Falcons, Turkey Vultures, Red-shouldered Hawks, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Cooper's Hawks, Northern Harriers, White-tailed Kites, and Burrowing Owls: 14 raptor species in all. The passerines we spotted included Loggerhead Shrikes, Western Bluebirds, Mountain Bluebirds, Meadowlarks, Red-winged Blackbirds.

And before all the pools dried up we enjoyed seeing Canada Geese, Cinnamon Teal, Blue-winged Teal, Green-winged Teal, Great Blue Herons, Shoveler Ducks, Gadwalls, American Widgeon, Mallards, Yellow Legs, as well as Common, Snowy, and Cattle Egrets. Wow!

Our biologists shared the US Fish and Wildlife bird banding procedures which provides an opportunity for the public to see these resident raptors. We believe seeing wildlife up close makes people believe in their importance and value to our ecosystem. How can we protect what we don't know exists?

Thanks to everyone who came out to share their time and become WRI members at Hawkwatch 2008. We hope you tell your friends and neighbors and join us again in January and February 2009.

A special thank you to all our 2008 volunteers who share their time and expertise with WRI and the San Diego County community.

Hawkwatch Team

Charisse Allen
Susan Bainbridge
Jan Billington
Dave Bittner
Leigh Bittner
Wil Fansher
Andrew Fisher
Jim Hannan
Wyn Knapp
Valmere Knapp
Karen Larsen-Gordon
Jeff Lincer
Bob MacDonald
Renee Martin
Katy McGrath
Chris Meador
Jennie Munger
James Newland
Janet Newland
Ted Newland
Vivian Osborn
Halley Sage
Bonnie Schlotfeldt
Fred Sproul
Joyce Stark
Tom Stark
Tom Trowbridge
Phil Turner
Alyse Turner
Daniel Turner
Alena Turner
Jon Paul Turner
Jeff Wells

Wilson H. Fansher 1929-2008

A special farewell
and tribute to
Wilson Fansher. A
dedicated member
whose life reflected
his love of nature.

CHILDREN'S HAWKWATCH 2008

Sixteen Classrooms of future Naturalists spent their morning at the Ramona Grasslands learning about Raptors, Grassland Ecology, Fairy Shrimp and how to use high power scopes. This was our 5th year offering this program to Schools in San Diego County. WRI's program is for 4th graders. Teachers only need to call our office to get scheduled. Hurry, the dates offered go very fast. Parents and schools need to provide their own transportation and snacks/drinks, and we do the rest.

Call Bev Torres at WRI 760-789-3992 for information or scheduling. Our Children's Hawkwatch is dedicated to memory of Julie Savory, an educator and naturalist in San Diego County.

Special thank you to Fred Sproul, Tom Trowbridge, Tina West, and Dave Bittner for making this year's Children's Hawkwatch a success. Sharing their passion for Nature is priceless.

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Fourth grade class attending Children's Hawkwatch at WRI. Dave Bittner demonstrating banding with live Red-shouldered Hawk.



Golden Eagle Travelogue

Project Update

PHOTOS: D.BITTNER

2007 was a most successful year for the Wildlife Research Institute's Golden Eagle Research team. During 2007, WRI biologists and volunteers banded 56 Golden Eagles. We now have 38 Golden Eagles with VHF transmitters and 8 golden eagles with satellite transmitters that we are tracking.



Dr. Pete Thomas releasing a banded Goshawk at the Montana Research Station.

These eagles with transmitters are ranging from southern Baja to Alaska and east to Wyoming, Colorado and Texas. Over the next few years we plan to continue to track these and additional eagles to document critical habitat, mortality factors and migration.

The specific knowledge we gain from tracking these eagles will help us identify critical habitat the eagles need for feeding, wintering, and nesting. We can then use this scientific information to protect the species by protecting these habitats.

Two Southern California projects and our Montana project make up our current Golden Eagle Research. The Bureau of Land Management has contracted WRI to study the Golden Eagles, Common Ravens and Prairie Falcons in the Western Mojave Desert. There we are studying approximately 20 pairs of Golden Eagles, 15 pairs of Prairie Falcons and over 75 pairs of Ravens. In San Diego County we continue to study the population of 46 active pairs of Golden Eagles that we have been documenting now for over 20 years. In addition we annually document another 15 pairs in Riverside and Orange Counties.

In Montana we are trapping, banding, and tracking with satellite transmitters the migratory population of Golden Eagles that migrate from Alaska and Canada into the United States and Mexico to winter.

This eagle migration along the Rocky Mountain Front in



WRI Director, Dave Bittner, carrying blinds and eagle bow nets to trapping site at Roger's Pass, Montana.

Montana occurs from mid September, peaks in October and continues through November each year. Members, volunteers and biologists all work together to trap and band these magnificent eagles. Last year several WRI members and volunteers got to experience a great day when seven (7) eagles were tagged in one day. Several other eagles were near misses so the action was nonstop all day.

We have been returning to the Blacktail Ranch and the Continental Divide for 8 years now and we want to acknowledge all our members that have helped support this important work. If you are interested in joining this elite group for a once-in-a-lifetime experience, just fill out the enclosed registration form to hold your reservation. Space is strictly limited to 12 people per week.



Bonnie Schlottfeldt, left, and Jeanine Means, right, releasing banded Golden Eagles at the Montana trap site.

Please see the enclosed sign up form if you wish to help on this project. For some additional information about the Blacktail Ranch visit: www.blacktailranch.com

Deadline for signup is September 15th 2008.

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A Most Imperial Census

It is estimated that more than 70% of the remaining Burrowing Owls in California live in the Imperial Valley. The Burrowing Owls live along the irrigation canals and drainage ditches operated and maintained by the Imperial Irrigation District (IID).

Since the owls are on the decline throughout most of their historic range, the remaining owl populations in the Imperial Valley near El Centro are all the more important to the species' survival. Ironically, the man-made ditches and canals, with the insects the adjacent agriculture brings, makes for a beneficial, albeit artificial and probably temporary environment for the little owls.



PHOTO: D. BITTNER

Burrowing Owls defending nest cavity in irrigation ditch.

They feed mainly on beetles and other insects and nest in burrows of their own making or homestead in burrows vacated by ground squirrels. It's a nice little arrangement, especially since native grassland habitats in California are estimated to be a mere 3-4% of their original size. These historic grasslands were the Burrowing Owls' natural homes from which they have been evicted.

Now back to the canals and the reason for the study. The IID is in the process of

implementing aspects of a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) as part of the Quantification Settlement Agreement (QSA). The HCP includes measures designed to mitigate for IID's ongoing operation and maintenance procedures. For example, the QSA water conservation program includes on-farm conservation through improved irrigation measures and some seepage recovery of the canal waters.

Some of their water allocation from the Colorado River could be lost to seepage while flowing through the incoming irrigation canals. Since these irrigation canals are simply dirt, the water filters through the sandy soil back into the ground. In their plans to conserve water, they want to experiment with concrete-lined canals to conserve water. (Water allocations of the Colorado River are in demand and the IID has agreed to sell a portion of their water to San Diego.) An important mitigation measure requires the IID to conduct scientific studies of the Imperial Valley population of burrowing owls and the effects any changes in operation on the populations of the owls.

WRI is teaming with Bloom Biological and Manning

Biological Research for this 3-year project to determine current Burrowing Owl populations in the Imperial Valley. The overall purpose is to develop a scientifically defensible Long-term Burrowing Owl Monitoring protocol that will fulfill IID's Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) commit-

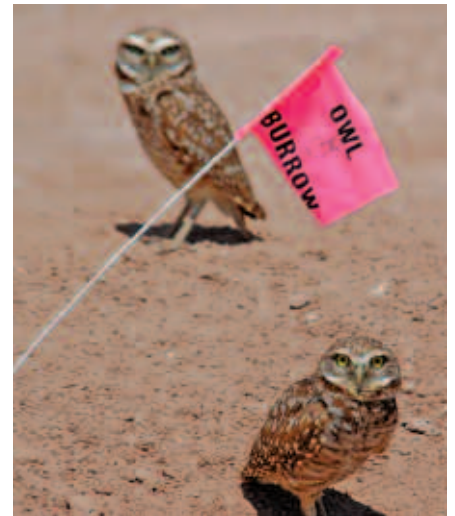


PHOTO: D. BITTNER

IID marker at nest burrow to prevent damage by tractors and graders.



WRI biologist using GPS to mark locations of Burrowing Owl nest burrows along an IID drainage ditch.

PHOTO: D. BITTNER



Pete Bloom, of Bloom Biological, demonstrating banding of Burrowing Owl to WRI biologists hired for the Imperial Valley population study.

ment to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife and California Department of Fish and Game.

Ultimately, the objective of this work is to develop and validate a predictive model of Burrowing Owl territory distribution and population abundance across this Habitat

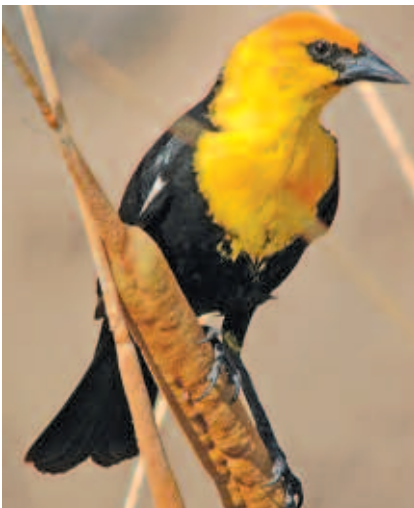
Conservation Plan area. Two related issues that influence accuracy of abundance estimates and habitat modeling are probabilities of detection and level of effort. The project included a pilot study (Year 1), which addressed these variables.

The experiments in the Pilot Study were designed by Manning Biological

Yellow-headed Blackbird, one of many species nesting in the IID canals and drainage ditches.

to characterize the sources of error in detection and determine the best statistical approach to surveying the larger burrowing owl population in IID's Service Area within the HCP (approximately 500,000 square miles).

This Pilot Study produced a feasible method of obtaining accurate estimates of Burrowing Owl population and distribution across the HCP area and was approved by the participating agencies. In the spring of 2007 (Year 2), the plan was implemented by 40 WRI Burrowing Owl biologists who spent seven weeks in the field surveying more than 4,000 miles of IID canals and drains. These data are being analyzed and the survey was replicated in 2008 (Year 3). A



final report will document the work accomplished and recommend a defensible Long-term Burrowing Owl Monitoring Program for the IID Service Area.

Based on comparable surveys throughout California, more than 70% of the state's Burrowing Owl population remains in Imperial Valley. This, according to some sources could be more than 50% of the entire population of the Western Burrowing Owl in the U.S. As to a more exact number of owls in Imperial Valley, estimates vary from 4,500 to 9,000. Our cooperative study is intended to provide a more precise number, and their distribution, for proper conservation and management in this important region.

"The burrowing owl is in trouble throughout much of its range and these kinds of studies and conservation efforts are critical if the species is to survive," indicates Dr. Jeff Lincer, WRI's Research Director and Project Manager for the Institute's Comprehensive Burrowing Owl Management Program. This multi-faceted program includes both scientific research on the owl as well as captive breeding and release, owl habitat conservation, owl translocation in the face of impending development, and public education and participation. Lincer further states, "Many of these efforts to save the owl will also protect many of the remaining acres of grassland."

NOTE: WRI, through our on-site breeding and hacking (release) program has produced over 54 Burrowing Owls from our Grasslands property from prior mitigation projects. We currently have at least 2 pairs that breed at our Ramona Headquarters. Our bison are instrumental in keeping the grasses short, which was conducive to Burrowing Owl habitats.



Bison at WRI Ramona Grasslands Headquarters grazing to keep the vegetation low to encourage continued Burrowing Owl nesting.

Confessions of a Tree Hugger

by Leigh Bittner

Editor by her favorite oak tree
after a Julian snowfall.

PHOTO: D. BITTNER

*I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast.*

*Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.*

Joyce Kilmer 1886-1918

It is high time we all went native.

Native Trees that is, or more specifically, native oak trees. Let's plant more *Quercus agrifolia*, our Coast live oak and perhaps the *Quercus chrysolepis*, our Canyon live oak.

After experiencing two giant fires preceded by drought in San Diego County and seeing the results on the landscape, the importance of planting native species is even more evident and urgent. In particular, we need to plant more of our glorious, wind resilient, drought tolerant, fire-resistant, ecology building, butterfly larvae eating, kid-climbing, hawk nesting, golden eagle nesting, Great horned owl nesting, property value-adding, Coast Live Oak. Both the Coast Live Oak and the Canyon live oak are the most fire resistant of our oaks. Their thick bark is credited with their

protection against these naturally fire resistant trees. Both have evolved in the natural fire ecology of our state.



California Sister Butterfly

It is not a coincidence the oak tree is deeply rooted in the human experience as a symbol of strength. It is a strong mighty tree, no matter which species, no matter the landscape. In fact, in a nation-wide contest by the Arbor Day Foundation, the oak tree was voted our National Tree. It is used for shade, for shelter, for heat, for water quality, erosion control, recreation, aesthetics and, if you have ever been a kid, for fun! Our California hardwood rangelands provide the richest ecosystems in the state, with at least 313 terrestrial vertebrate species relying on these habitats to live. According to "Guidelines for Managing California's Hardwood Rangelands, UC California", in a rich ecosystem of Coastal Oaks with 25-39 percent canopy cover, there can be predicted to occur 18 amphibian species, 34 reptile species, 74 mammal species, and 131 bird species.

And if we just speak of their acorns, these trees have fed *homo sapiens*, deer, squirrels, acorn woodpeckers, and turkeys to name but a few.

Here is the number one comment I hear about Oak trees and why you don't plant them:

FICTION: "But they grow so slowly"

FACT: Wrong!! But they do live for hundreds of years!! First of all, we all need to think more long term, and if you provide water early on, they grow rather quickly and you get a quality tree versus just quantity of lanky limbs. You can water a young oak to get it to grow faster and then as it gets older, it doesn't need (or want) the extra water.

Yes, non-native eucalyptus trees grow fast, but they are gangly, are prone to wind damage, and light up like torches when our Santa Ana fed fires rage through our region. (See Scripps Ranch, 2003) There is no eucalyptus oil in our



Over-crowded planting of Eucalyptus trees in Poway creates weak, spindly trees prone to wind and fire damage.

native oaks and our oaks don't shed bark all over the place, creating an oily tinderbox. Eucalyptus trees are nick-

named "gasoline tree" for a reason.

Now, I don't propose we cut all eucalyptus down, remember, I am a tree hugger, but let us all start planting oaks to get them started on a eucalyptus replacement program. I do love our Ramona Eucalyptus Boulevard, but these are very old, historic trees spaced apart. But take a drive down Twin Peaks road and see all the gangly eucs, planted so close together so none of them can grow to be a large specimen tree. It looks like and is a fire hazard. Wouldn't it be better if oaks were started there? Then the oaks could begin to replace the eucalyptus.

Or what about the ornamentals off Scripps-Poway Parkway...why aren't those oaks? And then why are these ornamentals and eucs always trimmed to within an inch of their lives? As soon as one of these ornamentals starts to provide some shade in the summer, they get trimmed to a mere nubbin!!! Every answer I get for this is "wind"...well then plant oak trees which have strong limbs to withstand our seasonal winds.

How did all these Eucalyptus get here? There are several reasons the eucs were started here. For their obvious

drought tolerance and fast growth for the railroad tie industry. However, someone forgot to see if you could drive those gigantic railroad nails into them. Guess what, the wood splintered. Eucalyptus trees were also introduced for lumber, firewood, and windbreaks. They were even thought to help remove malaria and insects from the air with the menthol odor. None of these uses panned out and we need to start giving our native oaks a chance to replace them.

Where will our native oaks grow in our county?

Everywhere!

Will they grow in my backyard?

Yes! For more information on this, the California Oak Foundation www.californiaoaks.org. Their website has great information on planting new oaks in your yard or caring for ones you already have. You can put them in your front yard, in your back yard in your pasture, even your neighbors yard. How? Well, just put out piles of acorns and let the scrub jays plant them for you.

Where can I buy them?

Probably any nursery can order them for you, but two native plant nurseries in our region are:

Tree of Life Nursery
San Juan Capistrano, CA 949-728-0685
www.treecoflifenursery.com

Las Pilitas Nursery
Escondido, CA
www.laspilitas.com

"A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in."

Greek Proverb

5-week-old Golden Eagles in oak tree nest in San Diego County.



Top Ten Reasons to Love & Plant Oak Trees

They provide firewood and lumber

They provide nest sites for birds

They provide shade

They provide oxygen

They make great climbing trees

Their limbs are sturdy enough to handle Santa Ana winds

They are beautiful and huggable

They are drought tolerant

They are fire resistant

They increase your property value

Art for Grasslands

*Giclee prints of wildlife paintings
by Ramona Artist Joyce Stark*

The purchase of the giclee print, "Let Me Go", the Red-tailed Hawk, will go entirely to supporting WRI and the Ramona Grassland acquisition. The signed limited edition is printed with longevity pigments on acid-free archival quality paper. It comes with a Certificate of Authenticity, an explanation of giclee prints and is encased in a clear acid free envelope. The 8.5"x11" print and the 13"x19" print also have an acid free board protecting them.

Joyce Stark painted the original art work of "Let Me Go" from a photograph that her husband, Tom, took a few years ago at Hawk Watch. Dave Bittner was holding the Red-tailed Hawk by its legs after banding the bird. Joyce donated the original to one of WRI's Live Auction Fund Raisers where it sold for \$900. All of the giclee prints of "Let Me Go" and the greeting cards are also donated to WRI.

"Huh!", the badger, and "Inquisitive", the Saw-whet Owl, were painted from two photographs borrowed from Dave Bittner, Executive Director of WRI. Dave saw the badger in the Los Padres National Forrest north of Los Angeles. The owl was taken while on a wild owl banding trip in Ohio.

Signed and Numbered prints:

"Let Me Go" (100% of purchase price goes to WRI for "Let Me Go")
\$35 for 8½"x11" giclee (limited edition of 50)
\$95 for 13"x19" giclee (limited edition of 50)
\$150 for 17¼"x 22" giclee (limited edition of 150)

"Huh!" (50% of purchase price goes to WRI for "Huh!")
\$35 for 8½"x11" giclee (limited edition of 50)
\$95 for 13"x19" giclee (limited edition of 50)

"Inquisitive" (50% of purchase price goes to WRI for "Inquisitive")
\$35 for 8½"x11" giclee (limited edition of 50)
\$95 for 13"x19" giclee (limited edition of 50)



Joyce Stark, Artist, (right) with Jeanette Smith, Owner of Art About Africa and Frame Shop in Ramona. Jeanette provided the framing for Joyce's artwork.

**TO RESERVE YOUR PRINT
CALL 760-789-3992**

BUYING GROCERIES HELPS US GROW!

ALBERTSONS has been donating to WRI for over five years now through their Preferred Card and Community Partners Program. The more you spend at Albertsons, the larger our quarterly checks are from Albertsons. All you need is an Albertsons card, which you can apply for at no charge at any of their store locations. You not only get discounts at the store, but a percentage of all your purchases goes to WRI.

Here is how you can link your Albertsons' Preferred Card to WRI. Thank you so very much! We use this funding to continue our Hawkwatch programs and reach out to schools. It works in any Albertsons location.

Go to www.albertsons.com and then:

- Click on "In The Community" then click on the Albertsons Community Partners logo link.
- Click on "Shoppers login or register with your Preferred Savings Card first."
- Sign in by entering the number located on the back of your Albertsons Preferred Card (found below the barcode).
- Click on "My Account". You can either "Add a Partner" or "Update Partners".

Enter WRI information:

ID#: 49000125837
Wildlife Research Institute (Children's Hawkwatch Program)
Ramona, CA

History: 1988-2008, continued from page 2

ed that there was absolutely no need for more industrial park zoning and buildings. The statistics showed that all the industrial park space in nearby Poway was still vacant and unused, and is still not fully developed nor leased out in 2008, ten years later.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service was soon advised by a local Ramona biologist that the federally endangered Stephens Kangaroo Rat (SKR) was present on the airport site and this discovery altered the County's plans for airport expansion. After several years of negotiations and compromises the County of San Diego backed down on some of their plans and limited the development and runway expansion to that necessary for safety. An endangered species, the humble seed-eating SKR, saved the Ramona Grasslands from total devastation.

In 1996 the Wildlife Research Institute (WRI) and Carol Angus's grassroots citizen group "Save the Ramona Grasslands", combined efforts to begin an effort to preserve the area now known as the Ramona Grasslands Preserve. Preliminary wildlife and plant studies were gathered and a plan with maps was put together. Dave Bittner, Carol Angus and several volunteers first presented this plan to The Nature Conservancy in their Temecula Office in 1996. No immediate results happened from that meeting so a long grassroots campaign began to get out the word and educate local authorities and governmental agencies of the Ramona's Grasslands importance.

WRI kept up the steady drumbeat; our local Ramonans continued their letter-writing and donations. They gathered thousands of signatures supporting the Preserve, demonstrating local support.

WRI conducted Hawkwatches every year at which we told our weekly crowds from all over the County about the Grasslands. We wrote articles, promoted the Grasslands to the county, US Fish and Wildlife Service, California Fish and Game, Congressmen and State Representatives.

During the 1990s Dave Bittner and Fred Sproul worked to ensure that Grasslands were included in the San Diego Multiple Species Conservation Plan (MSCP). Even though the Burrowing Owl, Ferruginous Hawk, Swainson's

Hawk, Golden Eagle (all Grassland species) were included in the MSCP, the habitat they need to survive was not initially part of the plan. Due to Dave and Fred's work and the Native Plant Society, Grasslands are now included in the San Diego MSCP. We discussed the Grasslands in our newsletters and finally, in the next millennium the stars would begin to align.

In June of 2000, WRI called yet another meeting of all government agencies and interested parties to hear a program about the Ramona Grasslands which was held at the California Fish and Game office in San Diego. The attendees at this meeting included CA Fish and Game, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, The Trust for Public Lands, The Nature Conservancy, Endangered Habitat League, County of San Diego, Vernal Pool Society, National Wildlife Refuge System, CA State Parks, Wildlife Research Institute, and many interested individuals.

After the WRI formal slide presentation and review of the documents and maps prepared and presented to all attendees, The Nature Conservancy representative asked if TNC could take the lead on the effort to preserve the Ramona

Grasslands. From that meeting, a cooperative effort began between several governmental agencies and WRI to preserve the Ramona Grasslands. TNC, WRI and the County of San Diego continue to be the primary leaders in the Ramona Grassland preservation. However, valuable support continues from the California Fish and Game and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

That same year, Tom Carr and Janet Gilbert, local concerned Ramona residents bought the 10-acre Agnes Carlson residence in the middle of the Cagney Ranch, part of the Ramona Grasslands, so it could potentially be preserved.

Tom and Janet then turned around and offered to sell the property to WRI as a location to continue our effort to preserve the Ramona Grasslands. In October of 2000, WRI purchased the now-WRI Grassland Headquarters on Highland Valley Road and turned it into their office and headquarters for wildlife research and preserving the Ramona Grasslands. The WRI purchase was the very first in the Ramona Grasslands. When two of our



Often seen hovering or "kite-ing" over the Ramona Grasslands, the White-tailed Kite.

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local conservationists, Bruce and Regina Wilson built and erected our sign on Highland Valley Road, it shouted “The Ramona Grasslands” to the community and to the county. It put the Ramona Grasslands on the map, even before one penny was raised to buy additional land. WRI’s Headquarters at the Ramona Grasslands was our “line in the sand” at the heart of the Grasslands proclaiming that this endangered habitat should be preserved; that there should be no more squandering of what is left of grassland ecosystems in our County.



Ferruginous Hawk female with young, a species that migrates to and winters in the Ramona Grasslands.

PHOTO: D. BITTNER

In 2000, Dianne Jacob, San Diego County Supervisor, was given a tour of the Ramona Grasslands by WRI staff. During that tour Dianne was able to observe a Golden Eagle at close range and her experience gave her a new perspective about the Grasslands. Supervisor Jacob then called a meeting of all the land owners in the Ramona Grasslands in June of 2001. This meeting was held in her offices in El Cajon and attended by most of the land owners or their designee.

Supervisor Jacob’s message from this meeting was that the County was now interested in preserving the Ramona Grasslands and that the County was interested in purchas-

ing land from willing sellers. Five years after our first meeting, the 70-acre Hardy Ranch had been the only parcel bought for the Ramona Grasslands by the County. However, the 419-acre Cagney Ranch, owned by the actor James Cagney, was bought by The Nature Conservancy from his family in 2003 for \$2,300,000, using TNC funds and grant money procured by TNC and WRI from State and Federal agencies. Cagney Ranch became the second parcel to be bought by the County when it was resold by TNC to the County for \$850,000 in 2006.

In 2006, TNC bought the 1,231-acre Eagle Davis Ranch and another 281 acres of the Oak Country Ranch. In 2007, 1,400 acres of the Gildred Ranch was acquired by TNC. Also in 2007, WRI was deeded the 40-acre Hobbs parcel with an endowment and is working on seven smaller parcels for acquisition.

The Ramona Grasslands is far from complete since several large ranches in the original plan for the Grasslands are still undeveloped and should be purchased and included in the Preserve. Additionally many small parcels need to be acquired to bring the preserve together. The Ramona Grassland Preserve could and should be as big as 7,000+ acres when complete. This would include conservation easements, all County Airport and Ramona Water District lands and connective lands to other wild areas. This connectivity is critical to ensure the Ramona Grasslands do not become an island, but rather include corridors where wildlife can travel from one preserve to another.

Thanks to many individuals and conservation partners, the dream is becoming reality and future generations of San Diego residents will be able to observe the land as it was when the first settlers arrived in the 1800s, and future generations of wildlife will continue to exist. With proper management, the wildlife will flourish and prey and predator can be seen in their natural state.

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Ramona Grasslands and hired local Indians, living in the Oaks at the edges of the Grassland, to tend to the sheep.

Golden Eagles, primarily a grassland species that nested on our numerous cliffs, have declined in San Diego County from a recorded 104 pairs in the late 1800s to approximately 46 breeding pair in 2008. This is a loss of 56% of the Golden Eagle population. This extirpation (localized extinctions) is primarily due to lost habitat which were

grasslands or combinations of grassland and other open plant communities. Fire was a primary contributor to maintaining these plant communities. In the 1970s, agriculture went from grazing to citrus and avocado groves in the western sections of the county. This agriculture is not compatible with Golden Eagles’ hunting techniques and foraging needs. Groves and ranches became housing and industrial developments were most easily built in the flat grasslands. It soon followed that grasslands became a rare ecosystem of unique plants and animals.