

A Few Words from Our President

Greetings!

We're in the fall of a tumultuous year, and the pandemic alone has impacted our lives in countless ways. One unanticipated effect is that many people have discovered Conejo Valley trails, realizing how rewarding a hike, trail run or mountain bike ride can be.

California is ablaze in another fire season of unbelievable destruction. You'll find an article on fire preparedness below, along with information on our upcoming online Speaker Series talk focusing on challenges and successes in recovering from wildfires.



National Park Service Photo

National Park Service biologists have found 13 mountain lion kittens in five litters in the Santa Monica Mountains and Simi Hills since May 2020.

A record!

Despite the difficulties we're all facing, we have positive developments to report:

- Governor Newsom signed AB1788 to make the use of 2nd generation rodenticides illegal. It will be a great advancement in the protection of our ecosystems, notably our population of mountain lions. While there are some exemptions, we sincerely hope that HOAs and companies like Amgen that border our open space will continue to aggressively pursue new methods and alternatives to the use of anticoagulant rodenticides. The lives of the mountain lion cubs pictured above will depend on it.
- The National Wildlife Federation recently announced that the California Wildlife Conservation Board, an independent state agency that funds environmental initiatives, approved a \$5-million gift for the Liberty Canyon Wildlife Crossing. The recent death of yet another mountain lion on the 101 Freeway near Calabasas underscores the need for the wildlife bridge. COSF is proud to have committed \$10,000 to the effort, and construction could begin in early 2022 if fundraising continues at the current pace.
- COSF is launching a scholarship program for college-bound students who will be pursuing careers with academic majors related to environmental studies.

- We think you'll enjoy the video series on local plant life we're helping to launch in collaboration with Laura Pasetta of Wild Rootz. See the article below for details.
- COSCA, the Conejo Open Space Conservation Agency, has expanded their trailhead outreach program to better understand how people use the open space and what new benefits or changes the public may desire.

We sincerely thank you for your support and your efforts to help maintain our open space for all to value and enjoy. Stay safe and well. Happy trails!



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.

Donate

Volunteer





Photos by John Kross

Jared Haar and his volunteering parents stand proudly with the new trail sign, as volunteers and COSCA rangers celebrate the project's completion.

Thank you, Volunteers!

On July 13 and 14 a group led by Jared Haar successfully cleaned up and erected a sign at the Rancho Potrero Open Space trailhead. Jared organized the project in pursuit of his Eagle Scout badge. Not only did the 20 volunteers and COSCA rangers make a major improvement to the area, but several members of the group provided COSF with a gift of \$500. Thanks again, Jared! That trailhead looks great and we appreciate the generous donation!

Announcing COSF Scholarships

COSF is pleased to announce that next spring we will award \$1,000 scholarships to two Ventura County graduating high school students who will be pursuing a college major related to environmental studies.

The Conejo Open Space Foundation Entering and Continuing College Scholarships will be given to applicants who have demonstrated a sincere and active interest in improving our natural environment and will be pursuing a career in the wide ranging fields that focus on solutions to environmental problems. For students who are full time and maintain a



Photo by Tom Robbins

High School seniors who plan to pursue careers that benefit the environment can apply for a COSF scholarship. COSCA Rangers Kari Stav and Rick Bertilson get great satisfaction safeguarding our open space and helping the environment.

3.0 or better grade point average, COSF will continue to provide \$1,000 per year for a total of four years to support their studies.

We are contacting college and career counselors at every Ventura County high school to alert them to this new opportunity for deserving students. A major mission for COSF is to help educate the public on using, maintaining and sustaining our open space, and the scholarship program is another example of our efforts to do so. More information can be found at www.cosf.org/scholarships.

Teach Your Children Well

The Conejo Valley Nature Club introduces children to the natural world around us. Former COSF director and current COSTAC (Conejo Open Space Trails Action Committee) member Christina Robertson publishes the family newsletter as part of her commitment to open space. “My hope in creating this newsletter is that it inspires families and serves as a resource and learning tool about the incredible nature we have all over the Conejo,” she explained.



Learn all about the praying mantis in the 9/14/20 Conejo Valley Nature Club issue.

To see the latest issue and sign up to receive weekly newsletters, go to the [preview and online signup page](#). You'll find lots of ideas to help your children and grandchildren become nature lovers and life-long protectors of the open space. Thank you, Christina.

New Video Series on Local Plant Life

The Conejo Open Space Foundation is delighted to announce our collaboration with noted local naturalist Laura Pasetta for a series of wonderful videos on native plant life in the Conejo Valley, starting with the black elderberry. Learn to identify some of our other common native plants – including white sage, narrow-leaved milkweed, prickly pear cactus, and coast live oak trees– their locations, uses, and even tips on native plant gardening. Laura will post a new video monthly on her [COSF videos page](#).



Photo Courtesy of Laura Pasetta

Have you seen elderberry bushes with their purple fruit along the trails? Did you know they've been used as an herbal remedy? As a musical instrument?

In Defense of ‘Defensible Space’

As fire season expands from a few autumn months to a year-round danger, Conejo Valley homeowners increasingly question what more can be done to reduce wildfire risk in public lands.

Why, for example, does the Ventura County Fire Department define the defensible zone as 100 feet of cropped vegetation? Wouldn't it make more sense to cut back a wider area? And what about goats? Why doesn't COSCA put them to work in reducing fuel load (i.e., dry vegetation) in parks?

Because defensible space is primarily intended to keep firefighters safe as they work; it only secondarily keeps flames or radiant heat from setting homes ablaze. For firefighter access, a perimeter of 100 feet is enough. The greatest threat to houses and outbuildings is wind-driven embers—firebrands—and those can travel for miles; the only practical defense against ember ignition is making your structures more fire resistant. For tips on “hardening” your home, visit [COSCA's Ready, Set Go Wildfire Action Plan](#).

Although [goats](#) seem like charismatic fire heroes as they clear hillsides, they are also destructive to native chaparral and coastal sage scrub—the exact vegetation we need to slow wildfire, notes COSCA Administrator Brian Stark. In landscapes denuded by goat grazing, an opportunistic mix of weedy invasive plants (think: black mustard, star thistle, and grasses) chokes out like less-combustible natives such as sage, buckwheat and sagebrush. The invasives then form a dense mass of dry fuel. If this practice is repeated year after year, the native plants are eventually eliminated in favor of the flammable weeds. To learn more about fire-wise landscaping, visit the new [Defensible Space](#) site.

COSF Contributes to Bike Bell Effort

In 2014 COSF partnered with CORBA, the Concerned Off Road Bicyclists Association, to purchase 2,000 “Bike Bells” as an experiment for our open space community. COSCA installed “Bike Bell Boxes” at a number of trailheads, and volunteers signed on to keep the free bells stocked.

The bells were an instant success. Mountain bikers, as well as equestrians



*Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation
Area Photo*



Photo by Tom Robbins

and trail runners, use them to announce their presence in a friendly way and to minimize unfortunate encounters on the trail. Additionally, the bells alert native animals to avoid contact with humans.

COSF and COSCA have shared the cost of several orders since, most recently replenishing the inventory with 5,000 bells. COSCA rangers plan to install boxes at additional trailheads, and more volunteer “adopters” are needed. If you’re interested in helping out, please fill in our [online volunteer application form](#).



Virtual Speaker Series News

On July 30, COSF held our first virtual Speaker Series event with Jessica Sanchez, veterinarian and wildlife ecologist at UC Davis, for a fascinating presentation with over 100 attendees. Jessica’s talk, “Challenges for humans and wildlife coexisting in a developing world,” focused on the urban-wildland interface, the value of wildlife and wild open spaces, the wildlife responses to urbanization, disease transmission, and the importance of connecting wildlife populations and more.

A variety of very interesting and useful facts were presented. For instance, did you know that in the 10 weeks after pandemic restrictions were imposed and people traveled less, wildlife-vehicle collisions decreased by 21% in California and mountain lion collisions were reduced by 56%? Or that an enzyme in the blood of Western fence lizards kills the *Borrelia* pathogen carried in a tick when it ingests the lizard’s blood, which neutralizes the tick’s ability to infect humans with Lyme Disease? This could explain why Lyme disease is less common in California. The full presentation is available in [our blog article](#).

We’re pleased to announce we will be having one more speaker event this year. Marti Witter,

fire ecologist with the National Park Service's Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, will be presenting an online talk on the challenges faced in recovering from wildfires in our Southern California natural environment on Thursday, November 12. More information will be forthcoming, so stay tuned!



2020 Conejo Open Space Challenge

The Challenge offers open space users an incentive to explore 10 lesser-known COSCA trails every year, submit photos of their adventures, and even win prizes.

This year 98 hikers, mountain bikers, runners and equestrians overcame COVID-19 complications to complete the 10 Challenge trails. COSTAC Chair and event coordinator Steve Bacharach hosted a virtual celebration and prize drawing for the Challenge finishers. COSF provided \$250 for gift cards, and donations also came from Pedals & Pints, Fleet Feet, JOi Café, and Newbury Park Bike Shop. For more details and to see photos, go to our [Conejo Open Space Challenge page](#). To get an announcement of next year's Challenge, be sure you're signed up to receive this newsletter.

Spotlight on...

Brendan Callahan grew up in Thousand Oaks then spent almost a decade on the East Coast where he attended college, started his career, got married and completed graduate school. In 2013 a gravitational pull brought Brendan and his wife Alyssa back to California. They lived in three cities before putting down roots in the Conejo Valley.

As Director of Bond Programs, Sustainability, Maintenance, and Operations at Oak Park Unified School District, Brendan oversees the District's construction projects, sustainability initiatives and maintenance department. He also serves on the Superintendent's cabinet.

With the goal of becoming more involved in the community, Brendan approached COSF last year. Our mission aligns with his passion for the outdoors and his commitment to conserving open space and educating the public on environmental issues, so we immediately invited him to join the board. He brings great experience and enthusiasm to COSF, and he is a tremendous asset to the board.

Why is open space important to you?

Open space is where we go to find balance and reconnect with ourselves and with others. Those of us who were fortunate to have childhoods that included activities like camping and playing outdoors have a

healthy appreciation for the open space engrained early on. However, it's never too late to build a stronger appreciation for our open space and build in time to get outdoors more frequently. Aside from the therapeutic benefits, open space is home to our wildlife. Land conservation goes hand-in-hand with other aspects of being a global steward, such as planting trees, identifying more sustainable ways to live, and supporting legislation that protects our planet.

What skills do you bring to COSF and the Conejo Open Space?

I'm inquisitive, and I like to tackle challenges. While we were in college, Alyssa and I started a nonprofit organization that built classrooms, restrooms, and desks for rural villages in Tanzania. Our largest project involved constructing a village's first secondary school, which currently serves over 1,200 students.

Prior to my current role at Oak Park Unified School District, I worked at Green Dot Public Schools managing finance and operations for schools in South Los Angeles, including Locke High School, a turnaround school that was named Charter School of the Year by the California Charter Schools Association. For the first half of my career, I led process improvement at sites at Lockheed Martin as a Lean Six Sigma Black Belt.

What do you like to do in the open space?

I enjoy mountain biking on trails near my house at dawn and dusk to view our incredible sunrises and sunsets, and Alyssa and I hike often with our dogs Ellie and Joy. Some of my most rigorous but also rewarding experiences have been overnight backpacking trips through a series of glacial lakes at high elevation on the eastern side of the High Sierras with my dad Bill and sister Elizabeth.

What are your hopes for the future of COSF?

Exciting things are coming. I'm thrilled that we are launching sustainability scholarships for



Photo by Alyssa Callahan

high school seniors. I worked closely with Jerry Westby to create the program, and we can't wait to award the scholarships!

Any other thoughts or words of wisdom?

I applaud the passage of AB-1788, new legislation banning the use of second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs). Senator Henry Stern and his office deserve credit for their work coauthoring the bill. SGARs are problematic because they build up in the bodies of rodents and are passed on to other wildlife when consumed. I am all too familiar with rodenticides as this scope falls under my purview at OPUSD. As many of you have read in *The Thousand Oaks Acorn*, Amgen received an exemption and thereby can continue using SGARs. I sincerely hope that Amgen, other companies with exemptions, HOAs and private citizens alike will make a commitment to discontinue the use of SGARs as soon as possible.

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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