



Wonderful Willowy Monardella

Mike Kelly, conservation chair and secretary

I walk through the brush in López Canyon in Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve and suddenly a familiar, wonderful smell rises to my nose. I identify it as a spearmint odor, wonderfully sweet. I simply love this plant. I first met it about 30 years ago, perhaps sooner, when California Native Plant Society and Friends' member Cindy Burrascano and I, and sometimes others, were ground truthing Biologist Maggie Loys' early map of rare and endangered plant species in our Preserve. This began a 30 year journey of working to save this Federally and State listed endangered plant here and in other sites in the County. Today I'm with others doing our annual survey of this plant, counting how many remain and if there are any new seedlings.

Where else does this plant exist? Lopez Canyon probably represents the northernmost limit of this plant. State Route 52 is almost the southern boundary. As a contractor on the Marine Corps Miramar base I surveyed and worked with this species on a Marine-owned finger canyon just south of SR52 and just west of Santo Road. The few plants there are probably the southernmost population of the plant, or close to it. There used to be a few plants south of what is now SR52 in Marian Bear Canyon. They're long gone and transplantation efforts by Caltrans in the same location failed. I-805 seems to be the boundary on the west. The plant is well established in Sycamore Canyon and Clark Canyon to the east



Monardella bush on the edge of a terrace in López Canyon being eroded away. This plant was gone when visited the next year. Photo by Margaret Filius, June 2012.



Closeup of Monardella flower in López Canyon. Photo by Margaret Filius, June 2012.

of the base and they probably represent the easternmost boundary of the plant. In other words, this plant is highly restricted geographically. This makes it an ultra endemic plant, one found just in our county and then just in a small part of it.

How many plants are left? I've surveyed most of the *Monardella viminea* populations including the biggest, which are on Marine Corps Air Station Miramar. I estimate there are fewer than 4,000 plants left in the wild. Threats to this plant include development, erosion, invasive plants, and illegal trails. Being somewhat moisture sensitive, I expect climate change driven drier and hotter conditions will negatively impact the species as well.

What can volunteers do? We can continue our surveys, often in conjunction with City staff. We can do weeding as several of us do each year in López Canyon. We can collect ripe seed, under permit, and grow up plants, then transplant them into López Canyon as the Friends did in 2010 with an MSCP grant. Currently, Native Plant Society's Lee Gordon and other volunteers such as our Beth Mather, are surveying more newly found populations of this species, collecting seed, and transplanting the



Friends' president Les Braund and Native Plant Society's Cindy Burrascano examine a blooming Willowy monardella (*Monardella viminea*) in López Canyon. Photo by Mike Kelly, June 2021

new plants out, then monitoring. Lee is documenting at what temperatures the seed best germinates, and how to grow healthy seedlings for transplanting. The Marine Corps even allowed Lee and his volunteers access to the base to access several canyons on their periphery.

The Friends will be collecting seeds again and growing up plants for new plantings, as well as testing and using older seeds we collected.

The (Little) Monarch Caterpillar 'Rescue'

Mike Kelly, conservation chair and secretary

On the California Native Plant Society's List-serve Brian Godrey posted that the small Milkweed plants they bought with Monarch butterfly eggs on them hatched into voracious caterpillars eating down the leaves to nothing, which would mean the death of the caterpillars



Monarch caterpillar on a Milkweed

since they eat only Milkweed plants. They appealed for help to save them. I've read several such reports on NextDoor. Nurseries and others shouldn't be selling small plants with eggs that can hatch and not have enough leaves to eat to survive.

Cindy Burrascano, long-time member of both the Friends and CNPS, offered to move the caterpillars to mature narrow leaf Milkweed plants in our Black Mountain restoration sites. Brian and his wife Janet agreed and Cindy, Beth Mather, and I visited them and learned a lot about Monarchs and their eggs and caterpillars and their appetites! It took forever to find the tiny caterpillars and carefully move them from their plants to the Milkweed branches Beth brought for the transport.

We brought them right away to one of our sites and transferred them to a big, mature Milkweed (*Asclepias fascicularis*). In fact this plant is one that a Monarch butterfly had visited and sipped nectar on earlier the same day, as photographed by Beth Mather.



Monarch butterfly sipping nectar on Milkweed blossoms at Friends' restoration site.



Tarantula hawk visiting Milkweed plant. A common visitor, it comes for the nectar, as do aphids and other insects.

Proposed Del Mar Mesa fire station faces community opposition

By Karen Billing

MARCH 31, 2021 4:47 AM PT

Editor's note: This story is reprinted from the Del Mar Times. The Friends have joined the opposition to this proposed project. While the format has been changed to fit our newsletter, the content is the same.

Del Mar Mesa residents are ramping up in opposition to a proposed new fire station on a piece of property that has been set aside as a habitat conservation area.

The San Diego Fire-Rescue Department plans to build the new fire station to better serve the

communities of Del Mar Mesa and Torrey Hills—currently those communities are served by Fire Station 24 on Del Mar Heights Road, and stations in Pacific Highlands Ranch and Sorrento Valley. To build the station, the city is targeting a Del Mar Mesa lot that it acquired from Pardee Homes in 2019.

The site is located off Carmel Mountain Road near the entrance to the Alta Del Mar community on Gallop Crest Court, east of the intersection with Carmel Country Road. Per the deed, Pardee granted the land to the city as Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) land. The grant deed states that the grantee agrees “to protect and manage the property as open space preserve”.

Local residents found out about the proposed station about a year ago and since then have tried to get involved in the city’s process but have been frustrated about the lack of communication. “It’s like pulling teeth to get updates and information,” said Ray Ellis, chair of the Del Mar Mesa Community Planning Board.

Ellis wrote letters to the city in June and September 2020 and again in January this year but they have never received a formal response nor have they been asked for their input. Community members fear they are being left out of the process and want to protect the open space from development. The Shaw Valley Wildlife Coalition and Alta Del Mar Homeowners Association have hired an attorney to represent their interests.

“The site on which the fire department proposes to build a massive three-bay fire station is sensitive wildlife habitat deeded to the city as dedicated open space for the benefit of all San Diegans,” said Dan Drosman, a member of the Shaw Valley Wildlife Coalition. “Because this site is truly a jewel in the crown of the Los Penasquitos Preserve and a critical corridor between wildlife habitats, the city’s insistence on building there can be explained only as a cash grab focused on Del Mar Mesa’s facilities benefit assessment (FBA) funds.”

According to San Diego-Fire Rescue Department’s Mónica Muñoz, media services manager, the department is still “very, very



This vacant lot in Del Mar Mesa off Carmel Mountain Road is a proposed location for a new fire station. (Courtesy)



The open space site in Del Mar Mesa. (Courtesy)
early” in the process on the Del Mar Mesa station.

The need for a fire station in the area is based on a 2017 report by outside consultant Citygate. Torrey Hills was one of six areas in the city identified to fill emergency response time gaps. The goal is for the fire department to arrive at a scene within seven and a half minutes 90% of the time and, according to the report, the city was only meeting that goal 79 to 80% of the

time due to travel time from too few fire stations across increasingly traffic-congested roads.

“There was a plan in place to extend Carmel Valley Road, which would allow access to Del Mar Mesa from Station 47 (in Pacific Highlands Ranch) but the cost of that road project far exceeded the projected use. Thus, the project was not feasible at the time,” Muñoz said. “That’s when the plan to move it further east was born — to provide appropriate service to both Torrey Hills and Del Mar Mesa.”

As the fire department could not identify a property in Torrey Hills, they instead focused their attention on the land acquired in Del Mar Mesa. A site survey is currently being completed for a station of at least 11,400 square feet. “We plan on it accommodating one fire engine and four personnel but we are building all stations for future growth to accommodate additional crews if necessary,” Muñoz said. On March 23, Josh Chatten-Brown, the attorney representing the Shaw Valley Wildlife Coalition and Alta Del Mar Homeowners Association, sent a letter to the city urging them to refrain from development of the parcel for any purpose, including for a fire station. Chatten-Brown asserted that the development of the open space preserve land is precluded due to the grant deed restriction, the Del Mar Mesa Specific Plan and the Coastal Act.

“Should the city, in spite of these restrictions on development, decide to move forward with development of this parcel, the city must prepare an Environmental Impact Report (EIR), as the project will have significant impacts, including impacts to biological resources and land use,” Chatten-Brown wrote.

According to the letter, the Shaw Valley lot is “relatively undisturbed” and has evidence of rare and endangered plants and species, as well

as nearby vernal pools. Additionally, the lot is one of only three natural wildlife corridors connecting Carmel Mountain Preserve through Shaw Valley to Los Peñasquitos Canyon. As the project proceeds, Muñoz said the need for an EIR will be determined.

“A specific project has not yet been proposed; but like any public project would comply with all development regulations, including the directives in the city’s MSCP and Environmentally Sensitive Lands Regulations,” said Tara Lewis, a public information officer with the city.

In the Citygate report, fire stations were estimated to cost \$12 million to build. Currently, the Del Mar Mesa community has \$8 million in available facilities benefit assessment (FBA) funds, also known as developer impact fees (DIF), with about \$5.2 to \$6 million left to be collected from the few remaining undeveloped lots.

Ellis has attempted to clarify to the city what they would like to do with that funding, such as developing a connection between Carmel Valley Road and Little McGonigle Ranch Road as an emergency access road. The access road would be a less expensive option for the city to help achieve faster response times and eliminate the need for a fire station up on the mesa, he said. The board would like to have a say in how their community’s funds are used, such as an effort to bring reclaimed water to the mesa and other smaller enhancement projects.

Ellis said \$1 million of the community’s FBA funds already went toward building the Pacific Highlands Ranch station. Muñoz said the city has some funds identified at this time but it is not enough to complete the project: “But again, we are very early in this process.” Lewis said the city’s planning department does not have a cost estimate for this fire station, and any cost would depend on a variety of factors: “DIF could be used as a source of funding.”

Since 2014, the city has opened six new fire stations to fill emergency response gaps, including the new University City fire station that opened last year. Five more stations are in the planning stages including one in City Heights. Residents in the Fairmont community of City Heights fought a similar effort against building the station near MSCP-designated lands in the Chollas Creek watershed.

Del Mar Mesa resident Lisa Ross, vice-chair of

Sierra Club San Diego, said she could not protest more strongly on behalf of the local chapter, which has a long history of advocacy for protection of San Diego's endangered habitat preserves and enforcement of the city's MSCP. Ross said building a station there would be "one more bad precedent allowing the city to abuse protected habitat".

"It's hard to imagine a worse place than Shaw Valley in Del Mar Mesa for this project if we care about San Diego's rare wildlife," Ross said.

Remembering Bill Witzell

Gina Washington, Senior Park Ranger

Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve lost a dear friend in 2021: Bill Witzell. Bill was a longtime resident of Rancho Peñasquitos and began his volunteer career in 1997 as a founding member of the Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve Volunteer Patrol. He then started using his extensive knowledge as an engineer to design and install most of the bridges that cross Peñasquitos Creek. Bill worked side by side with the City Park Rangers four days per week in the burning heat and pouring rain.

He was involved from day one in the layout, design and construction of the Trans-County Trail east of Black Mountain Rd; he spent countless hours cutting back the brush, replacing the bridges when they washed out and moving boulders weighing over a ton using math and a rock bar. That section of trail is now affectionately called the "Bill Witzell Trail."

He is greatly missed by all the Ranger staff and the lack of his presence in the Preserves is evident every day. Bill is survived by his legacy of work in the canyon, fellow volunteers he's trained, his two children, five grandchildren and one great-grandchild.



Long-time Volunteer Retires: Jim Snyder

Melanie Fontana, Park Ranger

This year marked another major change in Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve: Jim Snyder, long-time volunteer, retired from service to the canyon. From 2003 to March 2020, Jim worked alongside Bill Witzell and the Rangers three days a week — save for rainy days, a personal rule owing to his career as a mail carrier. His boisterous laugh and boyish curiosity in all things made him an ideal working companion. All the rangers are grateful to still have his friendship, though our volunteer mornings will never be the same without him. Please join the rangers in wishing him all the happiest moments as he turns his attention to his beloved wife and backyard pond.



The Birds of Summer

Jeanie Anderson

Greetings everyone! Jeanie here. I lead some of our bird hikes in the Preserve and want to introduce you to several of our summer visiting avian favorites, all in the passerine or perching bird family. These birds visit to breed and enjoy the fine dining during summertime in San Diego.

First, let's discuss the brightly-colored **Hooded Oriole**. This species is a member of the Icterids or blackbird family. As an orchard bird, it loves fruit, nectar and insects, think juicy worms. Backyard birders have success putting out oranges, grape jelly and special orange juice feeders. In the canyon, you might see a flash of bright yellow and black from the mature males or a more muted green from females and first year males.

Sometimes we hear the orioles and don't see them... so listening for their distinctive call is one way to recognize them. It's a loud "VEEK"! You can actually "VEEK" call back to them and have an avian conversation for a few minutes. They often nest in palm trees.

Hooded Orioles visit us from Mexico's southwestern coast, arriving in early April and departing at the end of summer. Males leave first, while females and young leave a bit later to allow the young to get strong and conditioned for the journey. I'm sad to see them leave.

Two hooded orioles are pictured below. Note the black face, throat-battling bees and white wing bars on the male (left). Not to be left out, a female Hooded Oriole on an orange juice feeder (right).



Next in the brightly colored category is our spring and summer visiting **Black-headed Grosbeak**. This bird is a seedeater and you may have them visit your feeders, but they also enjoy fruit as I can attest in my orchard! The male has very bright orange and black markings (do we see a pattern here?) while the female is a somewhat more muted peach. They both sing and the female sings on nest – highly unusual in the bird world!



Looking at their thick bill, you can see how they are designed to crack seeds... think sunflowers. They have a lovely lilting song, which the books describe as a *whistled warble*. Their call is a

distinctive high, sharp “PIK”! We heard them on our hike in the canyon last week but did not see them. They are quite shy.

Next on the roundup of visitors are the flycatchers, birds we owe a debt of gratitude for their insect foraging appetites. My favorite little ball of fluff is the **Pacific-slope Flycatcher**. More often heard than seen, this summer visitor to our canyon has a notable high, thin whistle. The books call it “a slurred *tseweep* “. It reminds me of the whistle one makes to call their dog. I have been quite successful duetting this whistle with the Pacific Slope, sometimes never seeing the actual bird.

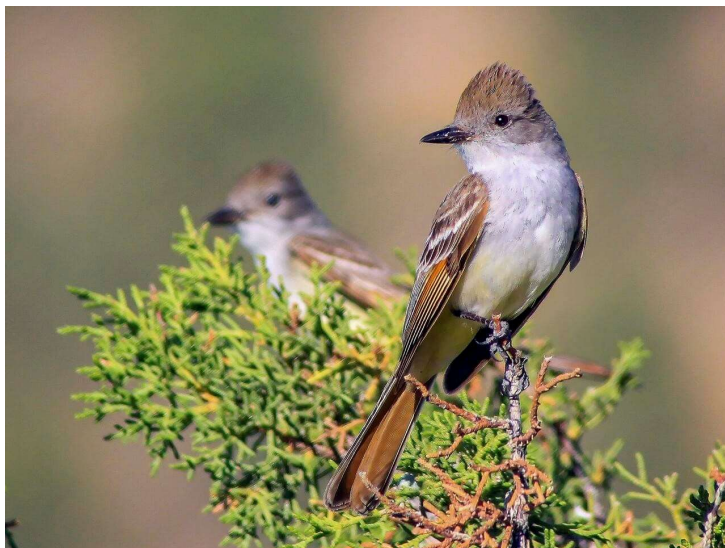


Here is my image from a few years ago, highlighting the notable oval eye ring behind his eye, yellow-olive in color. A little bird, only 5.5 inches in length, this small flycatcher winters in western Mexico.

Try whistling “tweesweep” to them!

Rounding out our flycatcher visitors, we are graced by the handsome **Ash-throated Flycatcher**. They are about 8.5 inches in length, with a very pale yellow breast, whitish throat, dark tail feathers and a slight crest at times. You may hear their call, a sharp “*bik*”.

Here is a nice image of the Ash-throated flycatcher from All About Birds



And last, but not least, we have an amazing flyer, the **Northern Rough-Winged Swallow**! Say that 5 times! Look for their plain brown backs, dusky throats, and buff breast.

These birds are aerial acrobats, dipping and soaring on pointed wings, with notched tails to capture insects on the wing, singing the whole time. We especially enjoy them in the evenings over the Preserve, dancing in the skies as they find dinner delicacies. This swallow summers all over the US and winters in Mexico and Central America. Watch and you will see their *joie de vivre* on wing!

Northern Rough-Winged Swallow. Image from Flicker

