

Oaks

SPRING/SUMMER 2025

CALIFORNIA OAKS

Good eats, great oaks: Why your next meal could be a win for nature

By Shana Risby, Senior Outreach Coordinator, Audubon California

I grew up in Detroit, a big city where corner stores and fast-food chains dominate the food scene. Food often felt like a matter of convenience rather than a link to the land like it did many years ago. When I moved to California—the agricultural heart of the United States—I was blown away by the people behind our food. Meeting ranchers and farmers who dedicate their lives to growing what nourishes us helped me realize just how deeply food, people, and nature are intertwined. There is no better example of this than California's oak woodlands, which are underappreciated but essential to food production and wildlife habitat. California ranchers navigate the delicate balance between the two. Ranchers are not alone in this difficult but important task. Stewardship programs such as Audubon Conservation Ranching (ca.audubon.org/conservation/conservation-ranching) aid ranchers in protecting vital oak landscapes, ensuring that food production works in harmony with nature.

Oak woodlands are a natural foundation for food and wildlife. California's oak woodlands are some of the most biodiverse ecosystems in the state, supporting over 330 species of birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. They rank among the top three habitat types in North America for bird richness, serving as home and refuge to species including the Acorn Woodpecker, California Scrub Jay, and Oak Titmouse.

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Acorns are a high-energy food source for birds and other wildlife while the trees offer critical shelter and nesting sites. Many bird species rely on these woodlands throughout their life cycles, making oaks a keystone species in California's landscapes. Without healthy oak woodlands and savannas, both food systems and wildlife populations would be at risk.

Cattle and oak trees can thrive together when managed with care. Oak trees provide shade, reducing heat stress and improving cattle well-being during California's hot summers. In turn, well-managed grazing helps maintain the health of these woodlands, reducing invasive species and supporting biodiversity. However, to ensure the regeneration of oak species and the long-term sustainability of food production, grazing must be carefully planned.

Research shows that cattle impact oak woodlands differently depending on the season. By adapting grazing strategies, ranchers can protect young trees while still benefiting from the shade and improved pasture conditions that mature oaks provide. Ranchers and land managers play a crucial role in ensuring oak regeneration and sustaining these ecosystems for future generations. With this understanding, in 2007 Audubon California acquired the 6,800-acre Bobcat Ranch in Yolo County, as part of our ongoing effort to support and encourage conservation and restoration of blue oak woodlands and rangelands in California. Audubon California is also a member of California Oaks Coalition.

Beyond their value to birds and cattle, oak trees contribute to the health of the entire landscape. Their deep roots enrich the soil with nutrients, creating healthier forage for grazing livestock and ultimately leading to higher-quality food. The roots also stabilize soil, protecting watersheds. Oaks also sequester carbon and release oxygen, benefiting people and the planet.

We have the power to protect these landscapes through our food choices. Oak trees do more than stand tall on the horizon; they are the backbone of a thriving ecosystem and



Acorn Woodpeckers are a focal species of Audubon's Bobcat Ranch management plan, which seeks to retain and restore acorn-producing oaks and retain granary trees, snags, and cavity trees.

have sustained and continue to sustain generations of people who depend on them. For thousands of years, Indigenous Californians carefully tended oak woodlands, stewarding the land in ways that support biodiversity and resilience. Protecting these trees means preserving the deep, interwoven relationship between birds, crops, cattle, and communities. And the choices we make—whether at the grocery store, farmers market, or dinner table—have the power to shape that future.

Nearly 80% of the beef found in grocery stores comes from just four mega-corporations, which often rely on large-scale feedlots, leaving consumers with little choice in how their food is produced. But through transparent land certification programs such as Audu-

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© Sandra Rothenberg, Audubon Photography Awards

Keeping California's native oaks standing

© Vicki Miller, Great Backyard Bird Count, photo courtesy of Audubon California



Oak Titmouse

California's oaks sustain culturally-significant landscapes, protect watersheds, sequester millions of tons of carbon, and provide vital habitat for much of the state's imperiled biodiversity. Absent statewide regulation of oak resources, California needs to provide incentives to those who own the land on which oaks still stand—or have stood—to maintain and restore oak woodlands, as the next best and most economical conservation option.

Many of California's oaks grow on rangelands. Over 1 million acres of oak woodland have already been developed for urban and rural residential uses.¹ Stewardship and conservation of remaining oak lands is vital to the future of California's primary old growth resource. We are grateful to Adam Cline for sharing some of his practices to protect and perpetuate oaks on land where he grazes cattle (page 6).

We are also grateful to members of California Oaks Coalition for their efforts on behalf of California's native oaks. Audubon's Conservation Ranching Program recognizes the importance of rangeland oaks as bird habitat alongside the many other conservation and societal values of healthy working landscapes (page 1).

Sierra Foothill Conservancy collaborated with The Nature Conservancy and Land Trust of San Luis Obispo County to establish conservation easements for two properties owned by different branches of a ranching family: the Waltz-Turner Ranch (page 4) and the Camatta Ranch in San Luis Obispo County. Working over an 18-month period, the three organizations raised \$21 million in state and philanthropic funding to conserve the two properties, which include almost 38,000 acres of biologically complex oak woodland and other habitat.

In addition to work on rangelands throughout the state, the coalition is also protecting other imperiled lands. We congratulate coalition members Clover Valley Foundation and Placer Land Trust, and other organizations and individuals that worked together with the common goal of saving 487 acres of Clover Valley in Rocklin. Clover Valley is a steep-sloped site composed of oak woodlands, grasslands and riparian habitat with important cultural and biological values. We will report on this breaking news in the next issue of *Oaks*.

While federal investments in ecosystem protection are waning, California is fortunate that its voters enacted a \$10 billion climate bond measure on the November 2024 ballot to provide critical financial resources for conserving the state's natural lands.

We must press on and protect our state's rich ecosystems.

Sincerely,

Janet S. Cobb, Executive Officer
California Wildlife Foundation/California Oaks

California Oaks Coalition

California Oaks Coalition brings together international, national, Tribal, state, regional, and local organizations to conserve and perpetuate the state's primary old-growth resource. Members of California Oaks Coalition are united by the vital role of oaks in sequestering carbon, maintaining healthy watersheds, providing habitat, and sustaining cultural values.

Amah Mutsun Land Trust
American River Conservancy
American River Watershed Institute
AquAlliance
Audubon California
Butte Environmental Council
California Institute for Biodiversity
California Invasive Plant Council (Cal-IPC)
California Native Plant Society (CNPS),
including Dorothy King Young, El Dorado,
Sanhedrin, and Yerba Buena chapters and
the San Diego Restoration Committee
California Rangeland Trust
California State University Chico Ecological
Reserves
California Water Impact Network (C-WIN)
California Wilderness Coalition (CalWild)
Californians for Western Wilderness (CalUWild)
Canopy
Carrizo Plain Conservancy
Center for Biological Diversity
Central Coast Heritage Tree Foundation
Chimineas Ranch Foundation
Clover Valley Foundation
Coastal Corridor Alliance
Conejo Oak Tree Advocates
Confluence West
Dumbarton Oaks Park Conservancy
Earth Discovery Institute
El Cerrito Trail Trekkers
Endangered Habitats Conservancy
Endangered Habitats League
Environmental Defense Center
Environmental Protection Information
Center (EPIC)
Environmental Water Caucus
Foothill Conservancy
Forest Unlimited
Forests Forever
Friends of Harbors, Beaches and Parks
Friends of Olompali
Friends of the Richmond Hills
Friends of Spenceville
Global Conservation Consortium for Oak (GCCO)
Hills For Everyone
Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation
LandPaths
Loma Prieta Resource Conservation District
Lomakatsi Restoration Project
Los Padres ForestWatch
Lower Kings River Association
Mick Grove Zoo

¹ Ferkovich, R, et al. August 2018. Forests and Rangelands 2017 Assessment. Contributors: Bakke, D, et al. California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, Fire and Resource Assessment Program.

Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority
 Northern California Regional Land Trust
 Ojai Trees
 100K Trees for Humanity
 Pacific Birds Habitat Joint Venture
 Placer Land Trust
 Planning and Conservation League
 Point Blue Conservation Science
 Redbud Audubon Society–Lake County
 Redlands Conservancy
 Regrounding
 ReLeaf Petaluma
 Resource Conservation District of Santa Monica Mountains
 River Partners
 River Ridge Institute
 Rural Communities United
 Sacramento Tree Foundation
 Sacramento Valley Conservancy
 Santa Barbara Botanic Garden
 Santa Clarita Organization for Planning and the Environment (SCOPE)
 Save Lafayette Trees
 Save Napa Valley
 Sequoia Riverlands Trust
 Shasta Environmental Alliance
 Sierra Club Northern California Forest Committee–Oak Woodland Subcommittee
 Sierra Club Placer Group
 Sierra Foothill Conservancy
 Smith River Alliance
 Stewards of the Arroyo Seco
 Tejon Ranch Conservancy
 Tending the Ancient Shoreline Hill
 Tuleyome
 Tuolumne River Trust
 Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, Department of Forest and Landscape Architecture (Vila Real, Portugal)
 University of California Botanical Garden at Berkeley
 University of California, Los Angeles, Mildred E. Mathias Botanical Garden
 Ventura Land Trust
 Western Shasta Resource Conservation District
 Woodland Tree Foundation

California Oaks provides the following support for coalition members:

- 1) Research and advocacy updates.
- 2) Collaboration in protecting oaks.
- 3) Information to educate and engage the public.
- 4) Tools for participating in planning processes and educating opinion leaders.
- 5) Materials to inform local, regional, and state governmental agencies of the opportunities for and benefits of protecting oak woodlands.
- 6) Sharing stories from coalition efforts to keep oaks standing.

For more information, please contact Oak Project Director Angela Moskow, amoskow@californiaoaks.org.



A baby calf peeks through the grass in an oak woodland.

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bon Conservation Ranching, we can choose a better path, one that supports conservation-minded ranchers and healthier ecosystems.

Founded in 2016 in Missouri and expanded to California in 2021, Audubon's Conservation Ranching program (audubon.org/our-work/prairies-and-forests/ranching) is designed to protect bird species and their habitats through responsible land stewardship. Audubon ecologists work closely with ranchers to develop habitat management plans that enhance bird habitat and ecosystem health, helping them to implement protocols that prioritize animal welfare and environmental sustainability. In return, ranches can earn designation as Audubon-certified bird-friendly habitat and can use the Audubon green seal on their products, giving consumers a meaningful way to support rangeland conservation

simply by choosing beef raised on bird-friendly land.

The future of working ranches such as Audubon's Bobcat Ranch depends on responsible stewardship. About 80% of California's oak woodlands are privately owned. By working together, ranchers, conservationists, and consumers can help safeguard these iconic landscapes, ensuring they remain vibrant spaces where food production and wildlife conservation go hand in hand.

In supporting ranchers who prioritize conservation, Audubon seeks to ensure California's oak woodlands remain a source of nourishment, resilience, and beauty for generations to come. Choosing products from eco-conscious land stewards is more than just a purchase; it's an investment in healthy ecosystems, thriving rural communities, and a more sustainable food system for all.

RESOURCES

Conserved areas explorer shows the state's effort to conserve 30% of California by the year 2030, including a web-based tool of conserved areas: experience.arcgis.com/experience/83b5c08cae8b47d3b7c623f2de1f0dcc

Pacific Northwest Oak Alliance hosts links to oak and prairie partners to amplify messages, expand resources, and share news and events across partnerships. The website also includes a link to the Prairie, Oaks, and People investment strategy, which presents a 5-year program of over \$300 million in ready-to-implement projects: oakalliance.org

TAKE ACTION

Advocating for Trees: Resources to help you speak for trees in your community is a webpage hosted by California ReLeaf, with a wealth of helpful links: californiareleaf.org/tree-advocacy/

CalUWild Guide to Effective Advocacy: How and to Whom is a web page by Californians for Western Wilderness (CalUWild; a member of California Oaks Coalition), offering suggestions for how to effectively engage in legislative advocacy: caluwild.org/take-action

Waltz-Turner Ranch Conservation Easement protects oak woodlands

© Gary Miltimore



Oak woodland in the height of spring.

By Bridget Fithian, Executive Director

Sierra Foothill Conservancy (sierrafoothill.org), a regional land trust, works to permanently protect habitat, scenic values, clean water resources, and the area's historic land-based economy. The conservancy, a member of California Oaks Coalition, recently completed the 10,361-acre Waltz-Turner Ranch Conservation Easement, our largest acquisition to date and the missing link in the 50,000-acre Merced River Conservation Corridor Focus Area. The newly protected ranch spans both Merced and Mariposa counties in the central Sierra Nevada region, from vernal pool wetlands of the San Joaquin Valley, across rolling annual grasslands and blue oak savanna, to oak woodlands and streams of the Sierra Nevada foothills.

In 2021 the ranch's owners, the Morrison family, faced generational shifts and family dynamics that placed the ranch in a precarious position. With less than a year to prevent an open market sale—which would have likely led to its subdivision, conversion, and development—the conservancy began its efforts to ensure that the ranch and its habitats remained intact, conserved, and stewarded by family members. Sierra Foothill Conservancy and partners developed an innovative strategy for The Nature Conservancy to temporarily purchase the property and hold it while the Sierra Foothill Conservancy and Morrison family developed the conservation easement and funding needed to save the ranch.

The Sierra Foothill Conservancy, Department of Conservation, Morrison family, and The Nature Conservancy worked collaboratively to develop a perpetual conservation

easement deed and accompanying long-term adaptive management plan, culminating in the purchase of the Waltz-Turner Conservation Easement on June 18, 2024.

Protection of the ranch enables the Morrison family to pass their ranching legacy on to the fourth generation. “The importance of keeping this working cattle ranch intact goes beyond our family and its heritage,” landowners Ken and Adela Morrison say. “This land is rich in history and wildlife, and there are not many like it. Our family realizes how unique this ranch is and has always worked it with love and respect.”

The Waltz-Turner Ranch was identified in The Nature Conservancy's Resilient Connected Network as one of the most connected, climate-resilient, and biodiverse properties in the state. The opportunity to protect the vernal pool complexes, oak woodlands, and riparian areas here was compelling since these habitats are imperiled across California. —Abigail Whittaker, The Nature Conservancy Project Director

Conservation values at the ranch include working rangeland, biodiverse native plants, open space and viewshed, cultural and historical resources, and high-quality critical wildlife habitat. Native terrestrial and aquatic species include the federally and state threatened central California Distinct Population Segment of California tiger salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*), federally threatened vernal pool fairy shrimp (*Branchinecta lychi*), federally and state threatened San Joaquin Orcutt grass (*Orcuttia inaequalis*), and more. Water resources on the ranch include 1,084 acres of vernal pool habitat and seasonal wetlands and 140 miles of streams. The easement's perpetuation of these collective conservation values benefits both the ranch and nearby designated disadvantaged communities, which rely on these protections for the supply and quality of their water.

The Morrison family's long-term, sustainable, adaptive management has been critical to maintaining the ranch's large, high-quality vernal pool ecosystems as well as diverse wildlife and plant species, such as blue oak, valley oak, and interior live oak habitat—some

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More than 10,000 acres of oak woodland, riparian, and wetland habitat are protected at Waltz-Turner Ranch.

© Gary Miltimore

Managing fire risk for natural and built communities

© Eric Kellegrew



View from Deer Creek Hills Preserve toward the nearby community of Rancho Murieta, showing the close proximity of vastly different land uses in eastern Sacramento County.

By Eric Kellegrew, Stewardship Director, Sacramento Valley Conservancy

The proximity of housing to natural areas throughout much of California offers many benefits, but also poses risks associated with fire. Sacramento Valley Conservancy (www.sacramentovalleyconservancy.org), a nonprofit organization, accredited land trust, and member of California Oaks Coalition, manages Deer Creek Hills Preserve—one of the largest natural areas in the Sacramento region. The Cosumnes Ladder Fuels Reduction Project, which includes parts of the preserve and other parcels, seeks to protect and perpetuate the preserve's oak woodlands while reducing fire risk to adjacent built communities.

The Miwok and Nisenan peoples cared for this area for millennia before European settlement, using cultural burning and tending techniques to cultivate and manage oak woodlands as groves. In the last century, ranchers provided land management through grazing, and fire has been excluded. Due to changed land use practices, the preserve's oaks are not regenerating with most trees estimated to be 200 to 300 years old.

Deer Creek Hills Preserve is a working cattle ranch with over 4,500 acres of blue oak woodlands, seasonal creeks, and grasslands. The site is home to a diverse array of wildlife and threatened species such as Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*, state threatened), Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*, candidate for California Endangered Species Act protections), and Tricolored Blackbird (*Agelaius tricolor*, state threatened).

Over 1,600 people visit the preserve every year to enjoy a variety of outdoor activities

including youth field trips, educational outings, hiking, birdwatching, horseback riding, and mountain biking, within a beautiful and wildlife-rich open space. The natural experience at the preserve is essentially tied to the ecosystem's vitality. Piles of branches, fallen limbs, and snags provide refuge from predators for birds such as California Quail, Spotted Towhee, California Towhee, and American Robin, as well as small mammals and myriad other species. However, this woody material also serves as ladder fuel that, in the event of a wildfire, has the potential to threaten both habitat and homes.

Rancho Murieta, a private gated community with low-density housing, was developed in the middle of this wildland area during the 1970s and 1990s. Today Rancho Murieta has upwards of 2,500 households with a population of almost 6,000 residents and rising public safety concerns about the risk of fire at the wildland-urban interface. Sacramento Valley Conservancy and Sacramento County Parks are collaborating to minimize wildfire risk.

The Cosumnes Ladder Fuels Reduction Project in eastern Sacramento County commenced in winter 2024. The project's focus is reducing ladder fuels to lower the risk of a ground-level wildfire transitioning into the oak canopy and becoming a catastrophic fire. Once completed, the project, funded by a \$4.4 million CAL FIRE Healthy Forests grant, will impact over 1,200 acres of oak woodland, including working lands, parklands, trails (within Rancho Murieta), and 394 acres of the Deer Creek Preserve, to benefit a diverse group

of stakeholders including ranchers, private landowners, homeowners, land trusts, a community service district, Sacramento County, and the state.

The project strives to balance fire risk reduction with wildlife habitat by creating a mosaic of preserve and treatment areas. While areas with high fire risk (e.g., 100-foot buffers along roads and property boundaries) receive more intensive thinning, other parcels receive no treatment and retain valuable understory habitat features such as brush piles and snags that support a multitude of native species.

The project area was surveyed by a Registered Professional Forester and staff from Sacramento County Parks and the Sacramento Valley Conservancy to identify components of the mosaic. Georeferenced maps were created and utilized by the fuels treatment crews to guide ladder fuel reduction efforts, ensuring alignment with conservation goals and CAL FIRE-approved prescriptions.

The project will extend through 2026, aiming to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires while enhancing and restoring some of the woodlands through conservation efforts. The conservancy is monitoring and documenting project progress, ensuring that management objectives are being met and desired ecological outcomes achieved for a healthier and more resilient environment.

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of most biodiverse and imperiled in California.

In 2019, Sierra Foothill Conservancy permanently conserved Hornitos Ranch, also through a partnership with California Wildlife Foundation. Hornitos, which is almost 7,000 acres, is adjacent to the Waltz-Turner Ranch. Together these two projects advance the conservancy's strategy in protecting the 50,000-acre Merced River and vernal pool grasslands conservation corridor.

"The Waltz-Turner Ranch was identified in The Nature Conservancy's Resilient Connected Network (www.maps.tnc.org/resilient-land/#/explore) as one of the most connected, climate-resilient, and biodiverse properties in the state," says Abigail Whittaker, The Nature Conservancy project director. "The opportunity to protect the vernal pool complexes, oak woodlands, and riparian areas here was compelling since these habitats are imperiled across California."

Sierra Foothill Conservancy extends our gratitude to our many project partners for their support of this project, including The Nature Conservancy, California Department of Conservation's Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program, and California Wildlife Foundation/California Oaks.

A California cattle rancher's perspectives on ranching in the oaks

© Matt Allhouse, Audubon California



Adam Cline guides his herd through oak-studded rangelands, where responsible grazing supports healthy ecosystems, resilient soils, and thriving wildlife.

By Adam Cline, Operator, Cline Livestock Company

Oak trees are as common in my daily environment as grass and cattle. I am a full-time cattle rancher based in Yolo County. I tend cattle on rangelands along the west side of the Sacramento Valley from fall to late spring. From July through October, I work on range improvement projects, such as water troughs and fences, while the cattle spend the long hot summers on green irrigated pastures in the Cascade Mountains or Modoc Plateau.

Coast live, Oregon white, blue, and valley oaks are common across the varied terrains where I work. Some of the land was cleared for firewood and wheat production in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Other ground has been largely untouched except by grazing animals and access roads.

I regularly speak at conservation events about cattle grazing to benefit the environment. Often I am asked about cattle's impact on oaks, specifically oak regeneration. The grazing management I employ is not widespread among my fellow ranchers. I operate on a ranch that has been described by Alex Palmerlee of Red Boot Ecology as containing the most oak seedlings he has observed. This ranch—typical of several I operate on that have adequate water and fencing infrastructure—is grazed by cattle from November to May. Seasonal grazing is thoughtfully planned and follows an adapt-

ive schedule, with the cattle moved every few days.

Typically, the herd grazes a pasture ranging from 10 to 350 acres for no more than 10 days during the winter. Then the pasture is rested for at least 90 days and grazed again in April or May for a shorter period. This keeps the cattle moving and focused on harvesting grass, while also preventing cow trails. Each year some pasture on the ranch is deferred from grazing, allowing it rest. Depending on precipitation and grass growth, some pastures are grazed only once in the winter and not grazed in the spring. A typical pasture may only be grazed for 14 days each year. Furthermore, an attempt is made, when developing the annual grazing plan, to adjust the grazing period in a given pasture so that it is grazed at a different time in the season each year.

Planned management, frequent movement of cattle, and monitoring the land create a mosaic of different grazing and vegetation patterns across a ranch's landscape, fostering different types of habitat for a variety of wildlife species. It also mimics somewhat the grazing behavior of large herds of elk and pronghorn that inhabited the region prior to European settlement. Perennial grasses, native and nonnative alike, are rejuvenated from periodic grazing followed by rest, which stimulates root

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Woodlands of Carrizo Plain National Monument's Caliente Range

California Wildlife Foundation has partnered for many years with Carrizo Plain Conservancy (carrizoplainconservancy.org) in support of its efforts to protect the Carrizo Plain and expand the Carrizo Plain National Monument. The conservancy is also a member of California Oaks Coalition. Oaks are abundant in coastal areas of San Luis Obispo County, where coast live, blue, black, canyon live, and valley oak grow, as well as tanoak. Oaks are farther and fewer between in the eastern reaches of the county, but some oaks, including Tucker oak, have a foothold in the Carrizo Plain environs. We are grateful to Dr. Havlik for sharing his observations of oaks and other trees of the Caliente Range.

By Neil Havlik, PhD, President, Carrizo Plain Conservancy

Forming much of the southern and western backdrop of the Carrizo Plain, the Caliente Range of southeastern San Luis Obispo County includes the county's highest elevation at 5,106 feet. This high-desert mountain range has always been of great interest to me. It is too dry for montane forest—such an elevation in the Sierras would be covered with ponderosa pines and many other conifers—but the Calientes have a thick woodland of California junipers and shrubby Tucker oaks. In some protected areas there are small stands of blue oaks, and I hope to find a few valley oaks in favorable locations as well. (Valley oaks are found within a few miles of the Carrizo Plain in the San Juan River watershed to the west.)

Coast live oaks are not known to grow in the Carrizo Plain, although one small stand has been reported from a canyon in the northern portion of the Temblor Range, north of the monument, and they occur in the La Panza Range farther west in Los Padres National Forest.

No discussion of the Calientes would be complete without mentioning pinyon pines. Pinyons are common to abundant in the mountains of interior Santa Barbara and Ventura counties, but are basically absent in the Caliente Range. One old tree has been known for many years near Caliente Peak, and I found perhaps a half-dozen more in some favorable locations along the northern base of the range. This absence is soil-related; the Caliente Range is composed mainly of shale, and the pinyons prefer sandstone.



Juniper and Tucker oaks growing along a trail in the Caliente Range.

© Bryant Baker, Los Padres ForestWatch

Building access to crane dances, from the theatre to the wild

© David Rosen



Trip co-leaders Carlos Alvarado and Don Yasuda, from The Wildlife Society, and Dan Williams, Sacramento Audubon, adjust scopes for participants to view birds at Cosumnes River Preserve.

By Bruce Forman, Crane Program Manager (retired), California Department of Fish and Wildlife, with assistance from Katherine Kerstetter, California Wildlife Foundation/California Oaks Intern

Visitors from Sacramento on a recent tour of the Cosumnes River Preserve in Galt and Woodbridge Ecological Reserve in Lodi marveled at the diversity and abundance of birds, including many flocks of Sandhill Cranes flying by and some coming in to roost for the evening. The cranes' extended dramatic dances, observed by a nearby coyote, made for a riveting experience.

I organized a consortium of organizations and individuals to host the tour in early February 2025 for 45 residents of the greater Oak Park region of Sacramento, a culturally diverse area with limited access to natural areas. The tour was offered through a unique partnership with Oak Park Community Center and Images Theater Company's Global Rhythms project, a series of multicultural dance and music shows (many crane-themed) presented at the Guild Theater in Oak Park.

One young adult participant's comment summed up the sentiments of many: "I didn't realize there was such a fun place to visit close to home. We felt safe and peaceful there, and can't wait to do more visiting in nature now that I know it's so interesting."

Birding interpretation on the guided tours was provided by me and expert birders from Sacramento Audubon and The Wildlife Society. Over 30 species of birds were seen, from waterfowl and hawks to shorebirds and Greater Sandhill Cranes (*Antigone canadensis tabida*, state threatened). The cranes exhibit dancing for pair bonding and courtship. While this jumping and bowing display can be seen

any month, it increases before migration (around March 1); tour participants were treated to extended periods of this elaborate ritual. Large flocks of White-fronted Geese, Snow Geese, Black-necked Stilts, dabbling ducks, and numerous herons and egrets also contributed to the magical experience.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife took ownership of the two crane reserve units in 1983 to protect Greater Sandhill Cranes. The lands were purchased from a duck hunting club that had kept the properties protected from wineries, orchards, and other types of development. These sites provide shallow, flooded marshes for roosting near feeding grounds of corn and rice fields typically located on private properties; they are vital for allowing the cranes to fatten up for their long migration.

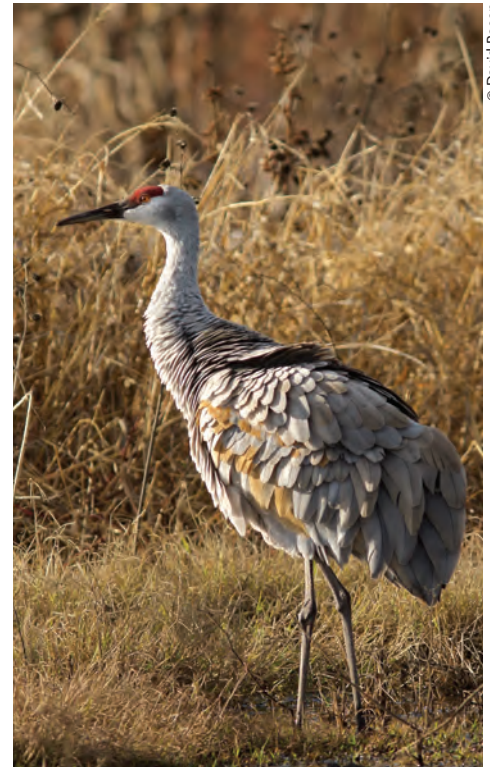
Most of the tour attendees were among the 650 patrons of Global Rhythms, which produced eight acts including dances and songs about cranes in January, a month before the tour. One of them, an Aboriginal-themed aerial dance act, included five narratives focused on cranes. These shows were planned to inspire attendees to join this free tour, with exit surveys to gain insights into how to better engage the community.

The project was a new undertaking of Images Theatre Company, a long-standing theater nonprofit group in Sacramento that seeks to raise awareness of important social and environmental protection issues, utilizing education and entertainment.

"Integrating cranes into each dance act and into the poignant narratives deepened the audience's engagement, inspiring a newfound

appreciation for real cranes on the tour," says Jeanette LaRue, executive director of Images Theatre. "By weaving nature into the arts, attendees found cultural relevance in conservation, making the experience both meaningful and joyful. It fostered connections—not just with wildlife, but with neighbors eager to continue these shared experiences."

The tour was funded by generous donations from California Wildlife Foundation, Sacramento Audubon, The Wildlife Society, and the Environmental Council of Sacramento, with a hosted picnic donated by two local supermarkets, Rancho San Miguel Markets and Sacramento Natural Foods Co-op.



Greater Sandhill Crane (*Antigone canadensis tabida*)

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growth and creates improved feed resources for wildlife.

Adam Cline is operator of Cline Livestock Company, a family cattle-ranching operation in the Sacramento Valley. He studied Range Management at Montana State University and completed courses in holistic management. He has been running cattle in the area for 25 years and has implemented numerous federal Environmental Quality Incentives Program projects. Cline was recognized in fall 2024 by the Cal-Pac section of the Society for Range Management for "Excellence in Range Management" for his efforts at a ranch he operates in Dunnigan. His ranch is certified by National Audubon Society as bird-friendly.

In Memoriam: Richard Thieriot



Richard Thieriot and California Wildlife Foundation Executive Officer Janet Cobb at the Rancho Llano Seco negotiation to save the last 5,000 acres of the nearly 20,000 acre-ranch in Butte County.

Richard Thieriot, a collaborator, donor, and former board member of California Wildlife Foundation, passed away at the age of 82 on September 27, 2024, leaving a legacy of journalism and environmental stewardship.

Thieriot worked in a number of capacities at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which his great-grandfather, Michael H. de Young, co-founded in 1865. Thieriot served as the *Chronicle's* editor and publisher from 1977 to 1993, a post he assumed after the death of his father, Charles de Young Thieriot. Under Richard Thieriot's leadership, print circulation reached its peak and the *Chronicle* began in-depth reporting on environmental issues. "He really felt like the paper should be a major voice in California for the environment," noted former *Chronicle* managing editor Jerry Roberts.

Thieriot pursued his interests in ranching and the environment after his retirement from the *Chronicle*. He collaborated with California

Wildlife Foundation to establish a conservation easement on Rancho Llano Seco in Butte County, property owned by Thieriot's family since 1861. In 1991, 4,200 acres of the ranch were transferred to state and federal agencies. Their wetland and upland habitat were restored and they are now part of the Sacramento River National Wildlife Refuge and Upper Butte Basin State Wildlife Area. These lands, in the Wintu, Maidu, and Yana Tribal areas, are some of the most important wintering and migration areas in the state, annually supporting a half million ducks and geese, according to the California Rangeland Coalition.

Thieriot was awarded the National Wetlands Award by the Environmental Law Institute for his restoration and stewardship of Llano Seco's grasslands, wetlands, and oak woodlands and savannas. Thieriot also served as a member of California's Fish and Game Commission.

Acknowledgements

The Board of Directors supports the important conservation efforts of California Wildlife Foundation/California Oaks (CWF/CO). We extend our deepest gratitude to Ellen Maldonado, Chair; Jim Lightbody, Treasurer; and Lynn Barris, Secretary, for their time and dedication to California's environment.

Many thanks also to CWF/CO Advisor Janet L. Byron who provided editorial support and guidance in development of the newsletter, to CWF/CO intern Katherine Kerstetter for her editorial review of the articles, and to Cathryn Bangs, Stefani Berger, and Sonia Pang for assistance with mailing.

How you can help:

- Donate to California Wildlife Foundation/California Oaks. A secure donation can be made from our website: californiaoaks.org
- Spend time in an oak woodland or forest. Click on californiaoaks.org/resources for a partial listing of oak landscapes around the state that have public access.
- Consider including oak conservation in your financial and estate planning efforts. Information can be found at: californiaoaks.org/donate
- Be vigilant about threats to oak woodlands and oak-forested lands in your community and consult californiaoaks.org for guidance.
- Restore oaks to areas where they historically grew.
- Sign up for the Oaks e-newsletter at californiaoaks.org
- Support local and statewide measures to protect natural resources.
- Hold decision-makers accountable for protecting green infrastructure.
- Learn about and support Indigenous stewardship of oak ecosystems.

California Oaks is a fund within California Wildlife Foundation, federal tax identification number 68-0234744. Contributions of cash, stocks, and bonds are tax deductible.



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Latin names are used for species with designated state or federal conservation status.

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Newsletter design by Darren Quin, Alpha Omega Print and Imaging.