

Wildlife Habitat Conservation Finds a New Voice in Napa

By Yvonne Baginski

Napa County is one of California's top biodiversity hotspots, containing one-third of the state's native plant species, more than 30 native fish, 250 species of native bees, and over 400 species of nesting or seasonal birds. The southern county is a critical coastal wetland habitat for migrating birds and estuary biodiversity, while the mountains that ring the valley harbor rare flora and fauna.

But our wildlife and native habitats are in peril.

Wildlife habitat is the focus of the Napa County Wildlife Habitat Conservation Coalition. This community-based, volunteer coalition brings together experts, environmental groups, and residents for monthly education sessions, collaboration, and support. The coalition is driving a local conversation on what can be done to conserve land for wildlife.

Threats to wildlife

Housing, vineyards, industrial parks, warehouses, and recreational areas all compete for open space. Despite regulations intended to protect endangered and special status species, development plans often proceed without adequate protection for wildlife.

Numerous reports and biologists warn that wildlife species continue to be impacted as development, poisoning, and other activities destroy habitats.

While many believe there's nothing that can be done, the Coalition is proving that people can make a difference.

For example, Coalition members have been involved in the current county Baseline Data Report, a precursor to the general plan. Napa Solano Audubon Society members reported bird sightings and habitats not previously known by local planners. Members representing the Napa Native Plant Society, Napa Vision 2050, Firewise, Napa Climate NOW!, and the Napa Sierra Club submitted comments, too.

The Coalition also partnered with ICare, Vintage High School, the Golden State Salmon Association, and the Napa Sierra Club to install educational signs along Salvador Creek to protect migrating salmon.

"The Coalition is identifying the habitat and species needing our support," said Scott Thomason from the Sierra Club. "This group of environmentalists and experts shares information and takes actions that can make a significant impact."

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) also hopes more people will become involved.

“We need to value wildlife and habitats,” said Krysten Kellum, CDFW’s public information officer. “Wildlife conservation is so important to our well-being. California’s biodiversity is something we don’t want to lose.”

Protecting wildlife requires awareness of how and where animals live. Being out of touch with nature can translate into killing animals or plants out of ignorance, fear, or believing them a nuisance.

More than 15 wildlife trapping companies are licensed to trap and kill animals in Napa County. Animals are also killed by cars, are trapped and die when caught in fencing or debris or are cut off from water. Pesticides are also a factor.

Making Habitat Conservation a Priority

The Coalition’s goal is to engender a new paradigm of co-existence with Napa’s native wildlife.

Members attend land use and commission meetings, public hearings, and write letters and emails voicing concerns and making recommendations. Coalition members have also worked with the American Canyon community, organizing to defeat a proposed ballot initiative that would allow the construction of an industrial park on sensitive land abutting the estuary.

Collecting data is important. One example is last year’s Coalition-led “bioblitz” alongside Sheehy Creek near the Napa airport. A proposed winery’s biological report indicated that animals were not evident on the winery development acreage, and that bird life was limited to a couple of common species. The bioblitz, which included several local biology and botany experts, found 44 bird species, beavers, river otters, and evidence of rabbits and coyotes along the creek. It demonstrated that the creek and surrounding areas are an important wildlife corridor. Since these animals are primarily nocturnal, they might be missed by an afternoon survey on a random day in mid-winter. This was reported to county planners for further study.

The Coalition encourages outdoor enthusiasts, citizen-scientists, birders, and others interested to attend meetings and participate in observations, bioblitzes, and information gathering on what’s happening along local creeks, wooded areas, fields, etc.

Meetings are on the last Friday of every month, 2 pm, Gasser Building Conference Room, 433 Soscol Ave. For information: <https://napaconservation.org> or contact

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Yvonne Baginski is the founder of the Napa County Wildlife Conservation Coalition, the Conservation Director of the Napa Solano Audubon Society, and President of Napa Valley Writers. She is also a Senior Senator representing Napa and Solano Counties in the California Senior Legislature.

Photo credit: Roland Dumas

Photo caption: A raptor in the Carneros.

