



Keeping the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor open and wildlife friendly



Sonoma Land Trust is working with landowners in the Sonoma Valley to ensure that wild animals can move safely between Sonoma Mountain and the Mayacamas. Photo by Stephen Joseph Photography.

One night in 2009, a black bear was spotted near a creek in Petaluma. After being chased by a helicopter, the bear followed that creek back up and over Sonoma Mountain to return to Napa County from whence he or she had probably started. It is likely that this adventurous ursine was using the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor to travel from Napa County through the Sonoma Valley and up and over Sonoma Mountain.

This bear didn't just drop into Petaluma — he or she had been able to travel a long distance, safely and mostly unseen, through existing land and creek corridors. Such corridors are essential for wildlife passage

— not just for large carnivores, like bear and mountain lion, but for the many smaller critters as well, like raccoon, fox and bobcat.

Just over a year ago, Sonoma Land Trust embarked on a multi-year project to keep open a narrow pinchpoint in the high-priority Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor that is at serious risk of closing up. In last year's winter newsletter, available at www.sonomalandtrust.org, we described two small properties we purchased along the aquatic corridor of Stuart Creek. Since last year, we have widened our focus to include the entire land-based wildlife corridor. This is a critically important project

with ambitious goals, and we've made several major inroads this past year.

A critical linkage between Marin and Lake Counties

Five miles long and only three-quarters of a mile wide at its narrowest point — the "pinchpoint" — the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor stretches from Sonoma Mountain, across Sonoma Creek and the valley floor, and east to the top of the Mayacamas range. It is located within the "Marin Coast to Blue Ridge Critical Linkage" identified in the Bay Area Critical Linkages Project and Conservation Lands Network, both projects of the Bay Area Open Space Council.



Along with these two dueling bucks, our wildlife cameras have captured mountain lion, fox, opossum, bobcat, skunk, coyote, turkey vultures, jackrabbits, squirrels, and more.

Because of our work and that of others in this area over the years, more than 8,000 acres of the corridor are already protected as natural land. It is the unprotected land at the heart of the wildlife corridor on which we are focusing our current efforts.

Using new tools to keep the corridor open

Ensuring that wildlife can move safely through the landscape so their populations can persist in the face of development and climate change projections is the goal of this large-scale project. Acquiring new properties is only one way of accomplishing this.

“We can’t afford to buy the entire corridor, nor would we want to because collaborating with private landowners is a very effective conservation strategy,” says Wendy Eliot, Sonoma Land Trust’s conservation director. “So we are using a variety of land protection tools to protect and enhance the corridor’s permeability, such as deed restrictions and new types of conservation easements and neighbor agreements — along with purchasing at-risk parcels.

Together with acquiring the three to four at-risk properties, our acquisitions staff is drafting model conservation easement language focused on “wildlife freedom of movement” that we will use in this corridor and share with other conservation groups also working to secure wildlife corridors.

Last year, in addition to our purchase of the two properties on Stuart Creek, Jim Happ and Betsey Moses donated an easement over their property along the creek that restricts activities that could impede wildlife passage, such as fencing and vegetation clearing. This year, with the help of 1st District Sonoma County Supervisor Susan Gorin, we have signed a purchase agreement for a critically situated 27-acre property in the pinchpoint that is highly vulnerable to estate and vineyard development and borders Sonoma Valley Regional Park.

“The Curreri property is a vital link in maintaining safe passage for wildlife through this corridor,” says Supervisor Gorin. “It also will become part of Sonoma Valley Regional Park at close of escrow, so it will provide important recreational values, too.”

Collaborating and monitoring

Keeping the corridor intact is a collaborative venture involving many organizations. Sonoma Land Trust project manager Tony Nelson is spearheading the monitoring and implementation activities and, to ensure that our strategies are based on sound science, he has pulled together a technical advisory group of biologists, wildlife agency staff, linkage assessors, and more.

The group has evaluated several properties within the corridor for wildlife permeability. In other words, are there barriers to wildlife movement or are the animals free to move through the corridor? This will lead to the development of a “Corridor Implementation Strategy” providing recommendations for improving passage on identified properties as well as guidelines for landowners to enhance permeability.

It is assumed that this area is operating as a functional wildlife corridor, but we are validating that theory by placing wildlife cameras on Sonoma Mountain and up and down the valley to collect data on the

Simple things landowners can do to improve wildlife movement

- Remove unnecessary fencing
- Modify fencing for wildlife passage
- Turn off lights at night
- Don’t leave pets (or pet food) outside at night
- Reduce nighttime noise
- Eliminate or minimize pesticide and herbicide use
- Modify vegetation management: Protect your home from wildfire, but leave enough cover for wildlife.

animals who live there. “We are hoping to show that this is a functioning corridor by documenting that the wildlife found here can move through it,” says Tony. “And if the data shows that certain species are having trouble, then we can work with our collaborators to find solutions.”

Photos and roadkill tell a story

Busy Highway 12 and Arnold Drive bisect the wildlife corridor pinchpoint. Roads are a significant deterrent to wildlife movement and a cause of death, not to mention a source of human danger from crossing animals. We will be combining the camera data with upcoming roadkill surveys to help us determine whether species are successfully crossing these barriers and how frequently they are using the culverts and underpasses to pass safely underneath. There’s a lot to learn and this is just the beginning of two more years of effort.

The landowners in the corridor have shown a great desire to protect

wildlife. Nearly everyone of whom we’ve asked permission to place a camera has granted it and has been excited to see the resulting photos. “People are thrilled to know that they have wild animals moving through their property, even if they don’t always see them, and that they can play an important role in protecting them into the future,” says Tony. “It’s one of the reasons we’ve been able to get the project rolling and have such high hopes for it.”

The critical link across the valley

At the heart of the narrowest part of the corridor lies the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC), which, at 1,000 acres, represents the largest and most significant unprotected land in the Sonoma Valley. SDC has provided services for developmentally disabled individuals since it opened at its current location in 1891; its future is, however, uncertain as similar facilities are being shuttered by the state.

There is no question that the loss

Roadkill Surveys

Roadkill surveys will be limited to Highway 12 and Arnold Drive, but there are other roads in the corridor. Community members are invited to report any roadkill they see in the online database operated by the Road Ecology Center at UC Davis at www.roadecology.ucdavis.edu.

of SDC facilities and open space to incompatible development would have far-reaching consequences, affecting hundreds of patients and their families, more than 1,000 employees, support services in the local community, 800 acres of critical habitat for fish and wildlife, the potential for recreation and public access — and the future of the wildlife corridor and animal populations to the west and east.

Sonoma Land Trust is helping to

The wildlife corridor is identified in Sonoma County’s 2020 General Plan thanks to the visionary work of the Sonoma Ecology Center. At the heart of the corridor lies the Sonoma Developmental Center whose services and 800 acres of natural land are at risk. Map by Joseph Kinyon.





A coyote at sunset, caught by a wildlife camera.



The 27-acre Curreri property, located in the pinchpoint, will become part of Sonoma Valley Regional Park.

lead a coalition of organizations focused on preserving the open space on the SDC property. “Creating a



Assistant stewardship manager Kara Caselas installs a wildlife camera. The cameras will be in place for 2–3 years with data downloaded every 6–8 weeks.

scenario in which the clients’ needs are served while providing urgent environmental protections — for the wildlife corridor, watershed preservation and public access — would be the optimal outcome for this anchor property,” states Wendy.

Successful protection of the undeveloped portions of the SDC would directly link more than 9,000 acres of protected land and help ensure the continued movement of wildlife across the Sonoma Valley and beyond. There are no do-overs once land is developed.

Funding the corridor work

The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation has provided a \$1.8 million grant that is allowing us to purchase properties and easements that are critical to keeping the corridor open. The

funding also supports our camera monitoring and integration of these parcels into a broader implementation strategy. Supplemental funding is being provided by the Resources Legacy Fund; it is expected that additional funding will need to be raised to complete the final year of the project.

“With this initiative, Sonoma Land Trust is working landowner by landowner and focusing on the function of the land rather than the land itself,” says Wendy. “This is what it means to be working on a landscape scale where we’re not focused on a single property, but an entire area.”

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