

## 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.

In 2012, Sonoma Land Trust embarked on a multi-year project to keep open the narrowest section — the “pinchpoint” — in the high-priority Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor that is at serious risk of closing up. Since that time, Sonoma Land Trust purchased three key properties in the corridor, including two along the aquatic corridor of Stuart Creek; assessed permeability (freedom of animal movement) within several strategic properties; and completed a corridor *Management and Monitoring Strategy* (available at [www.sonomalandtrust.org/Wildlife-Strategy.pdf](http://www.sonomalandtrust.org/Wildlife-Strategy.pdf)). With that progress as a guide, we have widened our focus to include the entire land-based wildlife corridor within Sonoma County. This is a critically important project with ambitious goals.



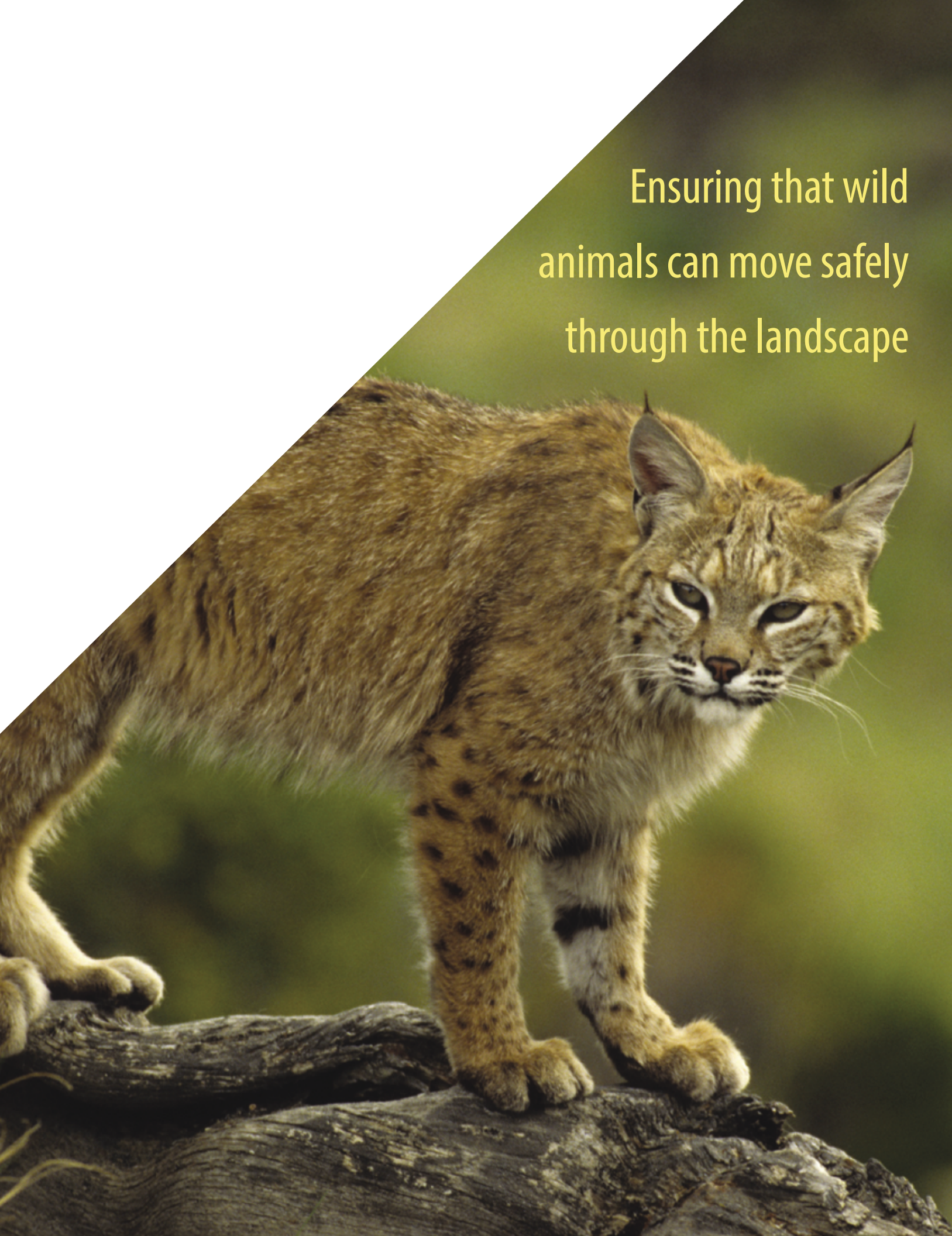
# SONOMA LAND TRUST

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## KEEPING THE SONOMA VALLEY WILDLIFE CORRIDOR OPEN AND WILDLIFE FRIENDLY







# Ensuring that wild animals can move safely through the landscape

## A critical linkage between Marin and Lake Counties

The Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor stretches from the southern hills of Sonoma Mountain, across Sonoma Creek and the valley floor just south of Glen Ellen, to the top of the Mayacamas range at Calabazas Creek Open Space Preserve. It is a vital portion of 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.

Because of our work and that of others in this area over the years, more than 8,000 acres of the corridor are protected as natural land. Our work transcends the boundaries of protected lands; however, as we are engaging all landowners with-in the corridor to collectively ensure the continued availability of this important landscape for wildlife.

## Using new tools to keep the corridor open

Ensuring that wild animals can move safely through the landscape so that 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 at-risk properties, our acquisitions staff has drafted 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.

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. In 2014, with the help of First District Sonoma County Supervisor Susan Gorin, we purchased a critically situated 27-acre property in the pinchpoint that was highly vulnerable to estate and vineyard development and borders Sonoma Valley Regional Park.

“The Curreri property was a vital link in maintaining safe passage for wildlife through this corridor,” says Supervisor Gorin. “It also became part of Sonoma

Valley Regional Park at close of escrow, so this acquisition provides important recreational values, too.”

## Collaborating and monitoring

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

The group 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 led to the development of the *Management and Monitoring Strategy*, providing recommendations for improving passage on identified properties as well as guidelines for landowners to enhance permeability.

To begin understanding how well this area is operating as a functional wildlife corridor and to track animal use over time, we placed remote wildlife cameras on Sonoma Mountain and up and down the valley to collect data on the animals who live there. “We hoped to show that this is a functioning corridor by documenting that the wildlife found here can move through it,” says Nelson, “and to find out if any species are having trouble so that we can work with our collaborators to find solutions.” While analyzing the two years of data will take more time, preliminary indications are that both common and rare species are passing through the corridor.

## 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 are combining camera data with roadkill surveys to help us determine whether species are successfully crossing these barriers. Results show that wild animals are readily passing through the major bridges and culverts in the corridor to pass safely underneath these busy roads, which is excellent news for wildlife and motorists (see the Wildlife Corridor Underpass report at [www.sonomalandtrust.org/pdf/Wildlife-Passage-Study.pdf](http://www.sonomalandtrust.org/pdf/Wildlife-Passage-Study.pdf)).

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 were able to get the project rolling



and to have such high hopes for it.” Some landowners are already making improvements recommended in the Strategy, such as removing unnecessary fencing.

## 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; however, the State plans to close the facility by the end of 2018.

There is no question that the loss 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 lead a coalition of organizations focused on preserving the open space on the SDC property. “Creating a 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 Eliot.

Successful protection of the undeveloped portions of SDC would directly link an additional 1,000 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 provided a \$1.8 million grant that has allowed 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 has been provided by the Resources Legacy Fund and additional funding is being sought to continue the project and expand efforts into Marin and Napa Counties.

“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 Eliot. “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.”



Critical Linkage Source: BAOSC, Bay Area Linkage Designs [www.scwildlands.org](http://www.scwildlands.org)  
Protected Lands: Bay Area Protected Areas Database, Bay Area Open Space Council—GreenInfo Network 2015 & Sonoma Land Trust 2015