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(We call ourselves "BCR")  
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## Cleaning, Greening, and Teaching the Watershed

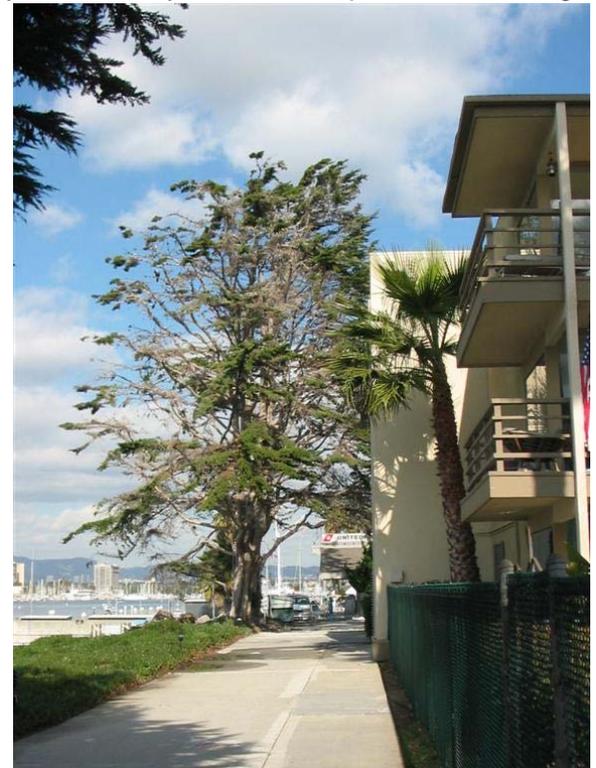
Ballona Creek Renaissance is privileged to work with many individuals, organizations, and public agencies to clean, green and teach Ballona Creek and the roughly 130-square mile urban region that drains into the creek--its watershed. Although we sometimes differ on the details and timing, we share broad consensus on the goals.

This issue highlights two recent moments of broad-based environmental activism and government action to reduce the overwhelming impact of disposable plastic bags and protect important places of wildlife habitat in our urban watershed.

On January 8, 2008, the California Coastal Commission thrilled local environmentalists by ruling to protect Marina Del Rey roosting and nesting sites for Great Blue Herons and other shore birds from the pressures of development (pg.4). Pictured below is the unassuming site that triggered the controversy and the action—the cypress trees in which herons nest. Though Marina Del Rey harbors many people and their boats, homes, businesses, and a bikeway, it was once part of the extensive Ballona Wetlands.

Then on January 22, BCR joined Heal the Bay and other members of the Reusable Bag Coalition at a rally and County Board of Supervisors hearing about options to significantly reduce or ban the disposable plastic bags which plague our neighborhoods, waterways, and bay (pg.2). Although the adopted measure stopped short of the reduction targets we sought, it represents one more important step forward.

The Las Virgenes Creek project in Calabasas provides an instructive example (pg. 3) and a Playa Del Rey store and library offers a special place to learn (pg.5). For inspiring work by local university students, check out the brief notes on three UCLA Extension landscape architecture theses about possibilities for Ballona Creek, Centinela Creek, and Stone Canyon Creek (pg.6).



## County Supervisors Approve Watered-Down Plastic Bag Reduction Measure

Our last two newsletters described efforts by Heal the Bay to reduce plastic pollution through legislation on both the State and County level. After San Francisco banned plastic bags last year, LA County Supervisors instructed staff to look into drafting a similar measure. Heal the Bay strongly supported the action, forming what came to be called the "Reusable Bag Coalition", in which BCR actively participates. The coalition has worked both with the County and at the grassroots level to promote reusable bags and work toward a ban on disposable plastic bags, including asking people to sign Heal the Bay's online petition.

Meanwhile, the 90-day study stretched into 9 months. The California Grocers Association hired a lobbying firm to oppose a ban, citing achievability and cost issues. A set of alternative motions was developed by County Public Works staff and reviewed and discussed among various stakeholders, including Heal the Bay. A public hearing was set for January 22, 2008.

As 2007 drew to a close, Heal the Bay and the City and County of Los Angeles, along with retailers, cities, and nonprofit organizations, staged a "Day Without a Bag" to give away thousands of reusable bags at locations throughout Los Angeles County. In Culver City, BCR volunteers joined with the City of Culver City to distribute free bags at Town Plaza by the Culver Hotel and with Supervisor Yvonne Burke and Los Angeles County staff at Westfield Fox Hills.

With the success of this cooperative effort, the new year brought hope for a significant new beginning on the plastic bag problem. Approaching the hearing, Heal the Bay, BCR, and others were prepared to accept a variation of the County's "Alternative 5" as the best achievable result. Briefly, this voluntary reduction measure would lead to a ban only if the use of bags in unincorporated LA County did not decrease by at least 35% by July 2010 and at least 70% by July 2013. Heal the Bay and coalition members believed that this significant measure would be approved as presented.

However, in the last few days before the meeting, Supervisors Antonovich and Knabe proposed an alternative motion, which would lower the percentages by 5% to 30% and 65%. That might not seem like a lot, but when you realize that it's 5% of hundreds of millions of bags---well, that IS a lot.

So Heal the Bay organized a rally of red-shirted volunteers on the steps of the County Hall of Administration an hour before the Supervisors' meeting. Inside, BCR's Jim Lamm and many other spoke on the issue. In the end, the Supervisors approved the lowered percentages, with Supervisors Yaroslavsky and Molina dissenting. After the vote, Supervisor Burke and Heal the Bay President Mark Gold exchanged some unusually heated words, reflecting their different understandings of the issue and of recent informal meetings.

Although very disappointing, the ultimate decision at least represented some progress toward the shared goal as we continue to work toward alternatives to the plastic bag. The tide is changing. Santa Monica is currently considering a ban. For details and updates, visit [www.healththebay.org](http://www.healththebay.org).

**Photo by Jim Lamm: Rally before the Supervisors' Meeting.** At left, Heal the Bay President Mark Gold holds a poster showing a turtle with a plastic bag stuck in its throat. Lee Wallach of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life addresses the volunteers, while Heal the Bay's Meredith McCarthy holds the bullhorn.



## Las Virgenes Creek Naturalization Restores a Wildlife Habitat Corridor

In the City of Calabasas in western Los Angeles County, Las Virgenes Creek flows underneath the 101 Ventura Freeway near Las Virgenes Road and meanders south, eventually entering Malibu Creek, which empties into Santa Monica Bay. Most of the creek bottom is natural, but in 1977, a 400-foot segment between the freeway and the Agoura Road bridge was encased in a concrete channel to protect the bridge from storm damage.



One consequence of removal of the natural stream bottom and riparian vegetation was to prevent some species (fish and perhaps some amphibians and small invertebrates which burrow in the mud) from crossing that 400-foot stretch. Another was "thermal pollution", in which the concrete channel bottom warmed the inch of water above it, increasing the heavy algae blooms that also infest Ballona Creek in warm weather. The 400 feet became a barren and ugly zone.

Now for the happy ending of a 14-year campaign to fix it: Calabasas has just completed a \$1.2 million project to remove the concrete and restore the habitat corridor. Last summer, 3,600 cubic yards of concrete were dug up. Large boulders, erosion-control fabric and other engineering measures, many of them invisible below ground, have stabilized the channel bed and protect the Agoura Road bridge. Engineering also provided for appropriate slopes and channels for fish to migrate. Many native plants and trees, including willows, have been planted on

the banks and beside the stream to provide food and nesting areas for birds and insects; the willows will be trimmed to form a canopy to cool the waters, especially in summer. The natural bottom will also help filter out pollutants from stormwater runoff before they reach Malibu Creek. Percolation of water into the soil reduces heavy flow during storms and improves the water table. The project also includes a pedestrian walkway, benches, a gazebo and informative signage.

Todd Evans, the City of Calabasas engineer who supervised the construction, described the gradual revival of the ecosystem. "The native vegetation established itself, but there was still not much food for wildlife because the insects and other small organisms had not yet returned. Now they have, and we see more birds and other signs, such as raccoon tracks." Considering that construction finished in October, 2007, it didn't take long. Of course, the vegetation regrowth still has a long way to go.

Sources of funds included Proposition 12 (passed by the voters in 2000), an Urban Streams Grant from the California Dept. of Water Resources, a Proposition 50 grant, a Los Angeles County grant and matching funds from the City of Calabasas. Engineering designs were provided by Questa Engineering, a San Francisco Bay area environmental consulting firm. Other participating agencies included the California Coastal Conservancy and the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission.



A related matter concerns the steelhead trout, an endangered species which occurs in Malibu Creek and formerly occurred in Las Virgenes Creek. Like salmon, steelhead trout spend their adult lives at sea, returning to freshwater streams to spawn. In 1926, construction of the Rindge Dam just a few miles from the coast severely constricted the trout habitat as they cannot get past the dam, which is 102 feet high and 140 feet wide. The steelhead

trout population is now severely depleted. Ironically, soon after completion, the dam's reservoir began to fill with normal sediment and by 1965 was completely full. In 1967, it was decommissioned for use. There is considerable interest in removing the dam to extend the trout's habitat. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is working on a feasibility study for removal, although the Rindge family strongly favors preserving the dam as an historic structure.

## A Win For Herons, Egrets & Cormorants In The Marina

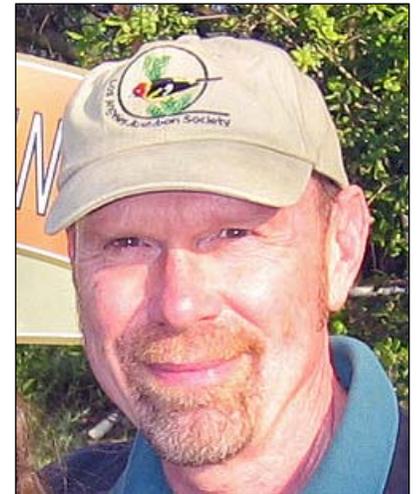
By Garry George

*This article was written for the Audubon newsletter Western Tanager. Reprinted by permission of Los Angeles Audubon Society.*

On Wednesday, January 9, 2008 the California Coastal Commission granted the strongest legal protections available to colonial roosting and nesting sites for Great Blue Herons, Snowy Egrets, Double-crested Cormorants, Black-crowned Night-Herons and other species of birds. In a unanimous vote on motions made by Commissioner Sara Wan of Malibu and seconded by Audubon California Board Chair Steve Blank, the Commission sent the strongest message possible to Los Angeles County Beaches & Harbors to incorporate findings that the areas important to birds in the Marina are Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas as defined under the Coastal Act of 1972. The unanimous vote was a victory for environmentalists in Marina del Rey who had been fighting for years to protect the rookeries, and other areas of the Marina from the pressures of development. Los Angeles County Beaches and Harbors administers the public land in the Marina for purposes such as recreation and leasing to commercial and residential development.

In making its determination, the Commission rejected Los Angeles County's plan to relocate nesting Great Blue Herons to man-made nesting platforms in another area of the Marina, and found that plan controversial, not peer-reviewed scientifically, and experimental. The Commission also rejected the County's report of the success of a relocation project at Long Beach Naval Station of Black-crowned Night-herons from the Naval Station to Gull Park as controversial, and presented data from studies that actually showed that total active nests diminished from 503 to less than 250 in the year after the move. Although there was an increase in active nests the following year, the Commission rejected that data as inconclusive in

that the nest counts didn't distinguish between relocated nests and already established nests in Gull Park. The nests were abandoned totally in the next few years. The Commission also rejected the County's presentation of examples of successful Great Blue Heron relocation programs in other parts of the U.S., reporting that one of the County's examples was a rehabilitation of an existing site, not a relocation as represented. The Commission also showed that the "reports" calling the relocation projects a "success" were written by the company that manufactured the nesting platforms, and were not scientifically peer reviewed.



Los Angeles Audubon joined the fight to protect the Marina rookery, one of two coastal rookeries in Los Angeles County, almost two years ago. Then President Dexter Kelly and Treasurer Lisa Fimiani spoke publicly in support of the birds in hearings in the Marina. Then Board member Jason Stuck's photos proved that Great Blue Herons were nesting in sites unreported by Los Angeles County biologists. Audubon members in the Marina contacted Los Angeles Audubon's Urban Wildlife Task Force to report upcoming tree trimming of roosting and nesting sites and Lisa Fimiani protected the birds on site from aggressive trimming. Los Angeles Audubon's Larry Allen, co-author of the upcoming Breeding Bird Atlas of Los Angeles County, provided crucial data from his species accounts, especially Great Blue Herons, that cleared up misconceptions of the breeding history of

the birds in the Marina. According to the data, Great Blue Herons were not observed nesting in the Marina during the field survey period for the BBA, which ended in 1999. This was critical as Los Angeles County and the Coastal Commission had determined in 1995 that there was "no ESHA in Marina del Rey." The new circumstance of nesting by Great Blue Herons after 1999 allowed for a new determination to overturn the prior designation. This writer worked with Commission ecologist and also with Coastal Commissioners directly, and spoke at the hearing on January 9. Biologist Andrea Jones, Audubon California's Director of Important Bird Areas, worked with Commission ecologist on her findings. The Ballona Valley, not just the wetlands, is an Audubon California Important Bird Area.

But it is the years of heroic efforts by new Los Angeles Audubon board member Dr. David DeLange and members Marcia Hanscom and Roy van der Hoek that set the stage for the final victory in the Coastal Commission hearing room. David's video footage of the destruction of Great Blue Heron nests by "tree trimmers" and his documentation of every attempt by developers to drive the birds from the Marina was

worth a thousand words, and caused more than one Commissioner to sit up and take notice. His passion for the birds, who roost and nest literally in his back yard, galvanized Los Angeles Audubon as well as the Commission into action.

Los Angeles County may decide not to follow the recommendations of the Coastal Commission in adopting the findings of ESHA in the Marina, but disregarding the Commission recommendations will cause problems for the County down the road as the County returns to the Commission for development permits on several large projects currently in the works. Destroying the habitat after the Commission's unanimous strong message would be an egregious act by the County. For now, the heron, egret and cormorant rookeries enjoy the strongest protections possible thanks to the hard work by passionate activists in the Marina and at Los Angeles Audubon, and the California Coastal Commission.

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*Garry George is executive director of L.A. Audubon. He was also instrumental in founding the native plant garden in Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area, among other achievements. Contact: [garrygeorge@laudubon.org](mailto:garrygeorge@laudubon.org)*

## Shallow Water Nature Store

Ballona Institute has opened its new non-profit Shallow Water Nature Store and Library Corner in Playa del Rey as a resource for all who are interested in wetlands preservation, and for their kids and grandkids. Opening Day, February 2, was chosen to coincide with World Wetlands Day and included a dedication and ribbon-cutting ceremony with Los Angeles City Councilman Bill Rosendahl and California Assemblyman Ted Lieu.

Ballona Institute founders Marcia Hanscom and Roy van de Hoek opened the store in response to strong support from the community. It offers many books for adults and youngsters on the wildlife of the wetlands, local birds, and related subjects; sound recordings, organic cotton T-shirts and tote bags with interesting designs, and other products of nature. In the small "library corner" are comfortable chairs where one can sit and read materials not for sale. The library will be augmented by materials from Ballona Institute's archives, including historic maps and documents. Those interested in specific materials can make arrangements to view them. Angie Megert, outreach coordinator for Ballona Institute, also serves as store manager and is looking for volunteers to work in the store.



Angie Megert shows some of the items available.

Location: 221 Culver Blvd, Playa del Rey, CA 90203.  
Hours: Tuesday-Friday 11 AM - 2:30 PM, Saturday-Sunday 9:30 AM - 4 PM; closed Mondays.  
Phone: (310) 578-5888.

When the store is closed, phone Ballona Institute at (310) 821-9045 or email [wetlandact@earthlink.net](mailto:wetlandact@earthlink.net)

# Student Landscape Architecture Thesis Presentations

By Jim Lamm

At their January 15<sup>th</sup> meeting at Culver City Hall, Ballona Creek Watershed Task Force stakeholders applauded three excellent student thesis projects from the UCLA Extension Program in Landscape Architecture, which offered intriguing possibilities for creeks in the watershed. Although these are academic projects without participation by property owners and governing agencies, they demonstrate ideas worthy of further exploration. The projects are well illustrated, but unfortunately, we have space for only brief summaries:

## *Centinela Creek: Lost and Found*, by Suzanna Mast

The southernmost tributary to the Ballona Wetlands, Centinela Creek originally flowed about 8 miles from its source at Centinela Springs in Inglewood, northwest past the Centinela Adobe and curved around the base of the Westchester bluffs through current day Playa Vista. After becoming fully channelized and rerouted for flood protection in the 1950's and 60's, the Centinela Creek Storm Drain now runs underground and in an open concrete channel before converging with Ballona Creek about two miles from the ocean.



At the site of Mast's proposed "Confluence Observation Park", Jim Lamm's photo shows Centinela Creek on the right merging with Ballona Creek on the left, south of the Marina Freeway in a soft-bottom tidal area of birds and a grassy island.

The project's goal is to reintegrate Centinela Creek into the local community, creating a greenway corridor that not only improves watershed aspects (such as water quality and habitat) but also provides multiple benefits for the business and residential communities (such as improved recreation, safety, and attractiveness)—all while maintaining flood protection. Each stretch would have its own character, starting with newly daylighted springs and stream in Centinela Park.

## *Daylighting Stone Canyon Creek*, by Meg Sullivan

Meg Sullivan explored varied renewal opportunities for Stone Canyon Creek, one of the last naturally banked streams in the Ballona Creek watershed. It flows along the west side of the UCLA campus on its mostly underground way south to Ballona Creek.

Among other things, Sullivan's thesis explores the possibility of strengthening habitat for the animal life (particularly birds); establishing a creek-based, living laboratory for the Corrine A. Seeds University Elementary School; augmenting current efforts to restore a portion of the natural creek on campus; creating safe access points for science instruction; and "daylighting" the creek in three Westwood locations, including a soft-bottom channel along Broxton Avenue to create a creek-front dining and shopping district reminiscent of San Antonio's Riverwalk.

## *A Master Plan for the Ballona Creek, Culver City*, by Tom Rau

Focused on the stretch of the creek from Washington Boulevard to Overland Avenue, Tom Rau's thesis includes portions of the City of Los Angeles as well as Culver City. As he developed his ideas, Rau participated in the Watershed Task Force's Greenway Committee and its walking reconnaissance of the creek corridor. Like the other students, he was inspired by environmental artist Betsy Damon, who has worked with governments to clean water in creative and artistic ways that enliven urban landscapes and educate the public.

Looking far into the future, Rau sought "to create a coherent public space for entertainment, recreation, and education; connect the communities along the creek; improve water quality; and create connected open space between a restored creek bed and the adjacent Baldwin Hills preserve". A key long-range proposal diverts stormwater into an underground channel to enable a more natural creek from National Blvd to Overland Ave. He also considers elevating a portion of Jefferson Boulevard to allow the Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook hillside to extend uninterrupted to the creek.

With fresh looks at three unique parts of our watershed, these studies offer good ideas that could contribute to future projects.

Ballona Creek Watershed Task Force stakeholder meetings are open to all interested persons. The next

meeting will be held 1:30-3:30pm, Tuesday, March 18, in the Patacchia Room, Culver City Hall, 9770 Culver Blvd. For more information, contact Jim Donovan, National Park Service Rivers, Trails, & Conservation Assistance Program at 323-441-2117 or [Jim.Donovan@nps.gov](mailto:Jim.Donovan@nps.gov).

## Around the Watershed



Lisa Fimiani took this photo of an osprey bathing in Ballona Creek several miles upstream, focusing her camera "through one ocular of my binoculars." This fish-eating raptor has a wing-span of 5-6 ft. While hunting, it hovers high above the water, then dives in talons first.

### BCR Presentations

At the November meeting of the Culver City Garden Club, BCR President Jim Lamm spoke to the club about Ballona Creek and its watershed. In a well-received PowerPoint slide presentation, Jim touched on the past and current connections among the watershed, creek and bay and ongoing renewal efforts.

Among other things, Jim showed places along the Los Angeles River from which we can learn: pleasant natural areas, wildlife, walking trails, parks, art, and a neighborhood "green street", which directs runoff through a filtration system below a riverside pocket park. Jim went on to show similar "new beginnings" along Ballona Creek. These included the various creekside native plantings from Mid-City Los Angeles through Culver City to Playa Del Rey, the redesigned bicycle path entrance at Centinela Avenue, and the existing trash filtration device and pending Ballona

Creek Bikeway Project at Overland Avenue. (See the October BCR Newsletter for related stories.)

Jim reprised this program in February for the Culver-Palms Y's Active Adults group. A follow-up creek walk and bus tour is in the works.

Meanwhile, BCR Board member June Walden, a wetlands docent and creekside resident, also has been busy. In October, she joined Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission's Jessica Hall in a presentation to the Culver City Democratic Club. More recently, June participated in three Culver City Parks and Recreation Master Plan Workshops, talking about potential creek and parks synergy.

Interested in a program or tour? Let us know.

### Caltrans to Curb Highway Toxic Runoff

In January, Caltrans reached an agreement in federal court with the Natural Resources Defense Council and Santa Monica Baykeeper to reduce toxic runoff from 1,000 miles of state highways in LA and Ventura Counties. Stormwater that drains off highways contains oil and grease, rubber from tires, metallic fragments from brakes and steel-belted tires, and trash.

This matter has been in court since 1993. In an April 2004 court settlement, Caltrans promised various mitigation measures but has had trouble complying. The new agreement calls for a 20% reduction in stormwater pollution below 1994 levels. Most of the plans to install pollution controls must be completed by 2011, with reductions to be achieved by 2015.

This goal-oriented procedure will allow Caltrans to focus on different cost-effective solutions for different situations. It avoids the previous piecemeal approach by allowing Caltrans to consider entire highway corridors when formulating a storm water strategy.

Editor: Bobbi Gold

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Address correction requested

## FEBRUARY 2008 NEWSLETTER

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