

ENVIRONMENTAL INSIGHT

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BRINGING BIRDS BACK IS PRICKLY BUSINESS

Moving and planting cactus can be a prickly business, but it was all part of a plan developed by the Transportation Corridor Agencies (TCA) and its partners to help the small brown-and-white cactus wren bird thrive in Orange County. The cactus wren, as you might deduce from its name, makes its home in cacti like prickly pear and cholla - the spiner, the better. Nests built within the dense bristles and thorns protect its young from predators.



About five years ago, Orange County's Natural Communities Coalition (formerly the Nature Reserve of Orange County) determined that the number of cactus wrens living within the 37,000-acre coastal and central Natural Community Conservation Plan had declined by more than 80 percent since the mid-1990s, most likely due to the impacts of fires and development. The Laguna Beach Fire of 1993 and Santiago Fire of 2007 burned approximately 75 percent of the wrens' precious remaining habitat.

As part of a larger regional approach to bolster the dwindling number of wrens, TCA collaborated with the Natural Communities Coalition and the University of California, Irvine (UCI) to bring the birds' population number back to levels seen in the early-1990s. Their Joint Regional Habitat Linkage Enhancement Project - coupled with TCA's efforts within its Upper Chiquita Canyon Conservation Area near Coto de Caza - is helping cactus wrens expand their nesting areas. The project has created a loose chain of cactus wren habitats that act as a series of signposts guiding the birds from nests near Fashion Island to above the Coyote Canyon Landfill in Newport Beach near the 73 Toll Road.

It's important work. Regional coordination across a disparity of sites creates a network of habitats for the wrens, extending their reach and reducing the likelihood of inbreeding and genetic loss. Creating the habitats was done by planting new cactus as well as transplanting cactus from other areas, such as the Upper Chiquita Canyon Conservation Area.

"The cactus wrens seem to need to see a cactus to fly to," said Peter Bowler, Ph.D., senior lecturer in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at UCI. "This project creates new linkages that allow the birds to move through a larger wildlife corridor."

Meanwhile, TCA continues to monitor cactus recovery from a 2002 fire in the Upper Chiquita Canyon Conservation Area. It has led a cactus salvage and transplantation project within the area, watering and maintaining the cactus to ensure their health and production of new growth. TCA is also restoring cactus at its Strawberry Farms Mitigation Site in Irvine.

"The secret to effective habitat restoration is working in collaboration with many knowledgeable partners. The Transportation Corridor Agencies leadership on projects like these is as close as Orange County conservation practitioners get to a guarantee of success."

*Jim Sulentic
Executive Director
Natural Communities Coalition*

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TCA's 25 years of dedication to long-term environmental protection and management programs contribute to a healthier environment and preserve the area's natural habitat for Orange County's native plants and wildlife.