

# Field Guide

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Habitats, Plants, and Wildlife  
Of

Riverside County



RIVERSIDE COUNTY HABITAT CONSERVATION AGENCY  
*A Joint Powers Authority*

# Endangered Species Day

In 2005, Mr. David Robinson of La Mesa, California suggested the idea of "Endangered Species Day" to Senator Dianne Feinstein, and on April 5, 2006, the United States Senate unanimously proclaimed May 11<sup>th</sup> as the first "Endangered Species Day."

Each year, in May, America celebrates its commitment to protecting and recovering our nation's endangered species.

# Endangered Species Act

- ◇ The endangered species act was signed into law by President Nixon in 1973.
- ◇ It was designed to protect species and their habitats.
- ◇ The main goal is to prevent the extinction of imperiled plants and animals.
- ◇ The secondary goal is to recover and maintain these plant and animal populations.

# How Many Species are Listed as Threatened or Endangered?

Over 1,800 species worldwide are now listed as threatened and endangered. In Riverside County alone there are 40 threatened and endangered species.

Threatened or endangered species are protected under several laws and regionally by habitat conservation plans.

Through a well planned Reserve System, Riverside County is working to protect many native habitats and the species that call them home.

# Birds

# American Kestrel

*Falco sparverius*



Photo source: Dr. Rosemary Neal

**Description:** The American kestrel, about the size of an American robin, is the smallest of all falcons in North America. Often seen hovering, it is recognizable by its plumage. The adult male has slate-blue wings and a rusty colored tail and back. The female has narrow bands on the tail. Both sexes have 2 black stripes on their face.

**Habitat:** Towns and cities, parks, farmlands, open country, forest edges, and plains

**Food:** In the country-side it eats insects, small birds, and rodents, capturing its prey on the ground rather than in midair like other falcons.

## *Fun Fact:*

The American kestrel has adapted to humans and nests even in our largest cities where it preys chiefly on house sparrows. Falconers typically use American kestrels to hunt non-game species because of their general ability to tame relatively quickly.

# Burrowing Owl

*Athene cunicularia*

**Habitat:** The burrowing owl lives in plains, deserts, open fields, and in places like airports.

**Voice:** Liquid cackling and a mellow coo-coooo, repeated twice

**Habits:** Burrowing owls are generally active at dusk and dawn, but sometimes at night also. They are highly terrestrial and are often seen perched on one foot on a mound of dirt or on a fence post.

**Burrows:** Owls typically claim burrows that have been dug by ground squirrels or gophers.



Photo source: Brian Shomo, Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency

## Fun Fact:

If approached, a burrowing owl will bob up and down and finally dive into its burrow rather than take flight. Juveniles give a rattlesnake-like buzz when threatened in the burrow.

# Coastal California Gnatcatcher

*Polioptila californica californica*

# THREATENED

**Habitat:** Sage scrub and chaparral

**Description:** This bird is very small with gray song feathers and a white eye ring. Males have a black cap during the breeding season.

**Endangered Status:** The reduction in numbers can be attributed to development pressures on its coastal scrub habitat that ranges from southern California down into Baja California.

Some of its historical habitats have been eliminated in the course of urban and commercial development and others have been altered and fragmented.



Photo source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## *Fun Fact:*

The call of this gnatcatcher has been likened to the mewling of a kitten. "Mew, mew, mew."

# Common Raven

*Corvus corax*

**Habitat:** They are found in coniferous forests and rocky coasts. In the West they can also be found in the deserts and arid mountains.

**Food:** Ravens consume a large number of grasshoppers, beetles, moths, scorpions and caterpillars, in addition to carrion and some plant matter such as melon, corn and cactus.

**Nesting:** This raven lays four to seven dull green eggs, spotted with brown, in a nest built on a cliff or in a tree top. The nest is made of a large mass of sticks and lined with fur, moss, and lichen.



Photo source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Gary M. Stolz

## *Fun Fact:*

Crow and raven calls are different in that the raven's can be described as a croak, while the crow's is a distinct caw.

# Mourning Dove

*Zenaida macroura*

**Description:** Soft, sandy buff colored with a long pointed tail bordered with white

**Habitat:** Open fields, parks, and lawns with many trees and shrubs

**Voice:** Low mournful (hence its name) coo-ah, coo, coo, coo

**Discussion:** The mourning dove is common in rural areas in all parts of the United States, as well as in city parks.

In some states it is hunted as a game bird while in others it is protected as a songbird.



Photo source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## Fun Fact:

Baby mourning doves, called *squabs*, are fed with *pigeon milk* the first few days of their lives. No, it's not actually taken from pigeons but rather produced in the mother's throat and it looks like yellow cottage cheese.

# Red-tailed Hawk

*Buteo jamaicensis*

**Habitat:** Deciduous forests and open country of various kinds, including tundra, plains, and farmlands

**Description:** This is a large, stocky hawk, 18-25 inches tall, with a wingspan of 4 feet.

This species is variable in color, especially in the West, where blackish individuals occur.

**Range:** The red-tailed hawk occupies a wide range of habitats and altitudes including deserts, grasslands, agricultural fields, and urban areas.

It breeds throughout most of North America and is protected in the United States by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.



Photo source: Dr. Rosemary Neal

## *Fun Fact:*

The red-tailed hawk is the most common and widespread American member of the genus *buteo*.

# Turkey Vulture

*Cathartes aura*



Photo source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

**Description:** The turkey vulture is an eagle-sized blackish bird usually seen soaring over the countryside. In flight, the long wings are held upward in a wide, shallow V. From below, their flight feathers are silvery.

**Habitat:** Mainly deciduous forests and woodlands and often seen over adjacent farmlands

**Discussion:** This species nests throughout all of the United States except northern New England.

The turkey vulture is valuable because it removes garbage and disease-causing carrion. The most common and widespread of the North American vultures, they often gather at night in large roosts.

## Buzzard or Vulture?

A turkey vulture is not a buzzard. Buzzard is the correct term for a family of hawks (e.g., the European buzzard, closely related to the American red-tailed hawk).

# Mammals

# California Ground Squirrel

*Spermophilus beecheyi*

**Habitat:** Open areas, including rocky outcrops, fields, pastures, and sparsely wooded hillsides

**Food:** They eat insects and small vertebrates, but primarily feed on plant material, including leaves, stems, flowers, bulbs, roots, seeds, fruits, and berries. They often damage grain, fruit, and nut crops.

**Burrows:** When available, they burrow under a log, tree, or rock, but are otherwise in the open, with a mound at the main entrance. Some burrows are used for many years by successive occupants.



Photo source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## *Fun Fact:*

The burrows of ground squirrels are often used as nesting sights for burrowing owls.

# Coyote

*Canis latrans*

**Habitat:** Coyotes are found in a wide variety of habitat types including the open prairies of the West to the heavily forested regions of the Northeast. They can also be found in cities.

**Food:** They are an opportunistic feeder feeding mainly on carrion (including prey killed by other carnivores), small vertebrates and invertebrates, and occasionally vegetation.

**Breeding:** A mated pair of coyotes may remain temporarily monogamous for a number of years. The average litter size is 6 pups.

Both parents feed the pups with regurgitated food.



Photo source: Brian Shomo, Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency

## Fun Fact:

Coyotes are strong swimmers and will not hesitate to enter water after prey.

# Desert Cottontail

*Sylvilagus audubonii*

**Habitat:** Grasslands to creosote brush and deserts

**Food:** Its chief foods are grasses, mesquite, other green plants, cacti, bark, and twigs.

**Breeding:** It has at least 2 litters per year, with 1–6 young (average 3) per litter.

**Discussion:** In areas of little vegetation, it occasionally rests in the burrows of other animals, such as skunks. The young of this species are born in a fur-lined depression.



Photo source: National Park Service, U.S.  
Department of Interior

## *Fun Fact:*

The desert cottontail readily climbs sloping trees and is thought to use logs and stumps as lookout posts after dark.

# Mountain Lion

*Puma concolor*

**Alternate name:** Cougar, puma, or Florida panther

**Habitat:** Generally mountainous, semi-arid terrain

**Food:** It feeds primarily on large mammals, especially deer, but also eats coyotes, porcupines, beavers, mice, marmots, hares, raccoons, birds, and even grasshoppers.

**Endangered Status:** Two subspecies of the mountain lion are on the U.S. **Endangered** Species List. They are the Eastern puma and the Florida panther.



Photo source: California Department of Fish and Game

## Fun Fact:

Mountain lions are good climbers and excellent jumpers, able to leap more than 20 feet (6 meters). This animal swims only when necessary.

# Mule Deer

*Odocoileus hemionus*

**Habitat:** Mixed habitats; forest edges, mountains, and foothills

**Food:** Its summer forage is chiefly herbaceous plants, but also blackberry, huckleberry, salal, and thimbleberry. Winter forage includes twigs of cedar, yew, aspen, willow, fir, dogwood, serviceberry, juniper, and sage. This deer also eats acorns and apples.

**Discussion:** The mule deer may be seen at mid-day in winter, but is primarily active in morning, evening, and on moonlit nights.



Photo source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## Do Deer Fight?

Displays and threats often prevent actual conflict between bucks, but vigorous fights do occur in which each tries, with antlers enmeshed, to force down the other's head.

# Stephens' Kangaroo Rat

*Dipodomys stephensi*

**Habitat:** Annual grassland and coastal sage scrub with sparse shrub cover.

**Food:** They eat seeds. In the spring they eat insects and herbaceous vegetation. Sagebrush may provide much of the food.

**Discussion:** The area of occupancy and abundance have declined as a result of urban and agricultural development. The rate of decline has decreased recently as a result of a habitat conservation plan implemented by the Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency (RCHCA).

## Endangered



Photo source: Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency

## Fun Fact:

Kangaroo rats travel by hopping on their hind legs. When threatened, they can hop 2 meters (6.6 feet) or more with one hop.

# Reptiles and Amphibians

# Desert Tortoise

*Gopherus agassizii*

**Habitat:** They are almost entirely confined to warm creosote bush vegetation characteristic of the Upper Sonoran life zones of the Mojave, Colorado, and Sonoran deserts.

**Threats:** Declines have been due to habitat loss and degradation, energy and mineral development, off-road vehicle (ORV) use, road traffic collisions, trail construction, disease, vandalism (illegal shooting), and collecting.

# THREATENED



Photo source: Brian Shomo, Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency

## ***Fun Fact:***

Desert tortoises spend about 98% of their life inactive underground.

# Red Diamond Rattlesnake

*Crotalus ruber*

**Habitat:** Red diamond rattlesnakes inhabit the cool coastal zone into the foothills and over the mountains into the desert encompassing altitudes from sea level to 5,000 feet. They prefer dense chaparral brush-covered boulders and cactus.

**Food:** They eat rabbits, ground squirrels, small mammals, and birds.

**Discussion:** They are most often encountered in the spring, coiled in a shelter in partial sun or crossing the road at night.



Photo source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## ***Watch out:***

Pit vipers are never safe to handle. Even dead ones can retain some neurological reflexes, and "road kills" have been known to bite.

# Side-blotched Lizard

*Uta stansburiana*

**Habitat:** They inhabit arid and semi-arid regions with coarse, gravelly soil and low-growing vegetation.

**Food:** These lizards live on or near the ground and are voracious consumers of insects.

**Discussion:** In the northern parts of their range they become inactive in the winter. In the southern regions they are active on any warm day throughout the year.



Photo source: Chad Young, Environmental Programs Department, Riverside County.

## *Fun Fact:*

The name of this lizard comes from the single dark blue to black spot on its side, behind the foreleg.

# Gopher Snake

*Pituophis Melanoleucus*

**Discussion:** The gopher snake or bullsnake (*Pituophis catenifer*) is a large, non-venomous snake.

**Habitat:** It is found in a wide variety of habitats, including deserts, prairies, woodlands, brushlands, coniferous forests, and even cultivated land.

**Range:** One of the most widespread snakes in North America, its range extends from the Atlantic to the Pacific, as far north as southern Canada, and as far south as Veracruz, Mexico.



Photo source: Chris Brown, USGS Western Geological Research Center

## ***Fun Fact:***

When startled or angry, it will hiss very loudly and rattle its tail. This is why it is sometimes mistaken for a rattlesnake.

# Western Spadefoot Toad

## *Scaphiopus hammondi*

**Habitat:** They prefer grassland, scrub, and chaparral locally, but can be found in oak woodlands. They are nocturnal and their activity is limited to the wet season, summer storms, or damp evenings.

**Discussion:** Easily handled, they have less skin secretions than other toad species. Their secretions smell like peanut butter and may cause sneezing.

**Food:** The diet of the Western spadefoot toad includes beetles, ants, spiders, flies, caterpillars, and other insects.



Photo source: USGS Western Geological Research Center

## *Fun Fact:*

A relatively smooth-skinned species with a pale gold eye and vertical pupil, it has a wedge-shaped black spade on each hind foot that is used for digging.

# Desert Horned Lizard

*Phrynosoma platyrhinos*

**Habitat:** The desert horned lizard is native to western North America. It typically ranges in size from 3 – 5 in. (7.6 - 13.6 cm.).

**Food:** The desert horned lizard preys primarily on ants, but is also known to prey on other slow-moving insects such as beetles, spiders, and some plant material.

**Discussion:** This species of lizard has a distinctive flat-body with one row of fringed scales down the sides. It has one row of slightly enlarged scales on each side of the throat.

Color varies, generally blending in with the color of the surrounding soil, but color is usually a beige, tan or reddish dorsum with contrasting, wavy blotches of darker color.



Photo source: Chris Brown, USGS Western Geological Research Center

## Fun Fact:

They are sometimes referred to as "horned toads" or "horny toads", although they are not toads.

# Plants

# Ceanothus

*Ceanothus*



Photo source: Environmental Programs  
Department, Riverside County

**Description:** It is a large evergreen shrub or small tree with a short trunk, many spreading branches, and showy blooms resembling lilacs.

**Habitat:** Mountain slopes and canyons with chaparral

**Range:** The range is generally southwest Oregon to southern California.

**Common Names:** California lilac, bluebrush

**Discussion:** Plants can be grown as screens, in hedges, and against walls. Mule deer may browse the foliage.

## *Fun Fact:*

There are at least 17 different species of ceanothus found throughout southern California.

# Coulter's Matilija Poppy

*Romneya coulteri*

**Description:** The large white flowers are conspicuous from a distance in early summer. Tall, heavy, leaning, leafy, branched stems grow in patches and have 5-8 large, fragrant, white flowers.

**Flower:** It blooms from May-July and bears the largest flowers of any species native to California.

**Habitat:** This flowering plant in the poppy family is native to southern California where it grows in dry canyons in chaparral and coastal sage scrub plant communities, sometimes in areas recently burned.

**Range:** Southern California



Photo source: Environmental Programs Department,  
Riverside County

## *Fun Fact:*

The Coulter's matilija poppy is sometimes referred to as the "fried-egg" flower as it resembles a cracked egg in a frying pan.

# Purple Owl's Clover

*Castilleja exserta*

**Description:** This is an erect, little plant with a rose and yellow or rose and white flower cluster. Flowers and flower bracts are velvety and rose-purple on divided tips.

**Flower:** March-May

**Habitat:** Fields, deserts, and open, wooded areas

**Range:** Southern California to southern Arizona and northern Mexico

**Name:** The Spanish name, Escobita, means “little broom” and describes the flower cluster.



Photo source: Environmental Programs Department, Riverside County



## Fun Fact:

Purple owl's clover is one of the host plants for the **endangered** quino checkerspot butterfly.

# California Poppy

*Eschscholzia californica*

**Description:** It is a wildflower characterized by a brilliant orange, cup-shaped flower borne individually on long stalks.

**Flower:** April-August

**Habitat:** Open fields and grasslands

**Range:** Western United States throughout California, Oregon, southern Washington, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and in Sonora and Baja California in Mexico



Photo source: Gail Barton, Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency

## *Fun Fact:*

It was selected as the California state flower in 1890 as its golden blooms were deemed a fitting symbol for the Golden State.

# Baby Blue Eyes

*Nemophila menziesii*

**Description:** A common wildflower of California, it has delicate, sky blue, cup-shaped flowers and requires a light, sandy soil with moderate amounts of water. It prefers partial shade, but in cooler climates can tolerate full sun.

**Flower:** March-May

**Habitat:** Grassy slopes, canyons, woodlands, chaparral, and desert washes

**Range:** California, Oregon and Baja California



© St. Mary's College of California

Photo source: Brother Alfred Brousseau  
@ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database

## *Fun Fact:*

Blooming baby blue eyes are the result of a good rain year.

# Buckwheat

*Eriogonum fasciculatum*

**Description:** A short, evergreen shrub, the buckwheat plant is very important to butterfly survival as it provides an essential nectar source. The flowers, leaves, and seeds are also used as food by smaller animals.

**Flower:** March-November

**Habitat:** Sage scrub and desert slopes

**Range:** Very widespread, it is found on rocky slopes of the Mojave, Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts.



Photo source: Gary A. Monroe @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database

## *Fun Fact:*

Cahuilla Indians chewed buckwheat to cure headaches.

# Brittlebush

*Encelia farinosa*

**Description:** A common desert shrub of the sunflower family, it has bright yellow flowers and long, silver-gray fragrant leaves. Brittlebush grows up to 5 ft. high, forming a leafy bush.

**Flower:** March-June

**Habitat:** Dry slopes and desert washes

**Range:** Mojave and Sonoran deserts of California, Nevada to southwestern Utah, western Arizona, and northwestern Mexico

**Name:** Its name comes from the brittleness of its stems.



Photo source : Gary A. Monroe @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database

## *Fun Fact:*

Branches contain fragrant resin and were chewed by Native Americans and burned as incense in California's first churches.

# Invertebrates

# Quino Checkerspot Butterfly

*Euphydryas editha quino*

**Daily Activity:** Adults fly from approximately mid-February to mid-May, depending on weather and elevation.

**Habitat:** Adult butterflies are found on sparsely vegetated rounded hilltops, ridgelines, and rocky outcrops.

**Range:** The butterfly was considered abundant and fairly widespread occurring in southern California and northern Baja California. However, its range is now limited to a few populations in Riverside and San Diego counties.

## Endangered



Photo source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## Conservation:

Survival of this species is partially dependant upon maintaining *stepping stone* connections between existing and new populations.

# Fairy Shrimp

*Anostraca*

**Discussion:** (*Anostraca*) are branchiopods that include brine shrimp. They often appear in vernal pools and other short lived pools.

**Habitat:** Although they live in fresh or saltwater they do not live in oceans or seas. They are well-adapted to living in arid areas where water is present for only part of the year.

**Range:** The Western United States – especially California – is home to many species of fairy shrimp, five of which are threatened or endangered.

## Endangered



Photo source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

## *Fun Fact:*

Their eggs will survive drought for several years and hatch about 30 hours after rains fill the pools where they live.

# Desert Hairy Scorpion

*Hadrurus arizonensis*

**Discussion:** The giant desert hairy scorpion is the largest scorpion in North America, reaching a length of 6 inches. Its body is brown, with yellowish pinchers and legs. It is a burrowing scorpion, but is commonly found under rocks containing moisture.

**Range:** Mexico and western United States, the arid regions of southern California, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona

**Food:** Large insects, spiders, and small vertebrates, such as baby lizards



Photo source: National Park Service, U.S. Department of Interior

## *Fun Fact:*

Like all scorpions, the desert hairy scorpion gives birth to live young, which remain on the mother's back for a few weeks before leaving.

# Black Widow Spider

*Latrodectus hesperus*



Photo source: National Park Service, U.S.  
Department of Interior

**Discussion:** The female is shiny black and has a reddish hourglass shape on the underside of her abdomen. Only the female is dangerous to humans.

**Habitat:** This spider likes to live in woodpiles and sheds, closets, garages, cellars and other dry and dark, generally undisturbed places.

**Food:** The black widow preys on a variety of insects including beetles, flies, and grasshoppers.

## *Fun Fact:*

The Black Widow spider does not spin a pretty web; instead, it spins a jumbled looking cobweb. The silk web of this spider is known to be the strongest of all silk webs.

# California Desert Tarantula

*Aphonopelma chalcodes*

**Discussion:** The Tarantula is a member of the phylum arthropoda. This phylum includes insects as well as scorpions, crabs, and lobsters. The tarantula is an invertebrate that relies on an exoskeleton for muscular support.

**Habitat:** The desert tarantula lives in the arid and semi-arid deserts and nearby foothills of the southwest.

**Diet:** The tarantula is a predacious fluid feeder, which means that its oral enzymes liquefy the tissues of its prey, which includes beetles, grasshoppers, small mammals, and reptiles.



Photo source: Environmental Programs Department,  
Riverside County

## ***Fun Fact:***

The tarantula's reputation for being dangerous to people is not deserved. They are not highly venomous and are often kept as pets.

# Habitats

# Grasslands

**Types:** Annual and perennial

**Status:** Only scattered remnants of semi-healthy native grasslands can be found in southern California, most notably on the Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve and Camp Pendleton.

**Species:** Many species, such as the **endangered** Stephens' kangaroo rat (photo below), burrowing owl, western meadowlark, and horned lark utilize grassland habitat.



Photo source: Michael Richard, Environmental Programs Department, Riverside County

## ***Fun Fact:***

Unlike annual grasses, perennial grasses turn green faster, stay green longer, and produce more biomass.

# Riparian

**Definition:** Riparian habitat is composed of the trees and other vegetation and physical features normally found on the banks and flood plains associated with streams, lakes, or other bodies of water.

**Types:** Scrub, woodland, and forest (e.g., oak, southern riparian, alder)

**Species:** Rare migratory birds, such as the **endangered** Least Bell's vireo, rely on riparian habitats to nest and forage.

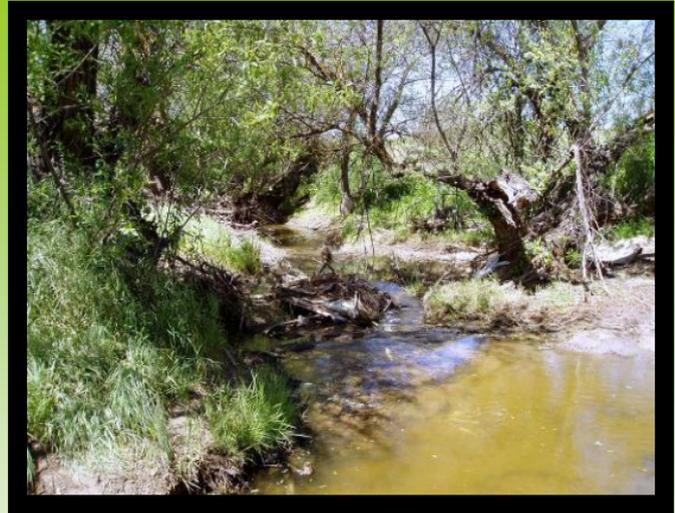


Photo above: Jared Bond, Environmental Programs Department, Riverside County

## *Fun Fact:*

Some riparian plants have funny sounding common names such as mule fat, stinging nettle, and mugwort.

# Sage Scrub

**Discussion:** Found on southwest-facing slopes below 3,000 feet, sage scrub plants frequently drop their leaves and appear withered during dry seasons. Sage and other scrub species can be fragrant. They secrete oily chemicals as part of a process that aids them in competing for soil, space, and water.

**Species:** The **threatened** coastal California gnatcatcher (photo below) depends on sage scrub habitat to nest and forage.



Photo above: Environmental Programs Department, Riverside County

## *What is left?*

Originally sage scrub was the dominant ecosystem of southern coastal California. Less than 10% of the coastal sage scrub community still exists, and is located in rural areas of Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties.

# Vernal Pools

**Definition:** A vernal pool holds water seasonally and is usually a shallow, natural depression in level ground, with no permanent above-ground outlet. Vernal pools are devoid of fish, and thus allow the safe development of natal amphibian and insect species.

**Status:** Highly threatened due to development pressures

**Species:** Many specialized plant species, such as spreading navarretia, little mousetail, and California orcutt grass only occur in close association with vernal pools.



Photo above: Environmental Programs Department,  
Riverside County

## *Go and Do:*

Visit vernal pools in Western Riverside County by checking out the Santa Rosa Plateau Ecological Reserve. [www.santarosaplateau.com](http://www.santarosaplateau.com)

# Resources

The following list of resources were used in part to prepare this field guide. Check out the resources and references below. They will provide you with much more information about the habitats, plants, and wildlife of Riverside County.

**Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency**

**County of Riverside Waste Resources Management**

**United States Fish and Wildlife Service**

**California Department of Fish and Wildlife**

**United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources  
Conservation Services**

**United States Department of Interior, National Park Service**

**United States Geological Services, Western Ecological Research  
Center**

# Resources

## Website Links

[www.wrcog.us](http://www.wrcog.us)

[www.countyofriverside.us](http://www.countyofriverside.us)

[www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)

[www.usfws.gov](http://www.usfws.gov)

[www.dfg.ca.gov](http://www.dfg.ca.gov)

<http://plants.usda.gov>

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