

## **Coyote Valley vital as wildlife corridor**

Jane Kay, Chronicle Environment Writer

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To Christine Choi, the farm fields and oak woodland in rural San Jose, just 10 minutes from her home, looked like "boring agricultural land."

"All the birds used to look the same to me," said Choi, a De Anza College student who has been studying wildlife in the 2-square-kilometer swath of land known as Coyote Valley.

But in the past two years, she and other De Anza students have identified 171 bird and 24 mammal species living - or moving through - Coyote Valley, including tule elk, gray fox, burrowing owl and golden eagle.

The students say they're convinced Coyote Valley is a wildlife corridor: the connective habitat in the midst of cities and suburban sprawl that lets animals travel on migratory routes to watering holes and seasonal food supplies.

These habitat links are increasingly garnering attention as areas that need to be recognized and protected. In June, the Western Governors' Association signed an agreement with federal agencies to try to protect wildlife corridors. And, California passed its own law last year, AB2785, requiring the state Fish and Game Department to identify and map critical corridors.

Coyote Valley includes marshes, grass savannah and some houses and is one of the last locations south of San Francisco Bay where wildlife can move between the Santa Cruz Mountains and the northern Diablo Range. Highway 101 separates both regions, but at Coyote Valley, students have found, the animals cross underneath the highway.

A corridor isn't just a trail, said Dave Johnston, an environmental scientist with Fish and Game.

The corridor has to be big enough for large animals to move past obstacles in one night to three days. And animals like mice, tiger salamanders, California red-legged frogs, ground squirrels and most insects have to be able to forage, survive and reproduce for generations in the corridor, he said.

Johnston called the students' work useful because before a corridor can be designated, "the first step is documenting that a corridor is being used." That is what the students are doing, he said.

Coyote Valley has the potential for designation, he said, "because it's the only thing that's left."

The De Anza students hope to establish a Coyote Valley Raptor Reserve, a 415-acre sanctuary that would encompass the popular spots near Coyote Creek where ferruginous hawks dive for squirrels and bald eagles soar overhead searching for a meal.

The students have identified 21 species of raptors and 40 active raptor nests of eight different species. Twelve species have special status, including the Swainson's hawk, peregrine falcon, short-eared owl and northern harrier.

But whether their dream will come true remains unclear.

Last year, Gavilan College, with its main campus in Gilroy, announced plans to build a 10,000-student campus in the core of the Coyote Valley corridor. The De Anza students weighed in on the proposal, saying the consultants who prepared an environmental review of the campus hadn't sufficiently investigated the rare biological value of the corridor.

In the end, the college's board of trustees approved the environmental review, and completed the purchase of 37 acres from the Sobrato family, developers and philanthropists who donated an adjacent 18 acres. No funds are currently available for construction.

"Nobody disputed that there was wildlife moving through the area," said Jan Bernstein Chargin, a Gavilan spokeswoman.

There's wildlife movement on the Gilroy campus, too, she said, citing a sign that says, "Warning: Mountain Lion Habitat." "We believe that these can be compatible - the campus and the wildlife."

De Anza's Julie Phillips, who founded the environmental studies department, said she hopes Gavilan will "rethink its long-term plan of bringing traffic, ball fields with lights, a police academy and paved parking lots into the wildlife corridor."

Assemblyman Ira Ruskin, D-Redwood City, author of the law to map corridors, has been watching the progress.

"Wildlife don't have just one habitat. Movement is an essential requirement for wildlife survival. If wildlife can't move, it's at risk of not being able to find food, or escape from fire, flood or disease," he said.

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