

# Hanson Property Habitat Restoration & Enhancement Plan

## Santa Paula, CA

Not far from the Los Angeles metropolis and coastal communities of Oxnard and Ventura, the Santa Clara River flows southwest from mountains to coast. Its headwaters gather on the northern slopes of the San Gabriel Mountains; its forks converge near Acton and receive additional flow from several creeks before continuing the journey to the ocean. Throughout its 116-mile course, the Santa Clara River shapes the land and creates critical habitat for increasingly rare wildlife and plants. Sometimes dry, sometimes raging, the river is a remarkably dynamic system. As one of southern California's least altered rivers, its wildness in turn sustains several threatened and endangered species. They, like the people who have lived in this region for thousands of years, depend on the river as their lifeblood.

Now owned by The Nature Conservancy, the project site is comprised of 1,000 acres of ecological significance within the Santa Clara River watershed. Known as the Hanson Property, the site is located on a former aggregate mining operation where more than the river has shaped the land. Heavy equipment has compacted the soil, mining activity has created shallow quarries, and habitat disturbance has enabled invasive species to take root and spread. The process of restoring habitat involves ridding the site of these invasive species namely the Brown-headed cowbird and Giant Reed. The non-native cowbird parasitizes the nests of songbirds, including the endangered Vireo and Flycatcher. Giant reed, or *Arundo*, chokes the river, altering the shrub habitat songbirds need, as well as interfering with flood control. Flammable, water-guzzling, and fast-growing, giant reed is one of California's greatest problem weeds.

The Hanson Property is a mosaic of habitats, from the chaparral-clad hillside to the willow scrub riverbanks, and is home to an array of wildlife from large mammals to diminutive amphibians, fish, and insects. Twenty-six species are listed as threatened or endangered; they include the Least Bell's Vireo, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, California Red-legged Frog, southern steelhead, and arroyo toad. Other species are listed as California species of special concern include Yellow Warbler, Blue Grosbeak, Green Heron, Great Blue Heron, and Cooper's hawk.

Land specifically purchased for habitat conservation, the client's purpose for this project is to restore the habitat, create a welcoming entry access point, and build new opportunities for K-12 education and interpretation. Unlike the heavily dammed and concrete-channelized San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers, the Santa Clara River still has large swaths of riparian and floodplain habitats in its lower corridor. It sustains extensive riparian scrub and woodlands, drains into a coastal salt marsh and estuary, and during storm events, pans out over a broad floodplain. This tract of land is important on its own terms but also on a larger scale. It lies within the California Floristic Province, one of world's internationally recognized "biodiversity hotspots." This designation is given to regions known for their high biological diversity, high rate of endemism, and proximity to human development.

This project will bring new amenities to the Hanson Property which will attract a range of visitors. Some of these people will come on their own to pursue passive recreational activities such as hiking and watching wildlife. Others will come as part of formal field trips, as members of K-12 and college classes. New entrance gates, trail enhancements, viewing overlooks, kiosks, picnic and resting areas, interpretive panels, and trail maps and signs will enhance their experience and communicate that they are welcome on the trails as long as they tread lightly.

Seasonal rains swell the River's flow, carving out the banks and flooding the trails. For this reason kiosks, shading, storage sheds, and gabion seating all have been designed to either be relocated during the river's flood periods or remain and withstand the effects of the seasonal water flow.

The interpretive signage will provide an overview of the Hanson Property; its chaparral, grasslands, riparian scrub, and woodlands all sustained by the Santa Clara River. Three (3) distinct panels will offer a snapshot of what Los Angeles and Ventura counties once looked like and how this important parcel is home to numerous plant and animal species, some threatened with extinction. Planting improvements will include an exclusively California native plant palette along with protection of existing native habitat.

### **Role of landscape architect**

As the prime consultant, the landscape architect provided design direction, project management, and facilitated team coordination. Grant funding exhibits and public presentation exhibits were developed to help The Nature Conservancy raise funds to develop this project. In conjunction with designing site features for the Hanson Property which can be moved during flood events, the landscape architect's goal was to create a 'brand' of site elements that could be used on other Nature Conservancy' properties. By using local materials indigenous to each particular site, protected lands can offer visitors a one-of-a-kind experience today and for future generations.