

# Endangered El Segundo Blue Butterfly is making a comeback across LA County

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Staff writer

It's a cool, crisp July morning in Rancho Palos Verdes.

A soft breeze of salty air rustles the emerald leaves of a sea-cliff buckwheat plant on a steep, rocky bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

As passersby jog and walk their dogs on the dirt path of Palos Verdes Loop Trail in the Vicente Bluffs Reserve, most don't notice her.

A small, flitting thing with spotted, pale-colored wings, a female El Segundo Blue Butterfly no bigger than an inch across has just laid eggs in the white, clustered flowers of the shrub.

She depends on the plant for survival, as will her children.

Each new generation of the El Segundo Blue is a sign of hope as the species has been federally endangered for decades due to the decimation of sea-cliff buckwheat plants in the name of urban sprawl.

The inconspicuous lit-



The El Segundo Blue Butterfly, once on the endangered species list, is making a comeback in coastal areas of Los Angeles. (Photo courtesy Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy)

tle butterfly is making a discernible comeback in its indigenous coastal area thanks to the efforts of groups such as the Palos Verdes Land Conservancy to restore native habitats.

"Our primary role in this conservation project is to create more habitat because we see a direct relationship between increasing the number of host plants and the increase in the population of the blue butterfly," said Megan Wolff, the volunteer coordinator at the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy.

## From thousands to dozens and back again

The number of the El Segundo Blues stretching along the coastal dunes of Los Angeles—from Palos Verdes up to about Ocean Beach near Santa Monica and inwards to what is now the Los Angeles International Airport area—was once in the thousands, according to Wolff.

That population saw a dramatic decrease to just hundreds and then mere

**NATURE WALK**

**Saturday, July 20, 9 a.m.**

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dozens by the 1970s once widespread development began along the coastline.

This led to the El Segundo Blue being placed on the federally endangered species list in 1976.

"Once you lose one thing, it's kind of like a cascade effect, so every species is very important," said Wolff, who has been working with various habitat restoration projects for eight years.

The PVPLC—which manages 1,600 acres of land and 40 miles of trail in Rancho Palos Verdes, San Pedro and Rolling Hills Estates—has four reserves with a total of 15 sites where the group is planting sea-cliff buckwheat

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and monitoring the El Segundo Blue population.

The conservancy has been doing so since 2011 and conducts triennial surveys of each site for a total of five minutes to get an idea of whether the butterfly population is increasing.

So far, their efforts appear to be working.

The butterfly population doubled from 2013 to 2016, when 30 butterflies were observed as opposed to just 15.

Although a 2019 survey has yet to be conducted, this shows a promising trend for the butterfly's resurgence, according to the conservancy.

"We're just doing what we can to help increase the numbers in the population," said Wolff. "It would be really cool to see a full recovery for the sake of the species."

And the PVPLC isn't the only group helping the ail-



Vicente Bluffs nature walk in Rancho Palos Verdes Saturday July 13, 2019. The preserve is home to the El Segundo blue butterfly. PV Land Conservancy naturalist Anke Raue leads nature walk. (Photo by Robert Casillas, Contributing Photographer)

ing butterfly.

Travis Longcore, science director for Urban Wildlands Group—a Los Angeles-based conservation effort that focuses on ecological processes in urban and urbanizing areas—said the El Segundo Blue population has seen an increase at several sites in Los Angeles thanks to similar projects.

These locations, he specified, include the dunes at the Los Angeles International Airport, a butterfly preserve at the Chevron Refinery in El Segundo, Malaga Cove and the Ballon Wetlands.

There are also increasing numbers of the butterflies at Rat Beach in Torrance,

Dockweiler Beach in Playa Del Rey and on the bluffs in Redondo Beach.

"Most of us who work on things like this just feel it's our responsibility to take care of other species that share the planet with us," Longcore stated. "We're a success story compared to when the El Segundo Blue was listed as endangered."

Longcore explained the continuous planting and maintenance of sea-cliff buckwheat is what has been crucial to upping the butterfly's numbers.

"This unique subspecies has adapted to this particular plant in this particular coastal environment so they represent something



that's special in that sense," he added. "Their entire life cycle is tied to the sea cliff buckwheat."

## Buckwheat and boom...butterflies

The butterfly begins life as an egg on the flower on the plant, before hatching into a caterpillar that then crawls to the base of the buckwheat, according to Longcore.

The caterpillar then cocoons underground, hibernating through fall, winter and spring months in the soil surrounding the buckwheat.

Then, in the summer months—usually June

through September—when the ivory flowers of the sea-cliff buckwheat plants begin to bloom, the El Segundo Blues emerge from the ground as butterflies.

Adult butterflies exist in their final form from a few days up to two weeks, feeding on the nectar of the sea-cliff buckwheat and mating, before females lay their eggs in the flowers and the cycle begins again.

"It's pretty simple, as long as you keep the food plants going and some new plants coming, then the butterflies should be fine," Longcore explained.

That's why the PVPLC is hoping to add even more sea-cliff buckwheat plants

## BUTTERFLIES IN ACTION

"How many people can say they volunteered to help an endangered species at this point in the story?" Wolff questioned.

To volunteer or for more information, visit [https://pvplc.org/\\_volunteer/](https://pvplc.org/_volunteer/).

Or to simply see the butterflies in action, **check out one of the PVPLC's free monthly nature walks at 31501** Palos Verdes Drive West, Rancho Palos Verdes.

to its reserves through the help of volunteers, according to Wolff, who runs the conservancy's Adopt-A-Plot program.

That program allows people to commit a year's time to work as a group on a particular site on their own schedule.

She said people can also get involved in Outdoor Volunteer Days which take place every Saturday at 9 a.m.