

THE COAST

Blue butterfly is making a comeback

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It's a cool, crisp July morning on the Palos Verdes Peninsula. A wisp of salty air rustles the emerald leaves of a sea-cliff buckwheat plant on a steep, rocky bluff overlooking the Pacific.

As passers-by jog and or 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 neighbor 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. The species has been federally endangered for decades, stung by the decimation of sea-cliff buckwheat plants amid urban sprawl.

The inconspicuous little butterfly is making a discernible comeback in its indigenous coastal area, thanks to the efforts of groups such as the Palos Verdes Peninsula 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 in-

crease in the population of the blue butterfly," said Megan Wolff, volunteer coordinator at the PV-PLC.

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 Ocean Beach near Santa Monica and inward to near the Los Angeles International Airport — was once in the thousands, according to Wolff.

That population saw a dramatic decrease to just hundreds and — then mere dozens — by the 1970s. The trigger: Widespread development began along the coastline.

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The El Segundo Blue Butterfly, once on the endangered species list, is making a comeback in coastal areas of Los Angeles.

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 PALOS VERDES
 PENINSULA LAND
 CONSERVANCY



PHOTO BY KIRSTEN FARMER

The cliffs of Rancho Palos Verdes are home to the Vicente Bluffs Reserve where local conservationist groups are restoring natural habitats to help struggling local species.

Butterfly

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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 comprising a total of 15 sites where the group is planting sea-cliff buckwheat and monitoring the El Segundo Blue’s population.

The conservancy has worked to revive the Blue since 2011 and conducts triennial surveys of each site to assess the health of the winged population.

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, it’s nonetheless 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 ailing 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 a butterfly preserve at the Chevron Refinery in El Segundo — portrayed in an upbeat TV commercial — as well the dunes at the Los Angeles International Airport, Malaga Cove and the Balloon 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 of 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 plant.

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 anywhere from a few days up to two weeks, feeding on the nectar of the sea-cliff buck-

wheat and mating, before females lay their eggs in the flowers, kickstarting the cycle anew.

“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 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.

“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, can log on here, at the Palos Verdes Land Conservancy website.

Or to simply see the butterflies in action, check out one of the PVPLC’s free monthly nature walks — such as the one Saturday from 9 a.m. to noon at 31501 Palos Verdes Drive West, Rancho Palos Verdes.