

# ENVIRONMENTAL INSIGHT

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## HIDDEN RESIDENTS OF UPPER CHIQUITA CANYON

The hilly landscape of Upper Chiquita Canyon Conservation Area near Rancho Santa Margarita offers some great vistas, but Steve Bledsoe and his associates are more interested in scouring the grasslands to find the kind of creatures most people avoid.

Each spring since 2014, Bledsoe and his fellow volunteer herpetologists at the [Southwestern Field Herping Associates](#) have ventured into the protected land—one of 16 open spaces set aside by the Transportation Corridor Agencies (TCA) as part of the construction of The Toll Roads—to conduct a census of local reptiles and amphibians. Their surveys provide important data used by agencies like TCA and U.S. Geological Survey to monitor environmental health and wildlife population.



Reptiles and amphibians are among Orange County's quietest residents, staying hidden or burrowing underground through tunnels made by rodents. Their shy nature makes it hard to know how many live in an area, but Bledsoe bets it's more than most people assume. "I think if people knew how many snakes live in the ground around them, they'd never go outside," he said with a laugh.

Orange County is home to 19 species of snakes, 10 lizard species and one species of turtle, among others. Bledsoe suspects that a good-sized cross-section of these species lives in the 1,158-acre Upper Chiquita Canyon Conservation Area, and the San Clemente resident hopes to discover many of them during this spring's surveys.

"The drought had a devastating impact on reptile and amphibian activity throughout Southern California," Bledsoe said. "We hope this El Nino condition will bring us enough rain this winter and spring to bring activity levels closer to normal. So far, things are looking pretty good."

The volunteer surveyors head into Upper Chiquita Canyon for about two to four hours at a time, walking the grasslands area with cameras, snake hooks and tongs, GPS units and voice recorders. In past years, they've placed plywood cover boards on the ground, primarily over rodent burrows, to bring snakes and reptiles above ground, but still safe from predators like hawks. Lifting the cover boards gives them a glimpse of the native population in repose. They document the wildlife living there and then put the boards back in place. Among their discoveries last spring: California kingsnakes, slender salamanders, Southern Pacific rattlesnakes and plenty of Western skinks.

A lifelong reptile and snake enthusiast, Bledsoe and his colleagues volunteer their time. "I'm driven by curiosity," he said. "I want to help protect these creatures and help to preserve them and the land for future generations."

Before TCA purchased the Upper Chiquita Canyon Conservation Area (1,158 acres near Rancho Santa Margarita), the former grazing pasture was zoned for residential and golf course development. Now permanently protected as open space, the restored habitat supports important populations of California gnatcatchers and coastal cactus wrens, as well as providing valuable connectivity and wildlife movement. Several families of deer are spotted running throughout this site on any day.

*"TCA is a champion at preserving natural wilderness open spaces. Without organizations that care, much more of our natural land would be in jeopardy of being destroyed and local reptiles and amphibians wouldn't be thriving the way they are."*

*Steve Bledsoe  
Southwestern Field Herping Associates*

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of Orange County

  
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