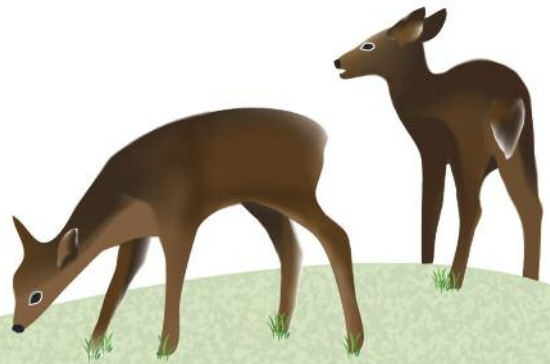


Wildlife Management



Los Altos Hills' natural setting of creeks, rolling hills, oak woodlands, and chaparral creates one of California's signature landscapes, and provides an inviting and rich habitat for all kinds of wildlife.

Because of our immediate adjacency to large, mountainous open spaces, our own internal Town-owned open space preserves, and our complex creek systems, Los Altos Hills serves as a natural habitat for wildlife, for which the free movement among all these open spaces is vital.

The Town's founders wisely recognized that to maintain our unique and highly desirable rural environment, we needed to preserve the natural resources and maintain a healthy ecosystem for wildlife, and thus they specifically installed sparse, low-density development standards.

Wildlife Management in Los Altos Hills

The active ecology of Los Altos Hills provides an increasingly rare and valuable opportunity for people to engage and appreciate nature on a daily basis, and this includes encounters with its wildlife. To an overwhelming degree, LAH residents value this. In a survey on fencing conducted among LAH residents in 2011, 89% of participants reported that “our rural environment and the protection of wildlife” in the Town is important to them.

However, new residents sometimes perceive wildlife differently: as pests, disease carriers, or threats to their safety; they would prefer that wildlife be eliminated or discouraged from living in the Town. This view contradicts both the Town’s principles as well as the position of our state and federal government, which holds that wildlife is a resource held in public trust for the benefit of all citizens.^{1,3}

Thus, the Town has an obligation to promote public awareness of the importance of wildlife conservation, and to educate its residents on how our development standards address both public safety and the conservation of wildlife habitat.

Wildlife Habitat and Corridors

Wildlife require food, shelter, water, and space to survive, reproduce and maintain healthy populations. Landscape areas that provide the resources and environmental conditions that sustain a species (e.g., vegetation type, water, cover) are called “habitat.”

However, “*habitat*” is not just about specific locations that animals like: it encompasses the connected *network* of all these locations. While many smaller animals may never move more than a few hundred yards from their birthplace, many larger species must move far and repeatedly to survive.² Coyotes, fox, and deer must move over substantial distances to access food, water, shelter, and mates. This movement enables local and regional migration, colonization, and interbreeding of plants and animals. Thus, to preserve wildlife requires not just maintaining areas with natural resources, but also maintaining *access to, and connectivity between*, these areas. These routes between areas for wildlife to move through are called *wildlife corridors*.

It is important to understand that a wildlife corridor is not just a trail. Though the word “corridor” brings to mind a constrained narrow pathway, this concept incorporates all migratory routes that animals move through, no matter how broad and open the terrain. Wildlife corridors often follow stream corridors, which are usually well-defined, but corridors may just as well include large meadows, grasslands, and fields, with no discernible single track.

The challenge in managing residential development here is to be aware of the impacts we have on wildlife habitat, including the corridors. In this effort, both people and animals share the same goal: to minimize conflict between animals and humans. As much as possible wildlife should flow *around*, rather than through, developed human areas (i.e. backyards, driveways). Most importantly, wildlife should be kept away from roads, as this is dangerous to humans and animals alike.



Habitat Fragmentation

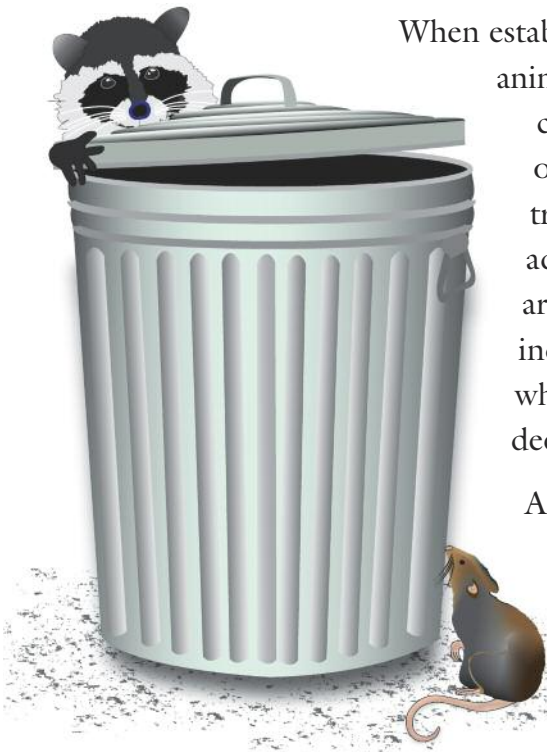
Over time, the ability to maintain this “habitat network” for local wildlife is being gradually and continually eroded. This has potentially serious effects on both our natural environment and our public safety.

New subdivisions, residences, and barrier fences can result in the breaking up of large blocks of habitat into smaller, disconnected, isolated pieces. This *habitat fragmentation* is one of the greatest threats to wildlife. Fragmentation reduces the area and the quality of habitat available to sustain healthy native wildlife populations; it prevents animals from moving between the remaining patches of habitat to access food, shelter, mates, and other resources.

Fragmentation and loss of habitat are the main reason for the increased rates of animal extinction seen in recent decades. Blocked corridors can lead to loss of predator species and cause a cascading change in species composition in an area. Loss of predators can lead to over-abundant smaller mammals (e.g., raccoons, rabbits, squirrels, rats and mice), which impacts songbirds through nest predation, which in turn impacts seed dispersal and control of insect populations.

Fragmentation reduces the amount of and access to habitats needed to meet species' requirements, thereby lowering the number of individuals of a given species that can be supported, reducing population sizes and increasing the likelihood of local extinctions.

—*Wildlife Crossings: Providing safe passage for urban wildlife. Oregon Metro, 2009*
www.oregonmetro.gov



When established wildlife corridors are blocked, deer and other animals are forced to alter their customary routes and may be channeled towards non-fenced residences, into backyards, and onto roadways. Deer can panic and kill themselves if they become trapped in a fenced area. As new fences and other structures are added, wildlife that has been accustomed to moving through an area is forced to find ways around or through the new barriers, increasing the likelihood of negative interactions with humans, whether it's an animal digging a new den under your deck, or a deer jumping in front of your car as it tries to cross a roadway.

An accumulation of seemingly innocuous structures can significantly alter wildlife movement through the Town. Unless movement corridors are planned for and protected in advance of future development, this fragmentation will continue. Unfortunately, the obstructions are often permanent and can be reversed only through expensive restoration projects.

Like other towns in the area, Los Altos Hills tries proactively to plan for wildlife habitat areas and corridors, and to provide habitat connectivity in order to prevent catastrophic fragmentation.



Our Legal Responsibility for Wildlife Habitat

State and federal law requires the Town to conserve and manage our local wildlife in the same way we conserve and manage other natural resources such as water and air.^{3,4} We are obligated by law to take steps to prevent undue negative impacts of development on wildlife habitat and movement corridors.

Local: As required by the State, two Elements of the Los Altos Hills General Plan—Conservation and Open Space and Recreation—direct the Town to consider and

minimize the impact of development on wildlife habitat and movement corridors to the extent possible.⁴ All other towns in the area have similar requirements for wildlife conservation and corridors.

Regional: The Santa Clara County General Plan encourages “maintenance of migratory corridors and linkages between natural areas

to compensate for fragmentation.” In 2010, the Bay Area Open Space Council initiated the *Bay Area Critical Linkages Project* with the goal of developing strategies to protect and restore systems of connected wild lands that support native wildlife and ecosystems.⁵

There is a need for planning to provide for effective protection and conservation of the town’s wildlife heritage, while continuing to allow appropriate development and land use.

Planning for natural movement of wildlife can help to avoid, minimize and compensate for serious negative impacts on wildlife and humans. Areas that link wildlife habitat have become vital because native animals such as deer, fox, bobcat, and coyote are prevented by roads, fences, homes, and other development from moving freely as they once did.

—LAH General Plan: Conservation Element (p 6)

Maintain and enhance the integrity of wildlife habitat

- Continue to require open space easements along creeks and riparian corridors.
- Inventory wildlife habitat areas and the suite of animals in those areas.
- Assess the potential for development patterns to fragment and isolate significant wildlife habitats.

—LAH General Plan: Conservation Element; Goal 3 (p 7)

State: The State requires that towns, as part of their General Plan process, evaluate and quantify the natural resources of the Town, including wildlife. In addition, towns must assess the potential impact of proposed development on wildlife habitat and corridors.

In 2010, CalTrans and the Department of Fish and Game commissioned the California Essential Habitat Connectivity Project to assess habitat connectivity across the state with the goal of maintaining and restoring functional connections in the face of human development and climate change.⁶

Federal: Federal law has established that wildlife is a public resource held in trust by government for the benefit of all citizens; government agencies are mandated to manage wildlife accordingly. Congress requires each state to develop a *Wildlife Action Plan* outlining a comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy.⁶ The California Wildlife Action Plan⁶ can be viewed at:

www.wildlifeactionplans.org/about/index.html

LAH Wildlife Inventory and Corridor Project

In 2005, the Los Altos Hills City Council initiated the Wildlife Corridor project to inventory wildlife habitat areas in the Town and the suite of animals in those areas. The study meets the goals in the Conservation Element of the Los Altos Hills General Plan, in addition to meeting State requirements to inventory wildlife species and habitat and to assess the potential for development to fragment this habitat.

The City Council authorized Live Oak Associates (LOA), a respected ecological consulting firm, to create a reference wildlife study for the Town showing locations of major habitat areas and movement routes and recommend measures to help maintain and enhance wildlife corridor linkages in the Town.

LOA based the habitat assessment on geographic and topographic analysis (e.g., aerial photos, vegetation maps) and investigative site visits by professional wildlife biologists. The study was aided by results of a Town-wide survey in which residents voluntarily reported the type and frequency of wildlife sightings and commonly used travel routes. The study focused on identifying existing major movement routes connecting the high-value core habitat in Town-owned open space preserves. Because vegetated drainages and riparian systems often are natural corridors, these areas were given the most attention.

Los Altos Hills Wildlife Habitat Study

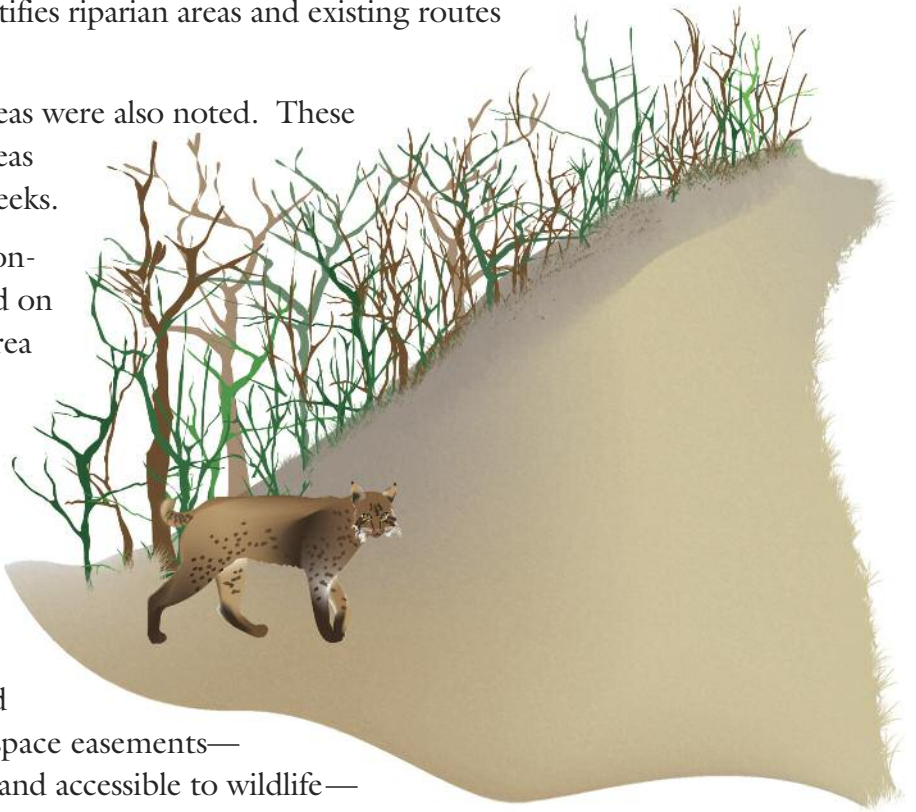
Most wildlife areas identified are located west of Interstate 280, where the terrain is generally steeper and less developed. The study primarily identifies riparian areas and existing routes connecting major open space areas.

Habitat and corridors outside riparian areas were also noted. These provide important links to open space areas between the riparian areas of different creeks.

Wildlife areas largely overlap with environmentally sensitive areas already identified on the Town's Open Space Conservation Area (OSCA) map.

Town planners have used the OSCA land-use map for decades to identify sensitive areas that warrant special protection. OSCA areas generally include steep slopes, canyons and ravines associated with major creeks or their tributaries, as well as creek corridors and other areas of heavy vegetation. Open space easements—which must be left in their natural state and accessible to wildlife—are generally required on parcels located in Open Space Conservation Areas.

Live Oak Associates reported that Town creek corridors are used for local and regional movements by a large number of species, including special-status species, such as California red-legged frog (*Rana draytonii*; federally Threatened); San Francisco dusky-footed woodrat (*Neotoma fuscipes annectens*; California Species of Special Concern); ringtail (*Bassariscus astutus*; California Fully Protected species); and cougar (*Puma concolor*; specially protected mammal via the California Wildlife Protection Act in 1990).



Protecting Wildlife in Los Altos Hills

Several Town ordinances include protections for wildlife. Many wildlife habitat and corridor areas are in riparian areas. Los Altos Hills development ordinances already protect these areas and generally require a minimum 25-foot riparian setback from the top of the creek bank. No structures are allowed in this setback, the riparian vegetation must be left undisturbed, and no fencing is allowed. These requirements help to protect these areas for wildlife. The Los Altos Hills fence ordinance limits certain types of fences in open space and conservation easements.

In addition to Town ordinances, private landowners are also encouraged to protect existing corridors and create backyard habitats that increase biodiversity.

Open space/conservation easement perimeter fences shall provide openings sufficient to accommodate the free passage of wildlife through the open space easement. A split-rail wood fence or equivalent design shall be required. Where a pathway is located within an open space/conservation easement, the perimeter fence shall be required to have at least two openings at least as wide as the width of the pathway easement.

—*LAH Zoning Ordinance Section 10-1.507f(9)*

Goals of Wildlife Management

Construction of fences affects local wildlife and obstructs wildlife movement. Even on small areas on some individual parcels—fences can have a disproportionately large impact. By requiring small accommodations for open space easements, riparian setbacks, and corridor connectivity, the Town can make a major difference in helping create a safer environment for both humans and wildlife.

Appendix: Definitions

Open Space Conservation Area (OSCA)

This is an overlay designation that is superimposed upon the residential land use areas on the Town's Land Use Diagram in the General Plan. Land within the OSCA is considered environmentally sensitive and warrant special protection. OSCA areas generally include steep slopes, canyons and ravines associated with major creeks, or their tributaries, as well as creek corridors and other areas of heavy vegetation that should be protected. Within these areas, special measures should be taken to conserve the natural quality of the area and to avoid environmental degradation.

1. *California's Public Trust Doctrine, Environmental Law Foundation.*
http://www.envirolaw.org/documents/EAQFINALwithPCFFAedits_000.pdf
2. *Dickson T. Freedom of Movement. National Wildlife Federation, 2010.*
<http://www.nwf.org/News-and-Magazines/National-Wildlife/Animals/Archives/2010/Wildlife-Corridors.aspx>
3. *Wilson P. The Public Trust in wildlife conservation. Mountain State Sierran, 2005.*
http://westvirginia.sierraclub.org/newsletter/archives/2005/07/a_001.html
4. *State of California General Plan Guidelines 2003. Governor's Office of Planning and Research, Sacramento CA.*
http://opr.ca.gov/docs/General_Plan_Guidelines_2003.pdf
5. *Bay Area Critical Linkages: Habitat Connectivity Planning for the Bay Area and Beyond. Science and Collaboration for Connected Wildlands.* <http://www.scwildlands.org/projects/bayarea.aspx>
6. *California Wildlife Action Plan. www.wildlifeactionplans.org/california.html*