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## NEWPORT BEACH'S HIDDEN GEM

Deer and possum tracks marked a path to a peaceful creek studded with boulders and surrounded by yellow-green shrubs. Members of the Orange County Association of Realtors stood overlooking the pastoral scene, all the more remarkable because it exists in the shade of a tall overpass for Bison Avenue in Newport Beach.



Bonita Creek offers a hidden gem of habitat that co-exists successfully with the urban development surrounding it, thanks to careful planning and decades of care by the Transportation Corridor Agencies (TCA). Further along, restoration ecologist Margot Griswold pauses the group to scan the dense, low shrubs where the least Bell's vireo may be nesting. She had recognized the small gray and white bird's distinctive song moments before.

Jan, a resident of Mission Viejo who joined the June morning tour to learn more about TCA's environmental initiatives, said she had no idea about the thriving habitat not far from The Toll Roads. "We drive the 73 all the time without realizing this was here," she said.

Formerly a narrow concrete channel, Bonita Creek was restored to a thriving wetland and coastal sage scrub community that serves as a major wildlife corridor from the San Joaquin Hills to Upper Newport Bay in Newport Beach. Re-establishment of the site's natural habitat began in 1992 and was so successful that seven pairs of coastal California gnatcatchers gave birth to 32 chicks in the area by the end of the monitoring period in 2001.

While most of the restored lands set aside and protected by TCA when The Toll Roads were constructed are closed to the public, the Bonita Creek mitigation site offers the community a three-mile hike through nature not far from University Drive.

Michael Grant, a planning commissioner for the city of Huntington Beach, has lived in the area for decades. "People either don't know or forget that wild space like this exists all over Orange County," Grant said.

[To visit Bonita Creek, enter the walking path at the south end of Bonita Creek Park at La Salud.](#)

## NATURE'S BEST FRIEND

A camouflage baseball cap shaded restoration ecologist Dr. Margot Griswold's eyes from the bright sun, but her gaze conveyed a kind of maternal love as she surveyed the contained wildness of the Bonita Creek wetlands on a June morning. She led a small group of interested community members to a spot close enough to State Route 73 to read the name of a plumber on a white van driving by, yet it smelled not of exhaust but of the spiky artemisia and mulefat flourishing along the pathway.



While most of her tour group saw the site for the first time that day, Griswold has a decades-long history working on the land. She can remember when the peaceful oasis was a weedy little creek bed encased in concrete rip-rap 20 years ago.

She pointed to a mature sycamore tree, growing at the top of a slope over the narrow creek. "We planted that tree from a one-gallon container," she reminisced. The tour group gazed up at its impressive height, now soaring more than 30 feet into the air. The mental image of the tall tree as a sapling helped to give attendees a sense of the area's vast transformation that has taken place since the mid-1990s.

Griswold's career has been shaped by the enormously complex task she took on decades ago: preserving or revegetating some 2,000 acres of natural habitat on land near The Toll Roads. Her work for TCA on its environmental initiatives has left a lasting imprint on the area's landscape while proving the efficacy of her methods, based in science and augmented by her intuition about how plants grow.

Having grown up on a farm raising fruits, nuts and grapes in the San Joaquin Valley, Griswold subscribes to a philosophy of restoring and revegetating land in the most natural and least intrusive way. She prides herself on using a light touch and following nature's lead whenever possible. For example, she prefers to plant seeds rather than container plants, and to avoid irrigation other than rainfall.

Griswold sold her company, EarthWorks Restoration Inc., about eight years ago and has flirted with the idea of retirement. But it's hard to imagine her doing anything other than the work she has loved and devoted her life to since her graduate school days at University California, Irvine.

Her pleasure at seeing wildlife using the native habitats she so painstakingly restored was visible on the tour. She scanned the shrubs, water and sky for wildlife and brightened when she spotted a bobcat sleeping in the sun and green-backed herons soaring in the air.

Robust native vegetation is key to such animals' survival, and thanks to the work of those like Griswold, they have found a home at Bonita Creek.



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