

Hopper Mountain, Bitter Creek and Blue Ridge National Wildlife Refuges

Planning Update #1 - February 2010

Comprehensive Conservation Planning Begins in Spring 2010

Greetings from the Project Leader

Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex is embarking on an important multi-year process to develop a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for three of the four refuges in the Complex: Hopper Mountain, Bitter Creek, and Blue Ridge National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs). These three refuges were established to restore the endangered California condor population to its native range. The fourth refuge in the Complex, Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes NWR, will have a separate CCP prepared in the future.

The CCP will help guide the overall management of the three refuges for the next 15 years. Your ideas and comments will be an important part of the process, so I encourage you to participate.

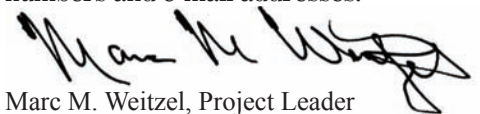
As we begin this process, I'd like to provide background about the refuges' history and current management. In this update, you'll also find information about the National Wildlife Refuge System and

how comprehensive conservation planning fits into refuge management.

You should receive our second "Planning Update" in the spring of 2010, describing the beginning of the planning process and information about attending our public scoping meetings.

We will frequently refer to background materials provided in this planning update (Planning Update #1) throughout the CCP process. Please try to read it before our first meeting; this will help to facilitate discussions at the public meetings. We welcome your comments, suggestions, and questions.

I hope you'll feel free to contact me or our Refuge Planner, Sandy Osborn, if you have any questions. See page 6 to learn about the CCP and page 8 for our phone numbers and e-mail addresses.


Marc M. Weitzel, Project Leader

What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

The FWS manages the more than 150-million acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses more than 550 refuges, 37 wetland management districts, and other special management areas.

It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices, and 78 ecological services field stations.

The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their wildlife and habitat conservation efforts.

The FWS also oversees the Federal Assistance program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.



All condors have numbered wing tags and transmitters to help biologists identify and locate each bird. Photo: Gary Kramer/USFWS

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What is the National Wildlife Refuge System?



In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt protected an island with nesting pelicans, herons, ibis, and roseate spoonbills in Florida's Indian River Lagoon from feather collectors who were decimating their colonies. He established Pelican Island as the nation's first bird sanctuary and went on to establish many other sanctuaries for wildlife during his tenure. This small network of sanctuaries continued to expand, later becoming the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System).

Today, over 100 years later, Hopper Mountain, Bitter Creek, and Blue Ridge Refuges are three of over 550 national wildlife refuges encompassing more than 150 million acres nationwide. The Refuge System is the largest system of public lands in the world primarily dedicated to the conservation of wildlife. It is spread across 50 states, American Samoa, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Johnston Atoll, Midway Atoll, and several other Pacific

Islands. About 20.6 million acres in the Refuge System are managed as wilderness under the Wilderness Act of 1964.

In 1997, Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (Act), legislation that provides clear guidance for the management of the Refuge System. The Act includes a new statutory mission statement and directs the FWS to manage the Refuge System as a national system of lands and waters devoted to conserving wildlife and maintaining the biological integrity of ecosystems.

This law requires the FWS to develop a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for each refuge. It also states that certain wildlife-dependent recreational uses are priority public uses on refuges and strengthens the compatibility determination process for assuring that these and other activities do not conflict with refuge management purposes and goals.

What's in a name?

Many people confuse state and federal fish and wildlife agencies because their names are similar. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is a federal agency within the U.S. Department of the Interior. The California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) is a state agency.

Our names are similar and so are our missions: both agencies are dedicated to wildlife conservation for the benefit of present and future generations. Our jurisdictions are different. The FWS is the lead agency responsible for federally-listed species and migratory birds, whether they are located on federal, state, or private lands. The DFG has primary responsibility for resident fish and wildlife on state and private lands and oversees state-listed species. Hopper Mountain NWR Complex is managed by the FWS, which coordinates with DFG on a variety of natural resource management issues.

What is the mission of the Refuge System?

National wildlife refuges are places where "wildlife comes first."

"The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans."

Lands within the Refuge System are managed first and foremost for the benefit of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats. Our mission differs from other federal agencies, such as the U.S. Forest Service, which focuses on forest stewardship and sustainable forest uses; the Bureau of Land Management, which deals with the productivity and multiple use of the land; and the National Park Service, which conserves scenery, wildlife, and historic objects for people's recreational enjoyment.

"Wild beasts and birds are by right not the property merely of people who are alive today, but the property of unknown generations whose belongings we have no right to squander."

President Theodore Roosevelt



Pronghorn antelope. Photo: USFWS

Hopper Mountain NWR - Background

Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is located in Ventura County, in southern California. It is bordered by the Los Padres National Forest and the Sespe Condor Sanctuary to the north. The 2,471-acre Refuge was established in 1974 to protect the endangered California condor, its habitat, and other wildlife resources. All lands within the approved refuge land acquisition boundary for Hopper Mountain NWR are owned in fee title by the FWS.

The Refuge is in rugged, mountainous terrain. Primary habitats include annual grasslands, interspersed with oak and California black walnut (considered to be a unique habitat in California), chaparral on the steeper slopes, natural water springs and riparian habitat, and a freshwater marsh. The California black walnut is recorded in the State Natural Heritage Database.

The Refuge provides habitat for more than 130 species of birds, mammals, and reptiles, including the southwestern pond turtle—a California species of special concern—black bear, bobcat, mule deer, golden eagle, and California tree frog. More than 200 plant species have also been documented on the Refuge.

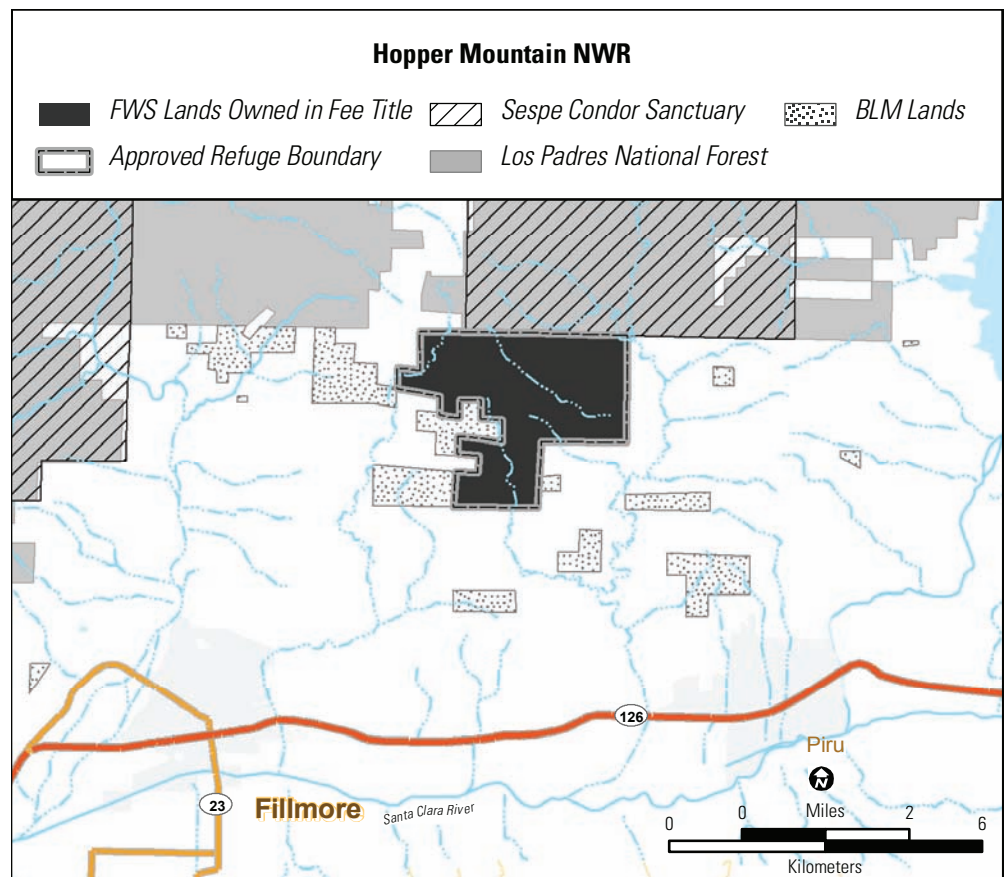
Hopper Mountain NWR plays an integral part in the California Condor Recovery Program, providing nesting, foraging and roosting habitat for the bird. The Refuge shares information about the Condor Recovery Program through an outreach program that extends to local, national and international publics.



The color of the mature condor's head and neck intensifies when the bird is excited, agitated, or engaging in courtship or mating activities. Photo: David Clendenen/USFWS



The California condor uses rocky pinnacles for roosting, while numerous caves provide potential nesting habitat. Photo: Laudine Borges/USFWS



Bitter Creek NWR - Background

Bitter Creek NWR was established in 1985 to provide safe roosting and foraging habitat for California condors. The approved boundary of the Refuge encompasses 16,144 acres, of which 14,096 acres is owned in fee title by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). The Refuge is located in parts of Kern, Ventura, and San Luis Obispo Counties, approximately 80 miles north of Los Angeles, just west of the community of Maricopa, California. The approved refuge land acquisition boundary identifies the area where the FWS can acquire interests in properties from willing sellers. Because the FWS's land acquisition program is based on willing sellers, not all lands approved for potential acquisition within the approved boundary may become a part of the Refuge.

Bitter Creek NWR is primarily open grassland, providing valuable foraging habitat for California condors. The Refuge was used historically by the wild condor population.

Smaller areas of habitat consist of juniper brush land, oak savannah, and pinyon pine/juniper/oak communities. Several springs are found within the Refuge's boundaries and creeks flow intermittently, depending upon rainfall. Bitter Creek Canyon provides a riparian corridor.

The Refuge protects the habitat of a variety of plants and animals, including the golden eagle, prairie falcon, pronghorn antelope, tule elk, and the endangered San Joaquin kit fox and blunt-nosed leopard lizard.

No hunting is allowed on the Refuge. The public can view the Refuge along Highway 166 and Cerro Noroeste Road, with the possibility of seeing a California condor. California condors are known to feed on and fly over the Refuge. A good pair of binoculars and/or a spotting scope are a must. The condors are currently using the Refuge on a regular basis.

Birders may also have the opportunity to spot golden eagles, prairie falcons, rough-

legged hawks and Swainson's hawks (winter), tri-colored blackbirds, loggerhead shrikes and many other species.

Preparation of the Bitter Creek NWR Grassland Habitat Management and Restoration Plan Environmental Assessment (EA) and Compatibility Determination are ongoing. To assist the EA process, an Independent Range Review (IRR) is currently underway. More information about the IRR may be found at <http://www.fws.gov/hoppermountain/>.



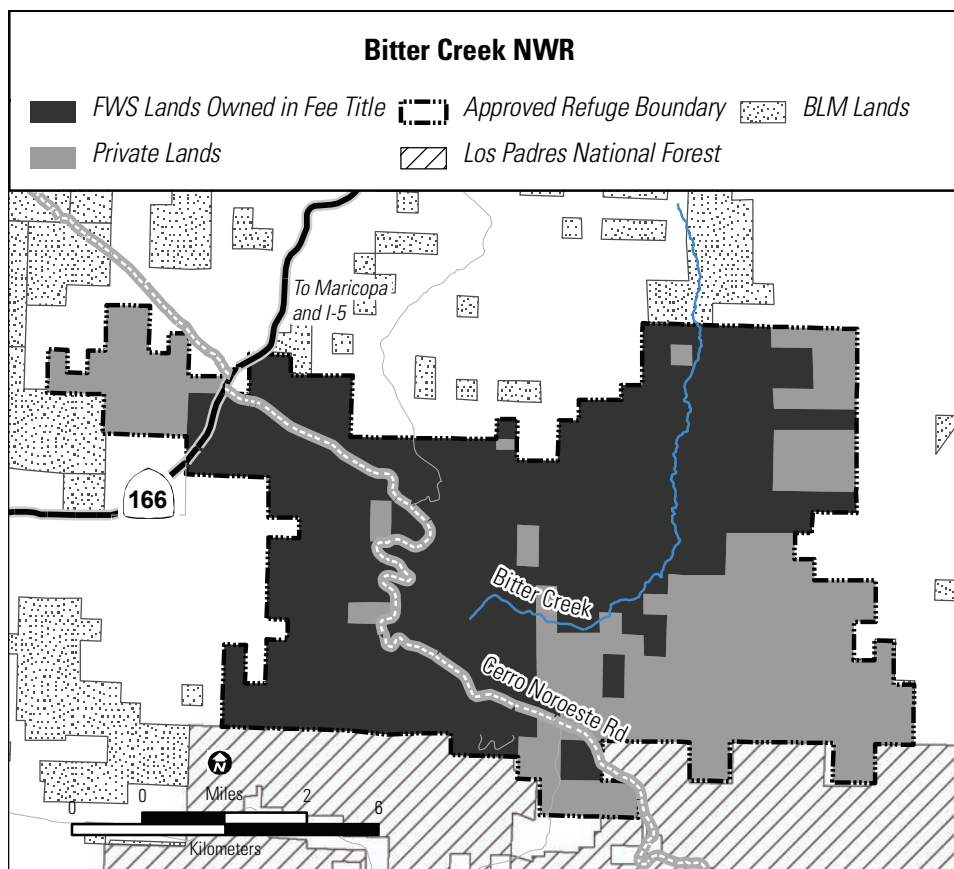
California condor
Photo: D.Clendenen/USFWS



San Joaquin kit fox. Photo: USFWS



Blunt-nosed leopard lizard. Photo: USFWS



Note: Because the FWS's land acquisition program is based on willing sellers, not all lands approved for potential acquisition within the approved refuge boundary may become a part of the Refuge.

Blue Ridge NWR - Background

Blue Ridge NWR was established in 1982. Blue Ridge NWR encompasses 897 acres, all within Tulare County, California. All lands within the approved refuge land acquisition boundary for Blue Ridge NWR are owned in fee title by the FWS. The Refuge is approximately 11 miles north of Springville and 17.5 miles northeast of Porterville.

The Refuge was established to protect critical habitat for the endangered California condor. The property was declared critical habitat on the basis of its importance as a traditional roosting area for condors. It also serves to complement the condor's historical foraging area known generally as the "foothill foraging zone," which begins around Glenville and the Greenhorn Mountains and spreads north into central Tulare County.

Blue Ridge NWR supports three vegetation types: coniferous forest, chaparral, and woodland-savannah. The Foothill Woodland plant community consists of dense or open woodland with scattered brush and grassland between the trees. Chaparral is the most common plant community on Blue Ridge NWR, with riparian corridors distributed throughout the topography.

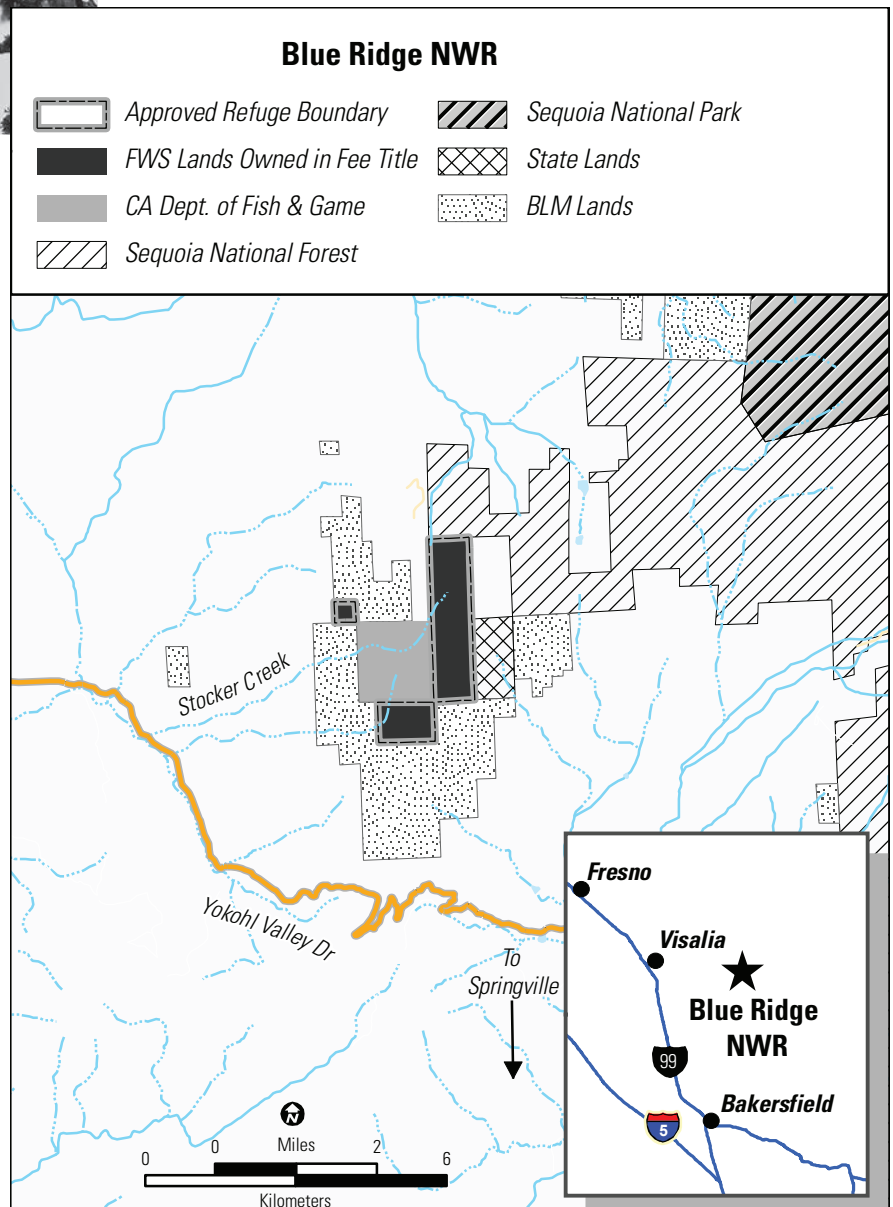
The Blue Ridge area supports a variety of wildlife. Birds include mountain quail, blue grouse, band-tailed pigeon, great horned owl, white-headed woodpecker, Steller's jay, mountain chickadee, white breasted nuthatches, and Townsend's solitaire. Mammals include mule deer, mountain lion, bobcat, coyote, red and gray foxes, striped skunk, porcupine, mountain cottontail, Douglas squirrel (chickeree), western gray squirrel, and yellow pine chipmunk.



Golden eagle.
Photo: USFWS



Blue Ridge National Wildlife Refuge. Photo: USFWS



Hopper Mountain NWR Complex Management

California Condor Recovery Program

The Hopper Mountain NWR Complex is the lead office for the multi-partner California Condor Recovery Program. The Recovery Program is currently focused on the goal of establishing two separate, self sustaining populations of 150 birds, each with 15 breeding pairs.

Hopper Mountain NWR and Bitter Creek NWR are the base of field operations for the Recovery Program. The Complex protects foraging, nesting, and roosting habitat for California condor.

What is a CCP?

When Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, it incorporated an underlying philosophy that “wildlife comes first” on refuges.

The Act provides the FWS with guidance for managing refuges to ensure the long-term conservation of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats. Two important principles of the Act are to maintain biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the refuge and facilitate compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.

Every refuge is required to have a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) completed by 2012. The CCP will outline refuge goals, objectives, and management strategies. It is a flexible, “living” document that will be updated every 15 years.

The CCP:

- Ensures that management of the refuge reflects the purposes of the refuge and the mission, policies, and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System;
- Provides the public with an understanding of the reasons for management actions on the refuge;
- Provides a vision statement for the refuge;

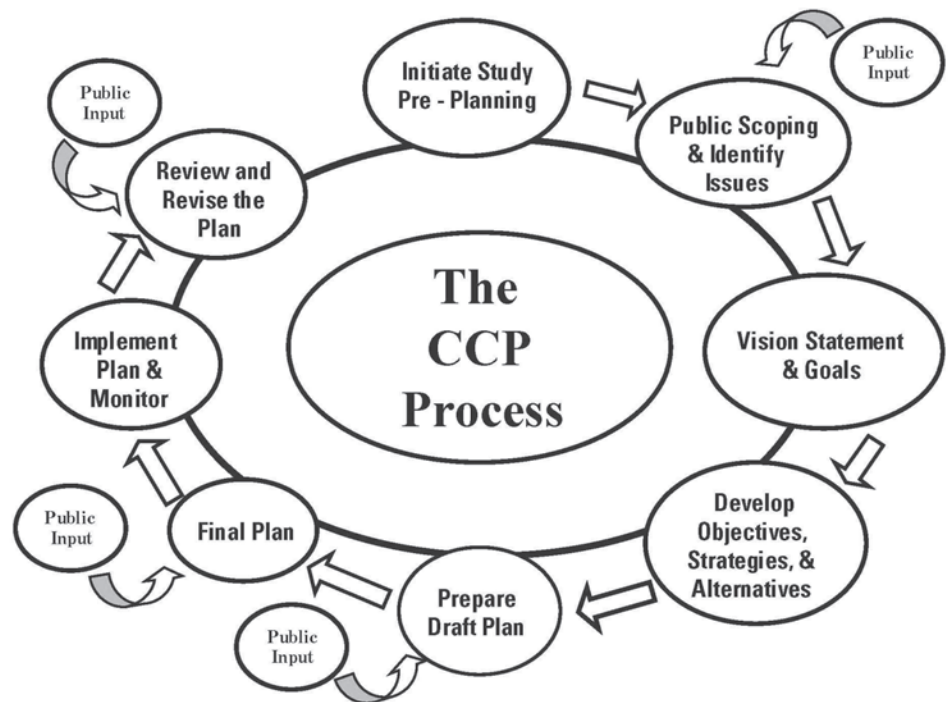
Refuge Purposes

Each national wildlife refuge is established for purposes defined by language within a number of acts of Congress that grant the FWS general authority to acquire land for national wildlife refuges. Hopper Mountain, Bitter Creek and Blue Ridge NWRs were established:

- “... to conserve (A) fish or wildlife which are listed as endangered species or threatened species or (B) plants ...” 16 U.S.C. § 1534 (Endangered Species Act of 1973)

In addition to the above purpose, Hopper Mountain NWR was also established:

- “... for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources ...” 16 U.S.C. § 742f(a)(4) “... for the benefit of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in performing its activities and services. ...” 16 U.S.C. § 742f(b)(1) (Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956)



- Ensures the compatibility of current and future uses of the refuge with its purposes;
- Provides long-term continuity in refuge management; and
- Provides budget justification for operation and maintenance and facility development requests.

The CCP will provide broad management direction and guidance for the refuge, contingent upon future funding and resources. The accompanying environmen-

tal document, required by the National Environmental Policy Act, will describe the alternatives considered and their environmental effects. You will have an opportunity to review and comment on the draft CCP and environmental document.

In the spring of 2010, we are scheduled to hold our first public scoping meetings to help identify issues and gather information. The key planning steps are listed above and will be listed in future updates so you can track our progress through the planning process.

The California condor

California condors are the largest flying birds in North America, with wing spans up to 9.5 feet. These giant birds have been soaring over California skies

“When animals are extinct it throws off the balance of the world.”

*Julie Tumamait-Stenslie,
Chumash Storyteller*

for tens of thousands of years. The Chumash, a native American tribe that traditionally lived along the southern California coast and valleys, revered the condor as a powerful presence. *Huyawit* (condor in the Chumash language) removes the foulness of the world. Condor feathers play an important role in Chumash ceremonies and stones taken from the nest of the condor can bestow special powers. Evidence of the significance of the condor can be found in prehistoric cave art depicting the large bird.

Compatibility of refuge uses

Prior to allowing various public uses on a refuge, federal law requires that the FWS first determine that these specific uses are compatible. A compatible use is a proposed or existing use of a national wildlife refuge that, based on sound professional judgement of the refuge manager, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the Refuge System mission or the purposes of the refuge. Compatibility determinations are used to help evaluate such uses and will be integrated as part of the CCP planning process. The FWS may only authorize economic use of the

refuge's natural resources where we determine that the use contributes to the achievement of refuge purposes or the Refuge System mission.

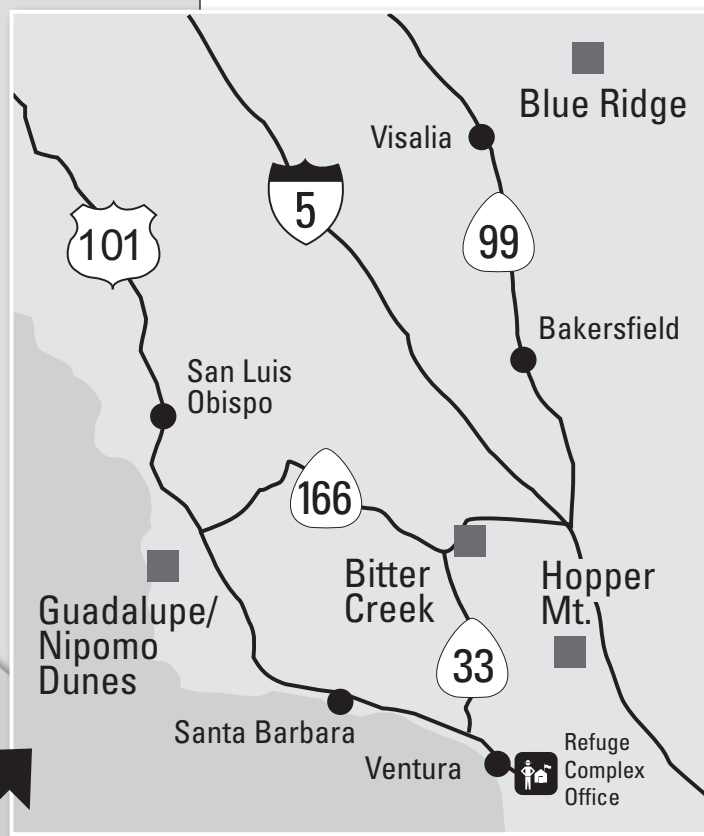
The Hopper Mountain NWR Complex

Hopper Mountain National Wildlife Refuge Complex, in southern California, was created primarily to restore the endangered California condor population to its native range. Three of the four refuges - Hopper Mountain, Bitter Creek, and Blue Ridge NWRs - exist expressly for this purpose. The Refuges are closed to the public to protect critical habitat for California condors and to limit disturbance to condors in the area.

The Refuge Complex is one of many partners in the California Condor Recovery Program. Cooperators are involved in releasing California condors to other parts of their historic range and in captive breeding.

The Refuge Complex also provides ongoing assistance to various related California condor projects in Latin America.

The fourth refuge in the Complex, Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes NWR, which is not included in this CCP process, protects some of the last remaining natural dunes habitat in California. It is currently the only refuge in the Complex open to public use. A separate CCP process will be conducted for Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes NWR.



The Refuge Complex lies in the heart of the condors' historical native range in southern California.

Help us plan the future

During early 2010, Tribes, interested individuals, agencies, organizations, and other stakeholders will be invited to share their visions for the refuges and express their concerns. This will be your opportunity to help us identify issues and concerns and receive answers to any questions you may have. Your comments and/or participation will be critical to the success of this planning effort.

We will send you our second planning update in spring 2010, announcing the beginning of the CCP effort and providing more information on how you can get involved.

CCP Schedule

Fall 2009	Begin preplanning
Winter 2009/2010	Mail out background information
Spring 2010	Hold public scoping meetings and begin the CCP process

Meeting Dates/Locations

As information about the public meetings becomes available, it will be posted on our website. For more information about the refuges, visit our website at:

<http://fws.gov/hoppermountain>

Please feel free to contact us!

We are available to provide additional information about the refuge history, goals, and accomplishments to date, and to answer any questions about the planning process. Feel free to call, write, or e-mail us at the location listed below.

If you did not receive this newsletter through the mail and would like to be on our mailing list, please contact us. You can also get information at our website: www.fws.gov/cno/refuges/planning/

If you would like to be removed from the list or are receiving multiple copies of these notices, please let us know.

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Tule elk. Photo: USFWS

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