



Annual Report July 2023 – June 2024

Friends of the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park

Email: info@friendsofthewildernesspark.org

Website: www.friendsofthewildernesspark.org



The Friends of the Wilderness Park is a grassroots organization that works with the City of Claremont to help preserve the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park as an environmental resource, manage the park for passive recreation, and minimize the impact of park attendance on surrounding residential neighborhoods.

Leadership Team

Charlie Gale, Chair

Wendy Reeder, Vice-Chair

Nancy Hamlett, Treasurer

Carol Blaney, Biota Project Manager

Ran Libeskind-Hadas, Secretary

Vicki Salazar, Volunteer Coordinator

Meg Mathies

Susan Starr



Introduction

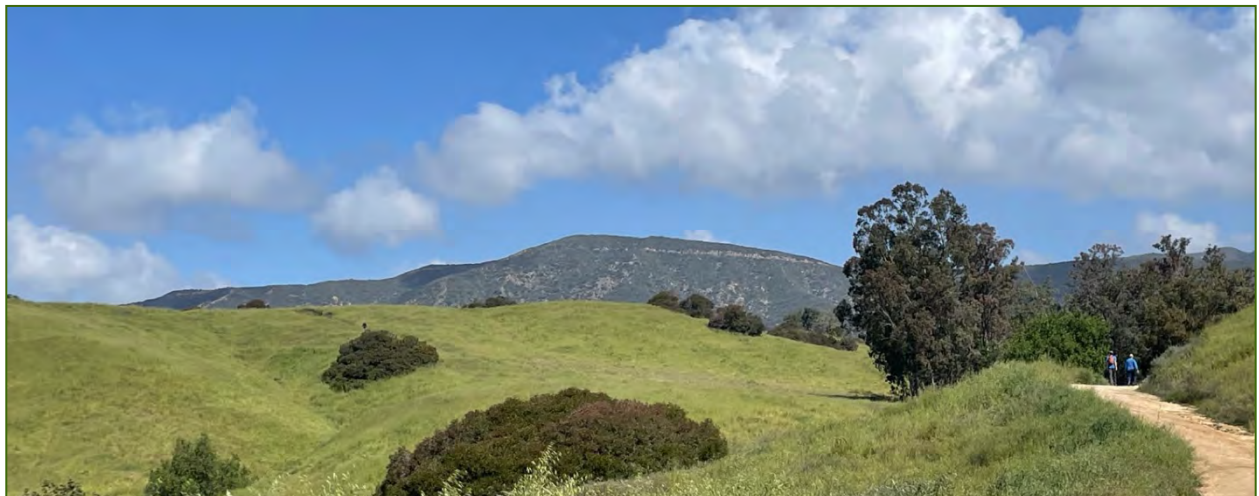
Mission and History

The formation of the Friends of the Wilderness Park is based upon the *Master Plan for the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park* (Section IP 2.1 of the *Implementation Plan*): an entity “assisting with recruiting volunteers for various projects, engaging with visitors on the trail to promote positive compliance with rules and trail courtesies, discussing issues of concern, sharing observations, and reporting to and coordinating with staff.” It is a group of volunteers, supporting the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park.

The Friends was constituted in its present form in Spring 2018. With few exceptions, the Leadership Team has met monthly via Zoom. Since joining the City in August 2023, Ashley Dembiczak, Recreation and Human Services Supervisor, has served as the City’s liaison to the Friends and attended the Leadership Team meetings. Prior to that, Eric Ey, City of Claremont Human Services Manager, served as the City’s liaison. The Friends have several working groups concerned with specific aspects of the Park, which are detailed later in this report under “Specific Projects”.

Purpose of this report

The *Implementation Plan for the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park* (CHWP) states that “In order to ensure the Community & Human Services Commission is informed of CHWP issues, the ‘Friends’ will provide an Annual Report and Recommendations on user experience and park culture to the Parks, Hillside, & Utility Committee as well as the Community & Human Services Commission.” This report has been submitted in response to that charge.



THE YEAR AT A GLANCE

Work on multiple projects continued despite unusual weather.

- The Park was closed for a total of **22.5** days during the 2023-2024 fiscal year:
 - 6** Red Flag Warning
 - 2** Hurricane
 - 3** Road Maintenance
 - 11.5** Rain
- We held **9** “Second Saturday” programs in FY 2023-2024.

The Friends participated in **Claremont’s Earth Day Celebration** in April 2024.

We continued monitoring **Monarch butterflies and milkweed** in the Park.

Our **iNaturalist** project documenting flora and fauna in the Park recruited new members, expanded the BioBlitz from 1 day to 4 days, added **1,416** observations, and documented **156** new species.

We continued some invasive plant removal in the Park.

The Friends contributed **287** volunteer hours to the Park.

We contributed articles to the entrance kiosk’s *Wilderness Park Gazette*.

We updated our website, continued our blog, and added **67** people to our email list.



The Friends’ Booth at the Sustainable Claremont Earth Day Celebration.

Specific projects

(1) Second Saturday volunteer program

Leader Vicki Salazar

The Second Saturday volunteer program is a collaboration of the Friends of the Wilderness Park, CHWP Rangers, and City Staff.

Our Second Saturday volunteers promote positive park culture and demonstrate respect for the outdoors by picking up litter on the trails, and by providing information about the park to visitors.

Our Friends' volunteers also:

- Answer questions about the kiosk map and trails.
- Exhibit and discuss the Friends' biodiversity poster.
- Promote the iNaturalist project dedicated to the CHWP.
- Encourage visitors to join the Friends email list and sign up to volunteer.
- Remind visitors to take adequate water for themselves and their dogs.
- For 2023-2024, the Second Saturday program involved:

19 Volunteers

112 volunteer hours



Second Saturday Volunteers. Photos ©Vicki Salazar.

(2) Invasive species management

Leader Nancy Hamlett

“Invasive plant species degrade native habitat and displace native plants and wildlife, increase wildfire potential; increase slope erosion potential; and degrade recreational opportunities. Therefore, invasive plant species control and management are important components to preserving the integrity of CHWP’s native habitat.” —Master Plan for the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park

Mapping

Since most invasive plant locations in the Park (excluding Evey Canyon) have been mapped, no systematic mapping efforts were undertaken. Some new occurrences were mapped adventitiously as they were spotted.

Education

For California Invasive Species Action Week (June 1–9, 2024), we exhibited educational materials and examples of invasive plants at our June 8 Second Saturday event.

Removal

Two winters of heavy rain led to serious overgrowth of Italian Thistles (*Carduus pycnocephalus*) and Milk Thistles (*Silybum marianum*) in the area of Johnson’s Pasture used for Monarch monitoring in Spring 2024, hindering the Monarch monitoring project, and two removal events were held before



Thistle removal in the Monarch monitoring area. Photos ©Nancy Hamlett.

removal was suspended because of the abundance of rattlesnakes in the work area.

A planned spring event to remove Castor Bean (*Ricinus communis*) and Tree Tobacco (*Nicotiana glauca*) was canceled because of rain.

- 8 Volunteers
- 25 Volunteer hours

(3) Documentation of All Park Species

Project Managers Carol Blaney, Nancy Hamlett and Vicki Salazar

To help lay the groundwork for effective Park conservation management, especially of special-status and invasive species, the Friends are cataloguing all the Park's known species of animals, plants, and other organisms. Our main tool is iNaturalist, a non-profit platform that stores observations from millions of naturalists, 368 of whom have made observations in the Park. Users upload a photo or sound recording (with location) of any wild plant, animal, or other organism. iNaturalist's image-recognition software and iNaturalist community members – sometimes world-renowned researchers – help identify the organism.



To compile the iNaturalist observations of park species, the Friends initiated the “Biota of the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park” (<https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/biota-of-the-claremont-hills-wilderness-park>) community science project in 2019. In addition to documenting Park flora and fauna, this project fosters community awareness of and appreciation for the Park and its biodiversity.

The current iNaturalist project counts are:

889 Total species observed (156 new since last year)

333 Plants (26 new)

20 Mammals (6 new)

69 Birds (6 new)

9 Reptiles (1 new)

4 Amphibians

5 Mollusks (2 new)

337 Insects (80 new)

34 Spiders, mites, ticks (4 new)

8 Protozoans (1 new)

64 Fungi & lichens (30 new)



Our second cool, rainy spring in two years led to another bumper crop of interesting fungi, abundant wildflowers, and lush vegetation in the Park. This, in turn, provided cover and food for rodents, which provided food for snakes. In the early months of 2024, many gopher snakes, rattlesnakes, and two other snake species new to the park list were reported in CHWP.



Photo ©Rudy Rodriguez

This Coast Mountain Kingsnake (*Lampropeltis multifasciata*), the second kingsnake species to be reported from CHWP, was caught on video crossing a trail.



Photo ©Scott Marnoy

This Western Harvest Mouse (*Reithrodontomys megalotis*), which observer Scott Marnoy said seemed “very tame”, jumped up on its hind feet and scurried through vegetation in the Johnson’s Pasture area.



Photo ©Carol Blaney

A California native, this Canyon Clarkia (*Clarkia epilobioides*) hadn’t been reported in the Park previously. A delicate member of the evening primrose family (Onagraceae), Canyon Clarkia likely is host to several moth species.



Photo ©mushroom_matt

Observed in Sycamore Canyon, the Western Jack o’ Lantern (*Omphalotus olivascens*) is bioluminescent—the first such organism reported in CHWP.

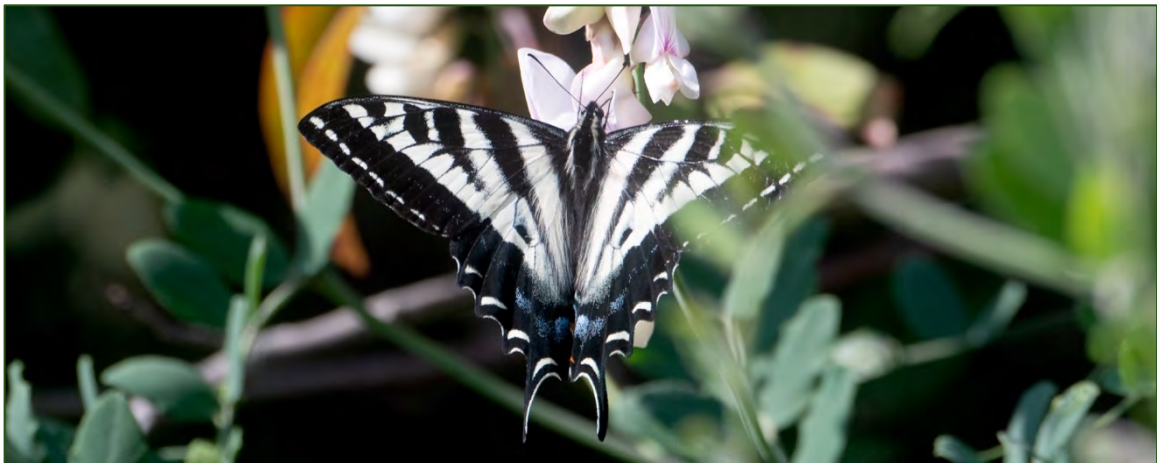
Biota Project Accomplishments in 2023-2024

- In 2024 the Biota Team worked hard to compile an *All-Species List for Claremont Hills Wilderness Park*, which includes all the Park species reported on iNaturalist, plus those reported in Calflora, the Consortium of California Herbaria, and eBird, as well as by local experts. These additional sources added 155 species to our iNaturalist project list for a total of 1044 species. In the future, we hope to confirm the continuing presence in the Park of several plant species reported there more than a century ago.

The list also contains extensive data on each reported species, including the source where the observation was reported; the first and most-recent dates of observation; and whether the species is special-status, introduced or invasive. The list will be updated as new reports come in from reliable sources. The list can be viewed here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1hyGp3mAdnrADiBe37Nauyq3UPv-LzJceoe1GY0Ydep0/edit?usp=sharing>

- Based on several years of iNaturalist data, the Friends have now documented 34 special-status (rare, threatened or endangered) species potentially occurring in CHWP. An estimated 145 introduced species, at least 46 of which are considered to be invasive, also have been observed in the Park.
- iNaturalist observations in the Park increased dramatically (again) this year, from 4,372 to 5,735.
- For a second year, the Friends continued our expansion of the Park BioBlitz from one day to four: April 26-29. Linked to the worldwide City Nature Challenge, the 2024 BioBlitz added 15 species to the park list. For more information on the BioBlitz, read our iNaturalist project blog: <https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/biota-of-the-claremont-hills-wilderness-park/journal/94104>
- To encourage people to participate in the BioBlitz and educate them about the Park, Friends hosted booths at Claremont's Earth Day celebration and at the Mills Avenue entrance during the second day of the BioBlitz. In total, 19 naturalists participated in the BioBlitz, and nearly half were new to making observations in the Park.



A Pale Swallowtail (Papilio eurymedon) on Pacific Pea (Lathyrus vestitus). ©Nancy Hamlett.

(4) Monarch and milkweed monitoring

Leader Nancy Hamlett

In 2023-2024, the Friends of the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park continued monitoring milkweed plants and monarch butterflies in the Johnson's Pasture area of the CHWP, using the protocols specified by the Integrated Monarch Monitoring Program (IMMP).

The monitoring program includes weekly Monarch larvae and egg surveys, biweekly adult Monarch surveys, and monthly milkweed and blooming plant surveys as well as a site description for each visit. During the 2023 monitoring season, which ended in October 2023:

- **10** Volunteers participated
- **150** Volunteer hours
- **168** Monarchs observed (113 adults, 34 larvae, 9 eggs, and 1 pupa)
- **2** species of Milkweed present (Narrowleaf Milkweed and Woollypod Milkweed)
- This project provides baseline data on Monarch reproduction, which will be useful for assessing any future restoration.



Clockwise from top left: Volunteers in the mist in a rainy September; a Monarch caterpillar on Woollypod Milkweed; a (greatly magnified) Monarch egg; an adult Monarch with Narrowleaf Milkweed (©Carol Blaney); a Monarch pupa. Photos ©Nancy Hamlett unless otherwise noted.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CITY:

- We recommend that the City consider how the Park is financed given the increasing number of Park closures. Wildfires, fire danger, and excessive heat – the reasons for most closures – will only increase as climate change increases, leading to further losses in Park funding.
- We recommend that the City explore ways to address resource and safety concerns expressed in the visitor survey and observed by Friends, including bike safety; creation of social trails; off-leash dogs; after-hours park entry; and unsanctioned gathering of wildflowers and other park resources.
- We recommend that the City develop a plan to open the Evey Canyon entrance.
- We recommend that the City explore ways to manage invasive species, some of which pose a potential wildfire threat. Many invasives also pose ecological concerns, including reducing habitat for native species that play a vital role in the Park environment.



The Park Rangers with their new distinctive, more functional trucks.

Many thanks to:

City of Claremont

for providing:

- Our liaisons, formerly Eric Ey and currently Ashley Dembiczak

Friends of the Wilderness Park Leadership Team

for their donations of:

- Domain name, web hosting, and G-Suite renewal
- Zoom license
- Monarch monitoring materials
- Second Saturday materials
- Money to purchase T-shirts

