

Rescuing wild seedlings on “Blue Oak Island”



An aerial photograph from 1937 shows a large grove of mature trees that were later fragmented by the freeway.

by Tim Vendlinski, life scientist

About 200 wild blue oak seedlings growing within the Capital City Freeway interchange at Watt Avenue in Sacramento will be protected through a unique conservation project carried out in partnership with the Sacramento Tree Foundation (STF) and California Wildlife Foundation's (CWF) California Oaks program. The project focuses on seedlings germinated from acorns, many of which were collected and planted by California scrub-jays from a trio of majestic blue oaks within the interchange.

These venerable oaks have been growing along Arcade Creek for centuries, and they were spared by Caltrans in 1956 when construction of the freeway fragmented a large grove surrounding the creek. The trees continue to provide valuable habitat for oak-dependent species, including the jays and acorn woodpeckers, despite extensive plantings of non-native, invasive trees.

The project will remove invasive plants from around each seedling, perform corrective pruning on young trees damaged by routine maintenance practices, and install tree shelters to protect the seedlings for the next three to seven years—the period needed for their establishment.

The freeway interchange divides the east and west sides of Del Paso Regional Park, a 650-acre tract of city land surrounded by northern Sacramento County. The City of Sacramento purchased the park in 1910 when the fabled Rancho del Paso was subdivided by the Sacramento Valley Colonization Company. By then, the Valley Nisenan of the Maidu Tribe, who had stewarded the region for centuries, had been displaced.

Sacramento's City Council made a Natural Area designation in 1985 to mitigate for

the clearing of oak savanna to build the Sacramento Softball Complex (see: fs.usda.gov/treesearch/pubs/28028). A second such designation, made in 2002, brought the total amount of protected land in the park to 100 acres, helping to secure one of the last strongholds for oaks in the region. An additional 50 acres of habitat suitable for Natural Area designation are currently threatened with conversion to pavement and turf, or transfer to private developers. Most of the park is devoted to intensive recreation on land that was once oak woodland, native grassland, vernal pool, and freshwater laguna.

The population of large, mature oaks across the region is succumbing to a multitude of stressors including ground disturbance, irrigation, vandalism, and drought. And yet, little is being done to conserve their legacy and genetic lineage through the stewardship of their acorns and wild seedlings.

Since 2016, I have collaborated with STF (a member of the California Oaks Coalition), the City of Sacramento, the Sacramento Horsemen's Association, Morton Golf LLC, the Sacramento Area Creeks Council, and the Girl Scouts on a re-oaking strategy for a half-mile segment of Arcade Creek within Del Paso Regional Park. We have planted and irrigated over 900 oak seedlings within the park's interior and rescued another 75 wild oak seedlings on the park's periphery. CWF's Vesta Fund supports the conservation of the 200 blue oak seedlings growing within the oval of the freeway interchange, bringing to nearly 1,200 the total number of oaks planted or conserved since the re-oaking strategy was initiated.

I am also urging Caltrans to designate the oval as the “Blue Oak Island Conservation Area,” consistent with *Senate Concurrent Resolution Number 17: Oak Woodlands*, and to change the maintenance practices to favor the recovery of the local blue oak population.

(See below for more information on this resolution.)

As stakeholders plant and conserve oaks along the banks of Arcade Creek, we are helping Caltrans comply with provisions of Resolution 17, and the City of Sacramento to comply with oak conservation measures within the 2035 General Plan. In turn, we are helping to ensure that blue oaks remain a key feature of Sacramento's environmental portfolio, and that they provide shade, beauty, and biodiversity for generations to come.

Excerpts from Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 17—Relative to oak woodlands, enacted September 1989

WHEREAS, There are a number of state departments, agencies, boards, and commissions exercising land use planning duties and management with respect to public and privately owned oak woodlands, including, but not limited to, the Department of Fish and Game, Department of Parks and Recreation, State Lands Commission, California Coastal Commission, Department of Forestry, and Office of Planning and Research; now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the Senate of the State of California, the Assembly thereof concurring, That all state agencies, including, but not limited to, those specified in this measure, having land use planning duties and responsibilities shall, in the performance of those duties and responsibilities and in a manner consistent with their respective duties and responsibilities, undertake to assess and determine the effects of their land use decisions or actions within any oak woodlands containing Blue, Engelmann, Valley, or Coast Live Oak that may be affected by the decisions or actions.

Resolved, That those state agencies undertake, in the performance of their duties and responsibilities, to preserve and protect native oak woodlands to the maximum extent feasible and consistent with the performance of their duties and responsibilities, or provide for replacement plantings where Blue, Engelmann, Valley, or Coast Live Oak are removed from oak woodlands.



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Open spaces along the Capital City Freeway in Sacramento could be managed to the benefit or detriment of the blue oak population in the Sacramento Valley; the choice is up to us.