

Chapter Chair Chat May 2023

Musings on Wildflowers, Wilderness Protection, and Dead Trees

You don't need me to tell you it was a cold and wet winter. We had more than double the average rainfall at our house this rainy season, and temperatures were chillier than usual, too. After several years of drought, the rain was welcome until it became too much. Some people concluded that climate change led to more and wetter atmospheric rivers, but scientists aren't certain about that yet.

Come spring, the rains abated, new growth abounded, and we could enjoy an amazing super bloom of spring flowers. On April 8, Representative Salud Carbajal invited several environmental groups to join him at Carrizo Plain National Monument (CPNM) to celebrate the reintroduction of the Central Coast Heritage Protection Act. True confession: I had never been to CPNM, so I welcomed this opportunity.



Photo of Soda Lake and the Temblor Range, by Carole Mintzer



The flowers were amazing! I enjoyed the variety, and learning the names of flowers that were new to me - common fiddlenecks (see picture on left), baby blue eyes, California daisies, common goldfields, phacelia ciliata, common tidy tips (my favorite name, for sure!). We also saw our share of California poppies and lupines. This radiant super bloom doesn't happen every year so I hope you got out to enjoy it.

The Central Coast Heritage Protection Act will designate over 250,000 acres of wilderness in the Los Padres National Forest and the Carrizo Plain National Monument. It came very close to passing last year when it was approved by the House, but failed to make it through the Senate. Representative Carbajal is committed to working toward passage, however long it takes. Check out the [press release](#) with an extended quote by our Conservation Chair, Sue Harvey.

We also had a chance to show our support for the designation of the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary when Representative Carbajal (center), Sierra Club members, and Northern Chumash Tribal Council representatives donned CHNMS hats for a picture.



While we celebrated the new life represented by the wildflowers, the rains came too late for many trees. The [US Forest Service estimated](#) that there were over 36 million dead trees in California in 2022, compared to 9.5 million the year before. Most of the mortality was due to drought, which also likely contributed to vulnerability to pests, the second leading cause of mortality.

Outside my living room window, I see a reminder of the tree mortality every day.



Two years ago, this beautiful Monterey Cypress stood tall and green. It's one of the tallest trees in the neighborhood and much beloved by birds for the vantage point it offers. But last year, it started turning brown and went from, "Gee, the tree doesn't look healthy - I wonder what's going on?" to "Wow, it definitely died." At this point, the only green is from the lace lichen still living among its branches. (side note, did you know lace lichen is the California state lichen? And that California was the first state to name a State Lichen?)

I'm not sure why it died. Monterey Cypress can live a long time and it probably isn't that old. Maybe it was the drought. Maybe it was cypress canker, although that's not supposed to be a problem along the coast where the summers are cool.

When it first died, I was anxious for the home owners to chop it down, but over time I've come to appreciate how much easier it is to see the birds that still use it. I've watched hawks and crows duke it out for the high perch and woodpeckers fling bark while searching for insects. Scrub jays often appear during the day. Most recently, it has hosted anywhere from 1 to 25 Eurasian collared doves in the morning. They hang out there until the crows chase them off. The doves are a non-native species that escaped from captivity in the Bahamas in 1974, spread to Florida, and now are found in nearly every state in the USA.

I'm sure someday I'll hear the roar of a chainsaw and the tree will come down. But for now, I'll keep an eye on the birds.

Until next time, I hope you are able to get outside and enjoy the wonders of nature,

Carole