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Development threatens Valley wildlife corridors

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SOURCE: California Wilderness Coalition

Staff graphic by TIM BERGER

Development severely threatens 59 percent of California's wildlife corridors, the natural pathways traveled by the state's native species, a study released Monday found.

Included in "Missing Linkages: Restoring Connectivity to the California Landscape" are three corridors in the San Gabriel Valley: the San Gabriel River, the Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor and the Puente-San Jose-San Gabriels corridor.

Although the Valley's foothill communities aren't mentioned in the report, there are important wildlife corridors between the San Gabriel River and the Verdugo Mountains west of La Cañada Flintridge, said Kristeen Penrod, executive director of the Monrovia-based South Coast Wildlands Project.

"I would say all of the areas in the foothills are a critical east-west corridor," Penrod said, adding the report is a first step toward identifying other linkages.

The 79-page study by a coalition of environmental and government groups identified 232 migration corridors used by the state's mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles.

The hope is to influence state conser-

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Study identifies migration corridors

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vation policy, which has traditionally focused on core habitat areas but not on the links that join them.

The San Gabriel River was identified as a missing link between the San Gabriel Mountains and the Puente-Chino Hills corridor, Penrod said.

"A missing link is not functioning now as it should be," she said. "It doesn't mean it's lost."

"Certainly there's potential with planning efforts going on that the full length of the San Gabriel River can be restored for more aquatic species like steelhead," she added.

Steelhead may be a good indicator species for the health of the river, said Dorothy Green, president of the Los

Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers Watershed Council.

During a conference in the spring, the group discussed restoring river habitat for steelhead with shaded resting places, good water temperature and enough insects for food.

The survey — said to be the first to cover an entire state — underscores the importance of corridors in preserving genetic diversity and the sustainability of wildlife populations, scientists said.

The Davis-based California Wilderness Coalition co-sponsored the study with The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Geological Survey, Center for the Reproduction of Endangered Species and the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

The connection between the Puente Hills and San Gabriel Mountains is particularly important for large animals, said Paul Spitler, executive director of the California Wilderness Coalition.

The corridor allows wildlife

to move between the San Gabriel and Santa Ana mountains, connecting blocks of high-quality habitat, he said.

The area is already highly developed, but wildlife can be helped by passages beneath highways, Spitler said. The Puente Hills Landfill Native Habitat Preservation Authority is looking to build such an underpass for Harbor Boulevard near the border of La Habra Heights and Rowland Heights.

Also helping the wildlife corridor is a purchase by California State Parks of Coal Canyon, which connects the Puente Hills with the Santa Ana Mountains.

"You can call wildlife corridors biodiversity bargains," Spitler said. "You can dramatically increase ecological function for relatively little cost."

The Puente-Chino Hills corridor, which connects Whittier Narrows to the Cleveland National Forest, is identified in the report as a chokepoint — a narrow, impacted or otherwise

tenuous habitat linkage.

The 31-mile corridor is one of the last large urban linkages in Southern California, said Whittier Councilman Bob Henderson, a member of the Wildlife Corridor Conservation Authority and chairman of the Puente Hills Landfill Native Habitat Preservation Authority.

"It's a critical time to try to preserve these linkages that have been there thousands of years," Henderson said. "Obviously, the preferable way is to buy them, but if we can't buy them, we have to work under the California Environmental Quality Act to be sure the developer has set aside a sufficient amount of land so the corridor remains intact."

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The Associated Press contributed to this story.