

<https://voiceofoc.org/2025/01/traveling-through-the-irvine-laguna-wildlife-corridor/>

VOICE *of* OC

ORANGE COUNTY'S NONPROFIT NEWSROOM

Traveling Through the Irvine-Laguna Wildlife Corridor



by [Angelina Hicks](#)

Jan 24, 2025



The Great Park portion of the Irvine-Laguna Wildlife Corridor on Oct. 31, 2024. Credit: ANGELINA HICKS, Voice of OC

Wild animals in South Orange County are at risk.

Limited space within the South Coast Wilderness threatens inbreeding — lacking genetic diversity can spread disease among populations of coyotes and bobcats.

Although [22,000 acres of open space](#) were established in the '90s to protect local habitats and ecosystems in South County, it's not enough for many species.

Environmentalists and biologists have spent decades imagining a wildlife corridor passage stretching [from the Santa Ana Mountains to the South Coast Wilderness](#) to give animals more space to migrate, maintain healthy populations and escape danger.

This six-mile stretch aims to connect those 22,000 acres along the coastline to the more than 150,000 acres of open space to the northeast.

The connection will promote genetic diversity for local species while also giving wild animals escape routes for events like wildfires.

While the corridor is still under construction in some areas — and in the planning phase in others — major progress has been made to bring the corridor to functionality in the past several years.



The entrance to an underpass near Bake Parkway and Lake Forest Drive on Dec. 10, 2024. This is one of the southernmost portions of the corridor. Credit: ANGELINA HICKS, Voice of OC

Separated into three main sections, the corridor stretches from the San Joaquin Hills and South Coast Wilderness, northeast through various street and freeway underpasses, through a section of the Great Park in Irvine and into the Santa Ana Mountains, leading toward the Cleveland National Forest.



Ducks swim in a pool within an underpass near Bake Parkway and Lake Forest Drive on Dec. 10, 2024. This portion helps connect the Irvine-Laguna Wildlife Corridor to the South Coast Wilderness. Credit: ANGELINA HICKS, Voice of OC

Coyotes & Humans Most Common Species Identified in Corridor

[Laguna Greenbelt](#) — a local environmental group that’s been spearheading the corridor effort — conducted a camera study in 2017 and 2018 to observe animal behavior within the northern and southernmost areas of the corridor.

The 21 cameras deployed 24/7 during the study captured 20 different species, including bobcats, raccoons, squirrels, opossums, various birds and more.



A bobcat was captured on camera on March 29, 2018, within the Irvine Spectrum Wildlife Corridor study area. During the entire study, bobcats were only spotted twice within the most northern and southern sections of the corridor. Credit: Laguna Greenbelt

During the camera study, the most commonly spotted animals were coyotes and humans.

This poses an issue.

“If we want the corridor to be functional, we’re going to have to make sure that we provide some means of keeping the humans out,” John Foley, a Laguna Greenbelt board member who helped run the camera study, said during an interview.



A mother coyote and her pup within the Irvine Spectrum Wildlife Corridor study area on July 10, 2018. The image was captured during a camera study to observe wildlife behavior within the area. Credit: Laguna Greenbelt

However, Foley said most of the findings from the study were promising.

“There were certainly areas of the corridor that we saw nothing,” he said. “It was encouraging at the upper and lower portions of the corridor. We saw animals that really, really seemed like they wanted to get into the corridor, but for one reason or another, were unable to do that.”



A great blue heron lands within the Irvine Spectrum Wildlife Corridor study area on Sept. 15, 2017. The image was captured during a camera study to observe wildlife behavior within the area. Credit: Laguna Greenbelt

Southern Stretch Has Most Issues Due to 5 Freeway

Of the three sections of the corridor, the southern reach is the least functional and biggest area of concern. Volunteers from the Laguna Greenbelt, in association with biologists, are the main advocates working on this project and brainstorming solutions to bypass the 5 Freeway — the biggest obstacle to completing the corridor.

The southern portion of the corridor follows existing creek channels and passes under Bake Parkway to meet the San Diego Creek.



A vehicle crosses a bridge on Dec. 10, 2024 in Irvine. Below, an underpass near Bake Parkway and Lake Forest Drive helps connect the South Coast Wilderness and the Irvine-Laguna Wildlife Corridor. Credit: ANGELINA HICKS, Voice of OC

After a short distance and a couple underpasses, the corridor reaches a tunnel underneath the 5 Freeway.

Norm Grossman, current president of Laguna Greenbelt, said the tunnel was originally constructed for water movement, leaving it unattractive to animals that might want to pass through.

The 1100-foot-long tunnel is 25 feet wide, 15 feet tall and pitch black.



The southern entrance to the tunnel on Dec. 17, 2024. The tunnel extends under Bake Parkway in Irvine and further beneath the 405 and 5 Freeway interchange before it opens back up on the other side of the freeway. Credit: ANGELINA Hicks, Voice of OC

“The question is, can this be made more animal friendly so animals will use it?” Grossman said in an interview.

He said the tunnel also usually features standing water — another deterrent that keeps animals from going inside.

To make it worse, the tunnel is completely covered in graffiti, meaning human presence likely discourages animals from passing through.



The 5 Freeway tunnel on Dec. 17, 2024, is covered in graffiti and pitch black, making it unattractive to animals that might be interested in passing through. Credit: ANGELINA HICKS, Voice of OC

“Technology keeps changing,” Grossman said. “We have a science advisory board — 15 biologists and animal behavior scientists who understand all this stuff.”

“We’re relying on them to give us advice on how we can best try to solve the problem using the existing tunnel.”

The camera study, which was conducted over a year and a half, found no evidence that animals were using this tunnel.

Foley said photos and videos from cameras near the tunnel depicted consistent human activity.

“We’d see all hours of the day and night — lights, music, talking,” Foley said in an interview.

“Obviously, animals are just not going to go in. They’re going to get to that, see all that going on, and they’re going to turn around the other way.”



The north entrance to the tunnel extends under the 5 Freeway. Credit: Google Earth

Grossman said the team needs to research the best way to solve this problem, ideally without making many changes to the tunnel in order to save money.

The Laguna Greenbelt team has received some recommendations from the San Diego Natural History Museum, Grossman said. They recommended adding some kind of lighting in addition to shelving or tubing to allow animals and rodents to pass through the tunnel when it fills with water.

But all this still needs to be studied.

Another solution could be an overpass over the freeway, similar to other wildlife corridor projects like the [Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Crossing currently under construction](#) in Agoura Hills. However, that would come with a hefty price tag — the LA County project is estimated to cost approximately \$92 million.



Marine Way in Irvine crosses over the corridor on Dec. 13, 2024 — just north of the 5 Freeway. Once the corridor passes through the freeway tunnel, it extends into the Irvine Great Park. Credit: ANGELINA HICKS, Voice of OC

Great Park Corridor Portion Expected For Completion in 2025

One of the biggest successes toward creating the corridor is the nearly completed, 2.5-mile-long passage that runs through the Irvine Great Park.

This portion, about 700 feet wide, was constructed by FivePoint Holdings over the past decade while they developed the Great Park neighborhoods.



The Great Park portion of the Irvine-Laguna Wildlife Corridor on Oct. 31, 2024. The 2.5-mile-long section of the corridor is about 700 feet wide and aims to connect the Santa Ana Mountains and South Coast Wilderness in Laguna Beach. Credit: ANGELINA HICKS, Voice of OC

Grossman said FivePoint worked with Laguna Greenbelt to develop this section of the corridor. It serves as the main central portion, nearly half of the expected six-mile-long passage.

“That’s the backbone of the wildlife corridor,” Grossman said.



Cars drive across a bridge at Irvine Boulevard & Lynx in Irvine on Oct. 31, 2024. The streets feature an underpass for the Irvine-Laguna Wildlife Corridor, which aims to connect the Santa Ana Mountains and South Coast Wilderness in Laguna Beach. Cars are able to pass above while animals have space to travel under the road. Credit: ANGELINA HICKS, Voice of OC

Construction originally began in 2018. Grossman said it's expected to be completed in 2025 — a year ahead of schedule.

Further Study Needed in Northern Section

Once passing through the Great Park portion, the corridor leads out through county-owned property before reaching a 900-acre portion of open space currently managed by the FBI.



The other side of the underpass at Irvine Boulevard & Lynx in Irvine is still under construction on Oct. 31, 2024. This portion of the corridor leads animals away from the Great Park, through FBI-managed land and toward the Santa Ana Mountains. Credit: ANGELINA HICKS, Voice of OC

Grossman said more research is needed to ensure this final portion of the corridor is functional — especially a culvert under the 241-toll road.

South OC Officials Join Corridor Effort

Over the past couple years, Laguna Greenbelt has been working to gain local civic support for the corridor.

By getting cities to sign a partner charter — which voices a city’s support for the corridor’s creation — Grossman said it’s easier for Laguna Greenbelt to get funding and state support.

The Irvine City Council voted to support the corridor’s creation at its meeting on June 25, 2024.

Irvine Mayor Farrah Khan, who has since been termed out of office, said it was important that local animals are able to traverse the environment safely.

“This will create more space for our wildlife to be able to migrate from one area to another in a safe manner, without the disruption of human beings,” she said.

Laguna Beach officials voted 4-0 at their Sept. 24 meeting to support activists’ efforts to establish the corridor. Councilmember Mark Orgill was not present for the vote but voiced his support in an email response to questions.

“Residents will benefit from opportunities to appreciate wildlife and natural beauty, which supports mental well-being and enhances our city’s identity as a sanctuary for nature lovers,” Orgill wrote.

Officials in Laguna Woods unanimously approved the partner charter on Sept. 18, and the Aliso Viejo City Council approved the agreement during its meeting on Nov. 6.



A coyote moves through the Irvine Spectrum Wildlife Corridor study area on July 12, 2017. The image was captured during a camera study to observe wildlife behavior within the area. Credit: Laguna Greenbelt

When it comes to completely finishing the corridor, Grossman said it will take many discussions between Laguna Greenbelt volunteers and their science advisors.

“Animals don’t read signs very well,” Grossman said. “So how do we direct the animals into the proper pathways? How do we adjust?”

“A lot of things remain to be worked out,” he said. “Right now is just trying to put the pieces together.”

Angelina Hicks is a Voice of OC Tracy Wood Reporting Fellow. Contact her at ahicks@voiceofoc.org or on Twitter @angelinahicks13.

Erika Taylor, Laura Cavalieri and Miles Gaskin contributed to this report.