



Big Deal

New funding protects more than 6,000 acres on a California ranch.

By Jane Braxton Little

IN SPRING, WHEN THE HILLSIDES of Tejon Ranch erupt in a riot of wildflowers, it's hard to see beyond the spectacle of orange and pink blossoms. But these San Joaquin grasslands, among the last remnants of a unique habitat, also host the endangered San Joaquin kit fox and the blunt-nosed leopard lizard. In winter this landscape attracts prairie falcons and scores of golden eagles; in summer, horned larks, burrowing owls, and long-eared owls take up residence.

Now Tejon's endangered grasslands are protected through one of the largest conservation easements in California history. In November the state Wildlife Conservation Board announced a \$15.8 million grant to pay for easements on 62,000 acres of land on the private ranch just an hour's drive from Los Angeles.

The purchase is a key step toward implementing the landmark 2008 Tejon Ranch Conservation Agreement, which Audubon California and four other conservation groups reached with the ranch's owners to protect 240,000 acres of backcountry (see "Shangri-La," March-April 2010). Considered prime development land by the owners, the newly conserved lands will continue to be available for hunting and ranching but are off-limits for new uses.

The easements preserve Mojave Desert grasslands and Joshua tree, oak, and riparian woodlands—some of the best wildlife habitat on the ranch, where desert, mountain, valley, and coastal ecosystems merge. "It is in these landscapes that you really see what makes Tejon Ranch the conservation prize that it is," says Graham Chisholm, Audubon California's executive director.

The Tejon Ranch Conservancy, which was created to manage the protected lands, is conducting scientific studies to guide improvement and restoration of this biodiversity hotspot. The recent funding will also allow the conservancy to expand opportunities for the public to enjoy the ranch firsthand.