

Rare butterfly makes comeback on L.A.-area beaches

The tiny El Segundo blue has returned to two locations where it has not been seen in decades. Scientists are surprised at the resurgence.

By Deborah Schoch, Times Staff Writer

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[Butterflies fight extinction](#)

Amid surfers and skaters, a tiny blue butterfly has scored a telling victory in its fight against extinction.

The rare El Segundo blue has returned to two popular beaches southwest of Los Angeles where it has not been seen in decades.

This is no mere academic sighting of a rare species.

Scientists say they are surprised at the resurgence. Dozens of the rare butterflies are thriving, not in some rarefied fenced-off reserve but in public view at county beaches in Redondo Beach and Torrance.

"You could open the car door, and they could hit you in the face," said conservation expert Travis Longcore this weekend, gesturing at creatures no bigger than a thumbnail flitting a few feet away from parked SUVs.

In a month that has marked the delisting of the American bald eagle as an endangered species, news of the tiny butterfly's reappearance is stirring hope that other species will rebound as unexpectedly and publicly as this one.

The El Segundo blue, one of the region's best-known endangered species, is found nowhere in the world but the southeastern shores of Santa Monica Bay.

Scientists staved off its extinction for years by nursing or monitoring it at three sites off-limits to the public at Los Angeles International Airport, the Chevron El Segundo refinery and on private land in Torrance. They estimate the current population remains low — only in the tens of thousands — with the largest group at LAX.

Now, the butterflies seem to be declaring independence.

They forged ahead on their own to reach new native vegetation at the two beaches. There they are mating and feasting on the buckwheat nectar they crave.

That proved wrong the biologists who called the species too sedentary to fly long distances.

"They were so, 'It's not going to happen,' " recalled Monica Acosta, a horticulturalist and coordinator with the Los Angeles Conservation Corps. Then, three weeks ago, she visited the Redondo Beach site where corps workers recently added native plants.

Something moved amid the shrubs.

"That's when I noticed this little blue flicker," she said. She snapped some photos and turned them over to butterfly experts to study. (Although the upper side of the butterfly's wing has the distinctive blue, the underside is mostly gray with spots.)

Two days later, it happened again.

"We took a walk to the Torrance site, and we saw them there too," Acosta said, "and we said, 'Wow, this has got to mean something.' "

In just one hour June 28, an independent biologist counted 238 El Segundo blues at the two sites. He advised the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service the next day that the discovery proved that the butterfly has the "capacity for rapid establishment and population increase on newfound habitat."

Visitors to some California beaches can already see several rare, federally listed birds, most notably the western snowy plover, the California least tern and the brown pelican.

A federal spokeswoman said last week, however, that she knew of no other spot in Southern California where beachgoers can mingle with federally listed butterflies.

Such success stories often rely on private consultants and a cadre of subcontractors. This one was led by a grass-roots team of residents and two nonprofits, the Urban Wildlands Group and the Los Angeles Conservation Corps' Science, Education and Adventure Lab program. The corps hires underprivileged young adults ages 18 to 24 with an interest in conservation careers.

They used a simple scientific formula: Pull out the ice plant, put in the buckwheat.

Starting in 2004, they stripped thick green carpets of nonnative ice plant from small areas on beach bluffs in Redondo Beach and Torrance. Month after month, they restored the scrub plants that flourished here centuries ago: California sunflower, deer weed, lupines, prickly pear cactus, ambrosia and, of course, buckwheat.

In the old days the butterfly thrived in what was then the region's largest sand dune system, the El Segundo dunes that formed a half-mile-wide band from Westchester south to the Palos Verdes Peninsula. The Los Angeles River created the dunes centuries ago, scientists say, when it entered the ocean at Playa del Rey.

Builders carved the dunes into pieces with construction of waterfront homes, the Chevron oil refinery in El Segundo, the Hyperion sewage plant and LAX.

They laced the sand with ice plant to guard against blowing sand and erosion. The South African import spread swiftly, crowding out native plants.

The El Segundo blue continued to ebb away, even after federal officials protected it in 1976 under the Endangered Species Act.

By 1998, it existed in only three spots on Earth, the dunes west of the LAX runways, the Chevron refinery and the Malaga Cove area. Airport and refinery officials launched recovery efforts, and scientists estimate that several thousand to about 7,000 now live at the two sites.

Still, biologists warned that the species remained imperiled unless native vegetation could be expanded south. One of those biologists was UCLA butterfly expert Rudi Mattoni, a longtime champion of the El Segundo blue and its distant cousin, the even rarer Palos Verdes blue butterfly, which is now being nursed back to life on a military fuel depot in San Pedro.

When Mattoni moved to Argentina, his work was continued by Longcore, science director of the Los Angeles-based Urban Wildlands Group.

A tall, lanky biogeographer and USC research professor, Longcore talks passionately about his hopes of replacing ice plant with natives in an arc around Santa Monica Bay.

For now, he and local residents are focusing on Torrance and Redondo Beach, joining forces with the Conservation Corps' SEA Lab program.

Corps teams started ripping out the ice plant in 2004, with funds from the state Coastal Conservancy and the city of Redondo Beach. They raised native plants at the SEA Lab nursery in Redondo Beach.

Not everyone was enamored of buckwheat and deer weed, though.

Some nearby residents missed their ice plant, calling the native shrubbery brown and scraggly.

To appease them, Corps workers are adding more quail bush and other evergreens than would normally occur in the native beach plant palette, said SEA Lab program director Giancarlo Cetrulo.

But county officials remain wary.

"There are a lot of people who are upset about what it looks like," said Kerry Silverstrom, chief deputy director of the county Department of Beaches and Harbors. "The sand has been blowing up into their yards and driveways. They have it all over. It's not just aesthetics."

She believes ice plant better prevented erosion and deterred beachgoers from scrambling down the bluffs. Before county officials allow restoration to spread to other beaches, she added, "We've got to get comfortable with what's going on."

Still, blue butterflies may draw families and other visitors to admire the species and then head for the sands.

"It would be lovely if they did," Silverstrom said.

Butterfly viewers should stay on nearby paths and not disturb the species or trample the native plants, said Jane Hendron, spokeswoman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which regulates endangered species laws.

Last week, teenagers passed by with surfboards and body boards, unaware that ecological history was being made.

Longcore stood watching the dancing of blue wings. He turned to scan the cars and crowds around him.

"We're recovering this species, right here, in the middle of the second largest city in the country," he said. "This is really amazing."

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

El Segundo blues

The endangered El Segundo blue butterfly, or *Euphilotes battoides allyni*, has returned to two beaches in the South Bay. Some facts:

- Adults have a wingspan of 0.75 to 1.25 inches.
- Males have brilliant blue wings with an orange border along the back of their upper hind wings. Females have dull brown wings with an orange border on the far upper surface of the hind wings.

- Adults can be seen from mid-June to early September, beginning with the flowering of coastal buckwheat, their main food source.
- Males flit from flower head to flower head, mating with females, which immediately begin laying 15 to 20 eggs per day.
- The species live about a year as eggs, larvae, pupae and adults.

Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service