8. Griffith Park SEA

Location

General

The Griffith Park Significant Ecological Area (SEA) is located within Griffith Park, the central park of the City of Los Angeles, situated on the extreme eastern end of the Santa Monica Mountains. The SEA is an extensive, relatively undisturbed island of natural vegetation in an urbanized, metropolitan area. It supports the coastal sage scrub, chaparral, riparian, and southern oak woodland plant communities that are typical in the interior mountain ranges of Southern California. What makes the SEA important is its geographical location. It has become an island of natural vegetation surrounded by urban and suburban development. The geographic location makes the area important for scientific study, for genetic interchange between otherwise isolated populations, and for recreation of urban residents.

The SEA is located partially in each of the following United States Geological Survey (USGS) 7.5' California Quadrangles: Burbank and Hollywood.

General Boundary and Resources Description

The SEA encompasses most of Griffith Park, south of the State Route-134, and west of Interstate-5. The SEA boundary generally follows the natural area near the Griffith Park boundaries in most cases. Isolated areas are important for preserving and documenting the geographical variability of vegetation and wildlife that formerly occurred throughout the region. They serve as reservoirs of native species that could be of scientific and economic value in the future. In addition, birds rely on these islands for areas to rest and feed along their north-south and east-west migration routes. In the case of Griffith Park, this function is made even greater than might be expected because it serves as a corridor for any gene flow and species movement that may take place between the Santa Monica and San Gabriel mountains via the Verdugo Mountains.

Beginning in the northwest corner, and proceeding eastward, the SEA follows the natural vegetation on the mountain slopes at the junction with the flood plain of the former Dark Canyon and the Los Angeles River. This area of the SEA includes the recently-acquired (2010) Cahuenga Peak, at 1820 feet, which is now the highest point of Griffith Park. Cahuenga Peak slopes have rocky outcrops, chaparral, and regenerating oak woodland and chaparral on the north-facing slopes. (This area was part of the 800 acres burned in the Griffith Park Fire of 2007.)

The Los Angeles River is channelized, but there is remnant oak riparian woodland in this area. Bordering the apartment complex on the east side of Barham Boulevard, there is a somewhat abrupt change in slope where the previous Dark Canyon Creek flowed. (Barham Boulevard was evidently constructed in this Canyon.) The SEA includes the remnant riparian coast live oak woodland (Quercus agrifolia), which has many jurisdictional oak trees and in many places, the natural understory. Residents and staff at the apartments report frequent sightings of wildlife, particularly mule deer (Odocoileus hemionus) and coyotes (Canis latrans), in their parking lots, which line the Griffith Park side of the complex. On the slopes above, the chaparral of this west-facing slope grades upward into an extensive area of coastal sage scrub. The SEA includes these natural areas. From the natural areas on slopes above the junction of Barham Boulevard and Forest Lawn Boulevard, the SEA boundary continues eastward along the border of natural vegetation on the slopes above Forest Lawn Boulevard, including oak woodland in the ravines and mixed chaparral and grassland on the upper slopes. Occasionally, an ash (Fraxinus velutina) or Southern California
black walnut (Juglans californica) are in these ravines, along with oak trees and other chaparral plants.

The boundary follows natural vegetation southward, away from the Los Angeles River, at the boundary of Forest Lawn Memorial Park (Forest Lawn). A slope and ridge top that have been cleared by Forest Lawn have been excluded from the SEA, but the chaparral on the east-facing side of the slope is included. From this ridge, the SEA roughly follows at the edge of the natural areas around the south side of the Forest Lawn and returns northward on the parcel line between the Forest Lawn and Griffith Park.

From the east side of Forest Lawn, the SEA boundary includes a chaparral-covered slope that is south of Travel Town and Zoo Drive. Cooper and Mathewson (2008) describe how coastal sage scrub occurs through a broad section of the northern part of Griffith Park, from end to end with patches of the sensitive valley needlegrass grassland. From the natural area near the Interstate-5 and State Route-134 interchange, the SEA boundary swings around westward, north of the Los Angeles Zoo, and forming a lobe on the chaparral-covered slopes. This area has ravines and a gradually sloping area near Travel Town, with riparian forest that includes sycamores (Platanus racemosa), oaks, willows (Salix spp.), and mulefat (Baccharis salicifolia), which are easily seen along Griffith Park Drive. Travel Town is not in the SEA, but its periphery of native riparian and chaparral is included. The north-facing upper slopes have chaparral, and the south-facing upper slopes have coastal sage scrub or grassland with chaparral plants here and there, especially elderberry (Sambucus spp.) Along Zoo Drive, ravines have typical chaparral of north-facing slopes. The SEA boundary continues past the Los Angeles Zoo along a road to a landfill area within Griffith Park, and goes around the landfill, forming a cherry-stem shaped area at the landfill road, and then continuing southeastward on the west side of Griffith Park Drive, excluding the Harding Municipal Golf Course. The Spring Canyon picnic area is excluded, as the understory of the sycamores and oaks is unnatural lawn, and the SEA boundary continues south along natural vegetation along Griffith Park Drive to the southern boundary of Griffith Park, near the Los Feliz offramp from the Interstate-5. A golf course practice area at the corner is excluded from the SEA.

From the southeast corner, the SEA boundary goes west along with the Griffith Park boundary at the edge of development to another golf course, which is excluded due to extensive modification of the slopes. The Greek Theater in Vermont Canyon and Griffith Park Observatory on the slope beyond are included, as the modified vegetation for each covers less than 40 acres. The SEA boundary continues west and then north with the Griffith Park boundary at the edge of development. A small quarry is excluded. The undeveloped upper Brush Canyon in Griffith Park is included. Griffith Park and SEA have oak woodland along the drainages, transitioning uphill into chaparral and then grassland on the upper slopes. Within Griffith Park, north-facing sides of rocky outcrops often have a cliffside vegetation that is characterized by multiple kinds of lichens, mosses, liverworts and other non-vascular plants along with live-forever (Dudleya spp.), and other flowering plants. The SEA boundary follows Griffith Park boundaries around the development in the Blackwood Canyon area. A ridge area in Griffith Park on the south side of Mulholland Drive overlook is excluded. The SEA boundary follows Griffith Park boundaries on the southern edge and then turns north after including the grassland and coastal sage scrub-covered slopes that cover the open area between the two northern arms of the Hollywood Reservoir. On the west side of the SEA, the boundaries lap west outside of Griffith Park boundaries to include the oak woodland and chaparral of the lower elevations of Cahuenga Peak in the neighborhood of Dark Canyon (Barham Boulevard) and Caguenga Pass.

**Vegetation**

Vegetation within the SEA is comprised of a large variety of community types. The diversity of the communities reflects the topography of the mountainous park and include coastal sage chaparral scrub, riparian and coast live oak woodland, riparian, many kinds of chaparral, grassland, and cliffside vegetation. The maintenance of the diverse vegetation mosaic and the contacts of the
different vegetation types (ecotones) has been cited as one of the principal qualities of importance to maintaining biotic diversity in Griffith Park (Cooper & Mathewson, 2008). The southern slopes are affected by more moist marine weather conditions, while the northern slopes are influenced by drier inland weather conditions. In addition, the steepness of many slopes causes sharp differences in vegetation on either side of a ridge. Sensitive plant species and plant communities occurring or potentially occurring within the SEA are discussed in the Sensitive Biological Resources section.

Descriptions and general locations of the each plant community present within the SEA are given below.

**Chaparral**: A shrub community composed of robust species. Within this SEA, a number of chaparral subcommunities are found, and differentiated by their dominant plant species. These include chamise (*Adenostoma fasciculatum*), buck brush (*Ceanothus* spp.), scrub oak (*Quercus berberidifolia*), coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia* var. *agrifolia*) and mosaics of these depending on mixture of species and elevation. These and other shrub species form dense vegetation covers, and grow 5 to 10 feet in height. The development of chaparral is pronounced over large hillside areas throughout the SEA.

**Corresponding MCV communities:**
- *Adenostoma fasciculatum* (chamise chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Adenostoma fasciculatum-Salvia apiana* (chamise-white sage chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Arctostaphylos glauca* (bigberry manzanita chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Ceanothus greggi [vestitus]* (cup leaf ceanothus chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Ceanothus spinosus* (greenbark ceanothus chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Ceanothus oliganthus* (hairy leaf ceanothus chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Prunus ilicifolia* (holly leaf cherry chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Rhus ovata* (sugarbush chaparral) Shrubland Alliance

**Coastal Sage Chaparral Scrub**: A shrubland community exhibiting less robust structure found in this SEA. This plant community is dominated by California sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), California brittle bush (*Encelia californica*), white sage (*Salvia apiana*), black sage (*Salvia mellifera*), and California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*). Dense stands may grow three to four feet in height. Within this SEA, it is generally found in scattered patches, which are highly integrated with mixed chaparral. These are located throughout the SEA at middle elevations and on hillsides.

**Corresponding MCV communities:**
- *Artemisia californica* (California sagebrush scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Artemisia californica-Eriogonum fasciculatum* (California sagebrush-California buckwheat scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Encelia californica* (California brittle bush scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Dendromecon rigida* (bush poppy scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Salvia leucophylla* (purple sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Salvia mellifera* (black sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Eriogonum fasciculatum* (California buckwheat scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Lotus scoparius [Acmispon glaber]* (deer weed scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Opuntia littoralis* (coast prickly pear scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Malacothamnus fasciculatus* (bush mallow scrub) Shrubland Alliance

**Coast Live Oak Woodland**: A plant community dominated by *Quercus agrifolia*. Within this SEA, this community includes coast live oak, which typically grows to heights of 20 to 40 feet, and forms either
closed or open tree canopies. Oak woodland is most commonly found on north-facing slopes and in drainage bottoms and often intergrades with shrub communities. Understory vegetation varies from grassland in level areas to shrubs where topography is steeper.

Corresponding MCV community:
- *Quercus agrifolia* (coast live oak woodland) Woodland Alliance

Riparian Forest: Along the major drainages riparian forest is found, which typically grows along streams in bedrock-constrained, steep-sided canyons, which results in a fairly narrow riparian corridor. The specific dominant plants are not known but riparian trees such as California bay (*Umbellularia californica*), white alder (*Alnus rhombifolia*), coast live oak, western sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*) and willow (*Salix spp.*) occur. There are also a greater number of hydrophytic (moister favoring) plant species in the understory.

Corresponding MCV communities:
- *Alnus rhombifolia* (white alder groves) Forest Alliance
- *Umbellularia californica* (California bay forest) Forest Alliance
- *Quercus agrifolia* (coast live oak woodland) Woodland Alliance
- *Platanus racemosa* (California sycamore woodlands) Woodland Alliance

**Wildlife**

Mammals making their home in Griffith Park include mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), coyote (*Canis latrans*), raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), common gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*), Virginia opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*), striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*), California ground squirrel (*Spermophilus beecheyi*), the non-native eastern fox squirrel (*Sciurus niger*), and house mouse (*Mus musculus*). Bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) have been observed in the northwest and eastern portions of Griffith Park, and there have been sightings of a mountain lion (*Puma concolor*) that some believe may have incorporated Griffith Park into its range.

The last survey of insects in Griffith Park was in the spring 2003, which was a year with a cool, late spring; it is not clear how that weather impacted the survey results. During that survey, the most frequently observed butterfly was the gulf fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*), which uses ornamental passion vines as a host plant. Bumblebees and honeybees were the most abundant bee species, although carpenter bees were also observed. Sand wasps were observed along some of the hiking trails, where sandy patches are present. Scorpions, tarantulas and other spiders are commonly observed.

Amphibians observed in Griffith Park have included arboreal salamander (*Aneides lugubris*), California slender salamander (*Batrachoseps attenuatus*), Baja California chorus frog (*Pseudacris hypochondriaca*) and California toad (*Anaxyrus halophilus*). Non-native amphibians found in many streams in Griffith Park are the American bullfrog (*Lithobates catesbeianus*) and the African clawed frog (*Xenopus laevis*). In addition to stream habitats, the Los Angeles River, on the eastern side of Griffith Park provides abundant habitat for amphibians.

Reptiles identified in Griffith Park include the Great Basin fence lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis longipes*), western skink (*Plestiodon skiltonianus skiltonianus*), San Diego alligator lizard (*Elgaria multocarinata webbi*), coastal whiptail (*Aspidoscelis tigris stejnegeri*), western side-blotched lizard (*Uta stansburiana elegans*), California legless lizard (*Anniella pulchra*), California striped racer (*Coluber lateralis lateralis*), red racer (*C. flagellum piceus*), California kingsnake (*Lampropeltis getula californiae*), San Bernardino ringneck snake (*Diadophis punctatus modestus*), San Diego gopher snake (*Pituophis catenifer annectens*), and southern Pacific rattlesnake (*Crotalus oreganus helleri*).
Ornithologists have identified about 200 bird species in Griffith Park, and about 150 of those are regularly seen (every year–Cooper and Mathewson 2008). Griffith Park is also an important stopover for migrating birds and provides an abundance of habitat for wintering birds. Resident birds during the 2003 survey included the acorn woodpecker (Melanerpes formicivorus), American crow (Corvus brachyrhynchos), Anna’s hummingbird (Calypte anna), Bewick’s wren (Thryomanes bewickii), bushtit (Psaltriparus minimus), California towhee (Melozone crissalis), California quail (Callipepla californica), California thrasher (Toxostoma redivivum), common raven (Corvus corax), European starling (Sturnus vulgaris, non-native), great horned owl (Bubo virginianus) and the red-tailed hawk (Buteo jamaicensis). Migratory birds include the ash-throated flycatcher (Myiarchus cinerascens), black-chinned hummingbird (Archilochus alexandri), black-headed grosbeak (Pheucticus melanocephalus) and western wood-pewee (Contopus sordidulus). Aquatic species, such as herons, egrets, ducks and migrating geese are seen in the Los Angeles River as it flows by Griffith Park. These species are also observed on the golf course water features within Griffith Park.

Sensitive wildlife species occurring or potentially occurring within the SEA are discussed in the Sensitive Biological Resources section.

**Wildlife Movement**

Griffith Park has become increasingly isolated from the rest of the Santa Monica Mountain Range, the Los Angeles River, the Los Angeles Basin, the San Fernando Valley, and the Verdugo Mountains (a little less than two miles to the east) because of the freeways, concrete river projects and urbanization that surround Griffith Park. Although some species have disappeared, including the ringtail (Bassariscus astutus), the gray fox is still seen.

River-bed vegetation is quickly returning in the Los Angeles River as sand deposits on the hard channel bottom, and re-vegetation should be encouraged. Major bird and mammal populations exist on the re-vegetated portions of the Los Angeles River. Although some stretches of the Los Angeles River may not provide suitable primary corridors, it is important to reinstate Griffith Park’s connection to the Los Angeles River for the future of wildlife and plant connectivity. In the management draft for Griffith Park wildlife (Cooper and Mathewson 2008), the authors outline some of the important connections to maintain or enhance: bridges and underpasses over and under State Route-101 and culverts that feed into the Los Angeles River Channel.

Griffith Park is viewed as an important connective island for the Santa Monica Mountains to the west of State Route-101 and the Verdugo Mountains and San Gabriel Mountains to the east. Wildlife may also use the natural areas and even concrete channels of the Los Angeles River to connect to the Tujunga Wash and Hansen Dam SEA and to the San Gabriel Mountains.

**Sensitive Biological Resources**

Sensitive biological resources are habitats or individual species that have special recognition by federal, state, or local conservation agencies and organizations as endangered, threatened, and/or rare. This is due to the species’ declining or limited population sizes, which usually results from habitat loss. Watch lists of such resources are maintained by the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG), the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and special groups, such as the California Native Plant Society (CNPS). The following sections indicate the habitats as well as plant and animal species present, or potentially present within the SEA, which have been accorded special recognition.

**Sensitive Plant Communities and Habitats**

The SEA supports several habitat types considered sensitive by resource agencies. These are inventoried by California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) in the California Natural Diversity
Database (CNDDB) [2011]. The CNDDB includes state and federally-listed endangered, threatened, and rare vascular plants, as well as several sensitive vertebrate species. These communities include chamise-white sage chaparral, holly leaf cherry chaparral, California brittle bush scrub, California bay forest, and California sycamore woodlands, which occur throughout the SEA. These communities, or closely related designations, are considered high priority communities by the CDFG, which indicates that they are experiencing a decline throughout their range. The array and composition of these communities has been discussed in the Vegetation section.

**Sensitive Plant Species**

The statuses of rare plants are hierarchically categorized by the CNPS using a rank and decimal system. The initial category level of Rare Plant Rank is indicated by the ranks 1A (presumed extinct in California), 1B (rare or endangered in California and elsewhere), 2 (rare or endangered in California but more common elsewhere), 3 (more information needed, a review list), and 4 (limited distribution). In cases where the CNPS has further identified the specific threat to the species, a decimal or Threat Code is added: .1 (seriously endangered in California), .2 (fairly endangered in California), or .3 (not very endangered in California).

The following special-status plant taxa have been reported or have the potential to occur within the SEA, based on known habitat requirements and geographic range information:

- Braunton’s milk-vetch (*Astragalus brauntonii*) FE, RPR 1B.1
- Nevin’s barberry (*Berberis nevinii*) FE, SE, RPR 1B.1
- Round-leaved filaree (*California macrophylla*) RPR 1B.1
- Lewis’ evening-primrose (*Camissonia lewisii*) RPR 3
- Southern tarplant (*Centromadia parryi ssp. australis*) RPR 1B.1
- San Fernando Valley spineflower (*Chorizanthe parryi var. fernandina*) FC, SE, RPR 1B.1
- Parry’s spineflower (*Chorizanthe parryi var. parryi*) RPR 1B.1
- Many-stemmed dudleya (*Dudleya multicaulis*) RPR 1B.2
- Palmer’s grapplinghook (*Harpagonella palmeri*) RPR 4.2
- Mesa horkelia (*Horkelia cuneata ssp. puberula*) RPR 1B.1
- Coulter’s goldfields (*Lasthenia glabrata ssp. coulteri*) RPR 1B.1
- White rabbit-tobacco (*Pseudognaphalium leucocephalum*) RPR 2.2
- San Bernardino aster (*Symphyotrichum defoliatum*) RPR 1B.2
- Greata’s aster (*Symphyotrichum greatae*) RPR 1B.3
- Slender mariposa lily (*Calochortus clavatus var. gracilis*) RPR 1B.2
- Plummer’s mariposa lily (*Calochortus plummerae*) RPR 1B.2
- Vernal barley (*Hordeum intercedens*) RPR 3.2
- California Orcutt grass (*Orcuttia californica*) FE, SE, RPR 1B.1

**Sensitive Animal Species**

The following special-status animal species are reported or are likely to be present within the SEA based on habitat requirements and known range attributes:

- Gertsch’s socalchemmis spider (*Socalchemmis gertschi*) CDFG Special Animals List
- Western spadefoot (*Spea hammondi*) BLMS, SSC
- Coast range newt (*Taricha torosa*) SSC
- Silvery legless lizard (*Anniella pulchra pulchra*) FSS, SSC
- Coastal whiptail (*Aspidoscelis tigris stejnegeri*) CDFG Special Animals List
- Western pond turtle (*Emys marmorata*) BLMS, FSS, SSC
• Coast horned lizard (*Phrynosoma blainvillii*) BLMS, FSS, SSC
• Two-striped garter snake (*Thamnophis hammondii*) BLMS, FSS, SSC
• Southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) FE, FSS, SE, USBC, AWL, ABC
• Least Bell’s vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*) FE, BCC, SE, USBC, AWL, ABC
• Pallid bat (*Antrozous pallidus*) FSS, BLMS, SSC, WBWG High
• Western mastiff bat (*Eumops perotis californicus*) BLMS, SSC, WBWG High
• Silver-haired bat (*Lasionycteris noctivagans*) WBWG Medium
• Hoary bat (*Lasiurus cinereus*) WBWG Medium
• San Diego desert woodrat (*Neotoma lepida intermedia*) SSC
• Pocketed free-tailed bat (*Nyctinomops femorosaccus*) SSC, WBWG Medium
• Big free-tailed bat (*Nyctinomops macrotis*) SSC, WBWG Medium-High
• Los Angeles pocket mouse (*Perognathus longimembris brevinasus*) FSS, SSC
• Pacific pocket mouse (*Perognathus longimembris pacificus*) FE, SSC
• American badger (*Taxidea taxus*) SSC

**Ecological Transition Areas (ETAs)**

There are no ETAs designated within this SEA.

**Regional Biological Value**

The SEA meets all SEA designation criteria and supports many regional biological values. Each criterion and how it is met is described below.

**Criteria Analysis of the Griffith Park SEA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Justification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A) The habitat of core populations of endangered or threatened plant or animal species.</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
<td>No known core populations occur within this SEA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B) On a regional basis, biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant or animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution.</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
<td>No known unique or rare plant or animal species occur within this SEA that would be regionally uncommon. No rare plant habitats occur in Griffith Park. Griffith Park has extensive wild areas that are little studied according to Cooper and Mathewson 2008. Such areas could be discovered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C) Within the County, biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant or animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
<td>No known unique or rare plant or animal species occur within this SEA that would be particularly uncommon in the County. No rare plant habitats are known in Griffith Park. Griffith Park has extensive wild areas that are little studied according to Cooper and Mathewson 2008. Such areas could be discovered.</td>
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<td><strong>D)</strong></td>
<td>Habitat that at some point in the life cycle of a species or group of species, serves as concentrated breeding, feeding, resting, or migrating grounds and is limited in availability either regionally or in the County.</td>
<td>Met</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>E)</strong></td>
<td>Biotic resources that are of scientific interest because they are either an extreme in physical/geographical limitations, or represent unusual variation in a population or community.</td>
<td>Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F)</strong></td>
<td>Areas that would provide for the preservation of relatively undisturbed examples of the original natural biotic communities in the County.</td>
<td>Met</td>
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</table>

In conclusion, the area is an SEA because it contains: **D)** concentrated breeding, feeding, resting, or migrating grounds, which are limited in availability in the County; **E)** biotic resources that are of scientific interest because they are either an extreme in physical/geographical limitations, or represent unusual variation in a population or community; and **F)** areas that provide for the preservation of relatively undisturbed examples of original natural biotic communities in the County.
8. Griffith Park SEA Sources


County of Los Angeles, Department of Regional Planning. 2006. *The Griffith Park SEA Description*, Los Angeles County, California.


