

Help preserve oak woodland habitat

In 2004, Congress named the oak the official tree of the United States due to the popularity of the tree among the public. But if oaks are popular with people, they're probably even more popular with birds and wildlife. Oak trees and the environment around them are one of the state's most diverse and important habitats, hosting more than 160 species of birds and 2,000 varieties of plants. The rolling hills and colors of oak woodlands also make up one of California's most beautiful and iconic landscapes.

Oak woodlands are increasingly in jeopardy from development. The California Oak Foundation projects that one million acres of oak woodland will succumb to development over the next 30 years and 750,000 more acres will be threatened. That's on top of the million acres of oak woodland already lost to development since 1950. Other threats to oaks include lack of regeneration due to competition from non-native grasses, grazing pressure, and soil compaction, and diseases such as sudden oak death syndrome.

Landowners can play a vital role in saving oaks

The larger ecosystem around oak trees provides a number of public benefits including forage production, water filtration, erosion prevention, and habitat for native pollinators, among other things. While the oak woodlands are important to landowners, landowners can be equally as important to the oak woodlands. Of the 7 million acres of oak woodlands in California, the vast majority is on private lands. Some of the things that landowners can do to protect their oaks, recruit young trees, and maximize the habitat value of oak woodlands include:

- Plant and restore oak woodlands and forest along rivers and streams, especially where there is perennial water, and retain patches of chaparral, riparian, and grassland habitat adjacent to oak habitat.
- Protect oak seedlings from rodents and other pests



Oak woodlands on Audubon's Bobcat Ranch near Winters, California.

- with tree tubes, milk cartons, and/or welded wire.
- Strive for a good mix of older and younger trees on your property. Avoid removing trees as much as possible, and certainly avoid removing the largest, oldest trees.
- Strive for a good diversity of native oak species.
- Around your oaks, plant grasses and shrubs that mimic the diversity and structure of a natural oak woodland plant community.
- Protect young trees and sensitive habitat areas from grazing damage and non-native animals with selective fencing.

Helping birds in oak woodlands

Birds rely on oaks and their surrounding environment because the trees offer abundant food (acorns and insects) and nesting (tree branches and cavities). The loss and fragmentation of oak woodlands is the central reason for significant declines in Lark Sparrow, Oak Titmouse, Nuttall's Woodpecker, Yellow-billed Magpie, White-tailed

Kite, Ash-throated Flycatcher, and Western Bluebird. There are a number of simple steps that property owners can take to help oak woodland dependent birds:

- Avoid attracting non-native bird species (including starlings and brown-headed cowbirds) that parasitize and compete with native birds.
- Thin oak woodlands instead of completely removing trees.
- Maintain habitat corridors between oak woodlands and other habitats.
- When harvesting firewood in oak woodlands, identify and retain important resources for wildlife.
- Leave dead trees and braches (snags) in place whenever possible. They provide valuable nesting sites and opportunities for birds, such as acorn woodpeckers, to store food. They also attract abundant prey species for insect-eating birds, such as hawks.



Above, Acorn Woodpeckers are frequent visitors to oak woodland habitats. They store their food in dead trees and branches. (photo by Dave Brezinski/USFWS). Below, Western Bluebirds have greater fledging success in restored forests. (photo by Steve DeMello).

