# **Conservation Assessment of Rocks Ranch:**

# An Opportunity to Safeguard Landscape Connectivity between the

# Santa Cruz Mountains to Gabilan Range



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#### **Conservation Assessment of Rocks Ranch**

### **Executive Summary**

The Land Trust of Santa Cruz County (Land Trust) is currently working to protect Rocks Ranch—an ~2,667acre property straddling San Benito and Monterey counties in the northern tip of the Gabilan Range in central coastal California (Figure 1). Protecting the property is essential to safeguarding connectivity between the Santa Cruz Mountains and the Gabilan Range— two diverse ranges containing expansive intact habitat in California's Central Coast Ecoregion, which is a critical component of California's biodiversity.

Rocks Ranch contains a 4.4-mile-long stretch of intact habitat that is highly permeable to animal movement. On its northern end, it abuts a 2.5-mile stretch of US Highway 101 that is currently a 'hot spot' for wildlife-vehicle collisions, which is evidence of the area's high frequency of use by animals. Caltrans is working with the Land Trust and other conservation partners to study highway infrastructure improvements (e.g., culvert improvements) that can facilitate wildlife movement through this 'choke point' within this important landscape linkage.

Protecting Rocks Ranch will facilitate animal movement, including in response to a warming climate, along the more than 315-mile-long latitudinal gradient within the Coast Range Mountains, between the Transverse Range Mountains in the south, and the northern tip of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Rocks Ranch's extensive aquatic systems, including streams, ponds, and springs, topographic and microclimatic variability, and cooler coastal mesoclimate within the Gabilan Range, will help native species adapt to a future hotter and likely drier climate.

The Land Trust is currently under contract to purchase Rocks Ranch, which has been previously proposed for intensive residential development, and was also recently partially rezoned for commercial development. Protecting Rocks Ranch from intensified land use would help safeguard this critical landscape linkage and conserve important habitat for rare and endangered species. Because of its location within the critical choke point, adjacency to US Highway 101, and extensive area of intact habitat, Rocks Ranch is critical to the success of the *Southern Santa Cruz Mountains Connectivity Project*: a collaboration between the Land Trust and its conservation and transportation partners, to protect and restore key habitat and enhance wildlife crossing infrastructure between the Santa Cruz Mountains and Gabilan Range.

#### **ROCKS RANCH SUMMARY**

Size: ~2,667 acres (1,376 ac. Monterey County and 1,291 ac. San Benito County); 4.4 miles long (north to south). Zoning: Mostly grazing/rangeland, with portions of San Benito County parcels zoned for Productive Agriculture (400 ac.) and Commercial Development (71.9 ac; Table 1). Wildlife Connectivity:

- Located in the choke point of the linkage connecting the Santa Cruz Mountains and Gabilan Range, the parcels were rated as 'critical' and 'key' in CDFW's Santa Cruz Mountains Linkages Conceptual Area Protection Plan (McGraw 2012).
- Borders 2.5 miles of US Highway 101, a barrier to wildlife, where Caltrans is working with partners to study potential wildlife crossing infrastructure improvements to enhance connectivity at this high priority location.

#### **Sensitive Species**

- California red legged frog breeding site and California tiger salamander suitable breeding and upland habitat.
- Tricolored blackbird, western burrowing owl, and Least Bell's vireo suitable breeding habitat; foraging habitat for golden eagle and California condor.
- Suitable habitat for American badger, San Joaquin kit fox, and tule elk.

#### Sensitive Habitats

- 9 ponds, 2.1 miles of streams, many seeps/ springs.
- $\,\circ\,$  At least 10.2 acres of wetlands.
- Approximately 7 acres of riparian woodland.
- Extensive grassland, oak savanna, and oak woodland.

#### **Climate Resiliency**

- Facilitates northward migration through the coast ranges, so species can follow cooler climates north.
- Features a cooler mesoclimate within the Gabilan Range, and highly variable microtopography and microclimates that enable species to stay within their climate envelopes through short-distance migrations.
- $\,\circ\,$  Contains abundant surface and groundwater.

#### Threats

- Development in the new 'regional commercial node'; residential development; and agricultural conversion.
- $\,\circ\,$  Inappropriate range and agricultural management.

#### Opportunities

- Safeguard and enhance regional connectivity by protecting habitat and conducting wildlife crossing infrastructure projects through US Highway 101.
- Protect extensive areas of sensitive communities and habitat for several rare species (Table 1).
- Manage grasslands using conservation grazing.



Figure ES-1: Santa Cruz Mountains to Gabilan Range Bay Area Critical Linkage

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# 1 Property Description and Conservation Values

This section describes Rocks Ranch and then outlines its conservation values. Section 2 highlights threats to the property and the current opportunities for conservation.

## 1.1 Property Description

1.1.1 Overview

Rocks Ranch is a 2,667-acre property in the northern tip of the Gabilan Range Mountains, just east of the community of Prunedale and west of the City of San Juan Bautista. Named for the outcroppings of sandstone scattered throughout the property, Rocks Ranch is adjacent to US Highway 101 through the Prunedale Bypass—a divided section of highway that traverses the northern Gabilan Range near the Aromas Hills, which connect the Gabilan Range to the Santa Cruz Mountains in the north. Used as an active cattle ranch for more than a century, the property supports extensive intact grassland, coastal scrub, and coast live oak savannas and woodlands, which have been maintained through a grazing as part of a cow-calf operation.

As a result of its prime location adjacent to US Highway 101 and in proximity to the Bay Area and abundant water resources, Rocks Ranch has been subject to a series of development proposals that would intensity land use and affect its permeability for wildlife movement. Though much of the site is currently zoned for low intensity land use including agriculture, grazing, and rural residences (Section 2.1.4), the County of San Benito designated the area as part of a 'new community study area' in its 2015 general plan update (County of San Benito 20154) and recently rezoned 71.5 acres of Rocks Ranch for commercial regional development (EMC 2019; Section 2.1).

## 1.1.2 Parcels

The 2,667-acre property straddles Monterey and San Benito counties (Figure 1). The three northern parcels totaling 1,291 acres (48%) are located in San Benito County while the three southern parcels totaling 1,376 acres (52%) located in Monterey County (Table 1, Figure 1).

Table 1: Roc	ks Ranch Parcels		
County	APN	Zoning	Acres
Monterey	181141002000	Permanent Grazing	471
	181141001000	Permanent Grazing	532
	181141003000	Permanent Grazing	373
		All Monterey County	1,376
San Benito	0113100040	Agricultural Rangeland	154
	0113100030	Agricultural Rangeland and Agricultural Productive	592
	0113100060	Agricultural Rangeland, Agricultural Productive, and Regional Commercial (C3)	545
		All San Benito County	1,291
		Both Counties	2,667



Figure 1: Rocks Ranch Parcels and Zoning

### 1.1.3 Land Use

The property is largely undeveloped but features a five-acre telecommunications facility in the north, where it is also traversed by a regional natural gas transmission line. In addition, there is a network of unpaved ranch roads and grazing infrastructure including a cross-fencing, troughs, stock ponds, corrals, and a barn, which is located in the northeastern corner of the property.

### 1.1.4 Zoning

The 1,376 acres of Rocks Ranch that are located in Monterey County are zoned for Permanent Grazing (PR), which is intended to preserve, protect, and enhance those productive exclusive grazing lands in the County of Monterey, and general allows for low-intensity land use (Figure 1). Most of the acreage within the San Benito County parcels is zoned Agricultural Rangeland, which similarly allows for low-intensity agricultural uses including 40-acre minimum building sites. The northern portion of the two northern parcels is zoned Agriculture, which allows five-acre minimum building sites (Table 1, Figure 1).

However, 71.9 acres located in the northwestern parcel of Rocks Ranch were recently rezoned by the County of San Benito for Regional Commercial (C3) to create the "Rocks Ranch Commercial Node"—one of five commercial development nodes located along US Highway 101 in the San Benito County General Plan. The purpose of these nodes to facilitate development that will serve tourist traffic by providing accommodations, supplies, and services geared to travelers and visitors (San Benito County 2015, EMC 2019; Section 3.1)

## 1.1.5 Geology and Soils

Named for the numerous granite rock outcroppings that dot the landscape, Rocks Ranch is underlain by a variety of geologic formations which include: sandstones of the San Juan Bautista Formation; Vaqueros Sandstone; red pebble and boulder breccia and conglomerate with interbedded red and yellow arkosic sandstone; eolian deposits of clay, silt, and gravel in the Aromas sand formation; dacitic to andesite Miocene volcanic rocks; granodiorite and quartz diorite; and alluvium deposits in valets (Wagner et al. 2002). The diverse geology, along with the variable topography, gives rise to 23 mapped soil types (USDA 1969, 1971), which range from coarse textured loamy sand (e.g., Arnold Series) to fine textured silty clay (e.g., Alo Series). The variable texture and chemistry of these soils, along with site's hydrology and hilly topography, give rise to diverse assemblages of native plants and animals.

## 1.2 Biological Conservation Values

Table 2 highlights the biodiversity conservation values of Rocks Ranch, which include rare species occurrences and suitable habitat, sensitive plant communities, landscape connectivity, and climate change resiliency. The sources listed in the table include several local, regional, and statewide databases, plans, and analyses that have identified these conservation values and the importance of land within Rocks Ranch for conservation of biodiversity, including most notably, by maintaining regional landscape connectivity.

Table 2: Rocks Ranch Biodiversity Conservation Values			
Conservation Values	Description	Sources	
Connectivity for Wild	life		
Landscape Connectivity	The property features intact, unfragmented habitat that has been mapped as a regional landscape linkage through multiple connectivity analyses:	Penrod et al. 2013	
	• <b>Bay Area Critical Linkages:</b> Rocks Ranch is located within the Santa Cruz Mountains to Gabilan Range linkage for the Bay Area Critical Linkages Project (Penrod et al. 2013; Figure 2).	JMc 2012 Thorne et al.	
	• Santa Cruz Mountains Linkages Conceptual Area Protection Plan (JMc 2012): The northern four parcels of Rocks Ranch were identified as critical to regional connectivity (Tier 1a), while the southern two parcels were identified as key (Tier 1b) in the California Department of Fish and	2002 TNC 2018 Mackenzie et	
	<ul> <li>Wildlife CAPP.</li> <li>Wildland Conservation in the Central Coast Ecoregion of California (Thorne et al. 2002): The property is within the linkage connecting the Santa Cruz and Gabilan Range.</li> </ul>	al. 2011 Spencer et al.	
	• <b>California Landscape Connectivity Analysis using Omniscape</b> (TNC 2018): The property is largely mapped as featuring 'medium diffuse to highly channelized' flow for the linkage connecting the Santa Cruz and Gabilan ranges (Figure 3).	2010	
	Connectivity between the Santa Cruz and Gabilan Ranges has been identified as critical in local, regional, and statewide analyses including the Land Trust's <i>Conservation Blueprint for Santa Cruz County</i> (Mackenzie et al. 2011) and the <i>California Essential Habitat Connectivity Project</i> (Spencer et al. 2010).		
Wildlife Crossing Area	• The property abuts a 2.5-mile-long stretch of US Highway 101 where Caltrans is working with conservation partners to study infrastructure improvements to facilitate wildlife passage	Shilling et al. 2017	
	<ul> <li>The section of US Highway 101 is a 'hot spot' for wildlife-vehicle collisions (Shilling et al.</li> <li>2017) The high incidence of roadkill there evidences the high frequency of animal</li> </ul>	Serieys et al. 2019	
	movement in the landscape linkage, which in turn reflects, at least in part, the intact habitat on Rocks Ranch, from which animals access the highway while moving north.	Gustafson et al. 2018	
	<ul> <li>A recent study of GPS collared bobcats identified Highway 101 as a barrier to north-south movement through the linkage (Series et al. 2019).</li> </ul>		

Table 2: Rocks Ranch Biodiversity Conservation Values			
Conservation Value	s Description	Sources	
	<ul> <li>A GPS collared mountain lion (M54) was killed in August 2016 while trying to cross US Highway 101 north of Rocks Ranch (C. Wilmers, unpublished data; Figure 2). Another mountain lion was killed near the northwestern Rocks Ranch gate near the Red Barn in May 2018 (T. Diamond, pers. comm. 2019).</li> <li>The current barrier presented by Highway 101 is likely a factor contributing to mountain lions in the Santa Cruz Mountains becoming genetically isolated from those in the remainder of the coast ranges in a manner that threatens long-term persistence of the species (Gustafson et al. 2018). Lack of connectivity between core habitat for mountain lion was cited as a key factor leading to the recent petition to list the species as a State threatened species (CBD and MLF 2019).</li> <li>Camera trapping and roadkill data collected along US Highway 101, along with assessments of existing infrastructure use and conditions, have been used to identify several wildlife crossing infrastructure</li> </ul>	CBD and MLF 2019 CFW 2011 PFW 2014 Huber et al. 2014 PFW 2018	
projects (e.g., culvert improvements) that could be conducted adjacent to Rocks Ranch wildlife movement through US Highway 101 and thus movement between the Santa Cr and Gabilan Range (CFW 2011, PFW 2014, Huber et al. 2014, PFW 2018, PFW unpublish	projects (e.g., culvert improvements) that could be conducted adjacent to Rocks Ranch to promote wildlife movement through US Highway 101 and thus movement between the Santa Cruz Mountains and Gabilan Range (CFW 2011, PFW 2014, Huber et al. 2014, PFW 2018, PFW unpublished data).		
Rare Species			
California Red- Legged Frog	<ul> <li>Rocks Ranch provides breeding as well as upland habitat for California red-legged frog (Figure 4).</li> <li>Breeding CRLF (adults and larvae) were documented in the large stock pond in southern part of San Benito County parcel 0113100040 in 2008 (CNDDB 2018). Other ponds, which may have yet to be surveyed, may also support the threatened species.</li> <li>Adult CRLF were also observed in 2001 in a drainage downstream (west) of Monterey County parcel 181141002000; the species may utilize the stream reaches as well as upland habitat</li> </ul>	CDFW 2019	
California Tiger Salamander	within Rocks Ranch. Rocks Ranch provides suitable breeding as well as upland habitat, including grasslands occupied by California ground squirrel. California tiger salamander has been documented in multiple locations	CDFW 2019	
	within 1 mile; the species moves more than 1 mile from breeding pools to aestivation sites (Figure 4).		

Table 2: Rocks Ranch Biodiversity Conservation Values			
Conservation Values	Description	Sources	
Other Potential Rare and Unique Species	<ul> <li>Rocks Ranch has the potential to many additional rare and endangered species including (Figure 4):</li> <li>Fragrant fritillary and Congdon's tarplant may occur in the grasslands;</li> <li>Western pond turtle may inhabit the ponds;</li> <li>Least Bell's vireo may utilize the property's extensive willow riparian woodlands for breeding, as this species was recorded on the western border of the property in 2000 (CDFW 2019);</li> <li>Western burrowing owl may nest in the extensive grasslands, which feature colonies of California ground squirrel which create burrows used by burrowing owls;</li> </ul>	Zander Associates 2003 CDFW 2019	
	<ul> <li>Tricolored blackbird may nest in the emergent wetland vegetation on the margins of the ponds;</li> <li>California condor and Golden Eagle may forage on the property, as well as potentially roost or even nest within the rock outcroppings on the site;</li> <li>San Joaquin kit fox may utilize the site's grasslands; and</li> <li>Tule elk may utilize the extensive grasslands, which lack paved roads.</li> </ul>		
Sensitive Communitie	es		
Grassland	The site features a complex mosaic of plant communities that are characteristic of the Mediterranean biome in Central Coastal California (TNC 2006), including expansive grasslands that support patchily dense native bunchgrasses including purple needle grass. The thin soils around the rock outcroppings may support diverse assemblages of native plant species adapted to the inimical conditions.	Zander Assoc. 2003	
Oak Woodlands	Rocks Ranch features coast live oak savannas and woodlands that provide habitat for diverse native animal assemblages and black-tailed deer. The property also features stands of California buckeye.	Zander Assoc. 2003	
Riparian	Willow scrub and woodlands line the streams in four main areas throughout the property (Figure 4), providing important habitat for a variety of wildlife species including neotropical migratory birds.	USFWS 2010	
Wetlands	The property features 10.2 acres of freshwater wetlands supporting hydrophytes adapted to season or perennial water occur in and around the extensive streams, ponds, seeps, and springs (Figure 4). Rocks Ranch features additional unmapped wetlands in association with smaller seeps and springs including those associated with the rock outcroppings in the grasslands (J. McGraw, pers. obs.).	USFWS 2010	

Table 2: Rocks Ranch Biodiversity Conservation Values			
Conservation Values	Description	Sources	
Streams	The site features 2.1 miles of intermittent streams (Figure 4) that are almost entirely within the Alisal- Elkhorn Slough Watershed. These streams provide freshwater inputs into Elkhorn Slough—one of California's most extensive and biodiverse wetland ecosystems.	USGS 2010	
Ponds, Springs, and Seeps	Rocks Ranch features 9 stock ponds (Figure 4) which support emergent aquatic vegetation including bulrush and smartweed. Additionally, numerous seeps and springs flow out of the southwest-facing slope on the grasslands in San Benito Parcel 0113100030, and support extensive wetland vegetation.	Zander Assoc. 2003	
Other Biological Cons	ervation Values and Assessments		
Area of Conservation Emphasis (ACE-II)	Land within Rocks Ranch was rated a '5' on a scale of 1-5 as part of the CDFW analysis, reflecting its high species richness, high levels of rarity and irreplaceability, and/or sensitive habitats.	CDFW 2015	
Climate Change Resilience	<ul> <li>As noted above, Rocks Ranch is located within the Gabilan Range to Santa Cruz Mountains landscape linkage, which is part of a 315-mile long latitudinal gradient between the Transverse Range Mountains and the tip of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Species can migrate north to stay within their climatic envelopes in a future hotter and likely drier climate (Cayan et al. 2008).</li> <li>The property is within a portion of the Gabilan Range that features a relatively cool mesoclimate (TNC 2010); plants and animals that more north into the property can more readily stay within their climate envelopes.</li> <li>Aspects of the site can confer resiliency to climate change (TNC 2010, Morelli et al. 2016):         <ul> <li>North-facing slopes supporting oak woodlands and drainages supporting riparian woodlands feature cooler microclimates;</li> <li>Streams, ponds, springs, and wetlands, support mesic, often shade-producing vegetation, provide a source of free water to animals, have cooler microclimates, and reflect important groundwater created historically that might persist into the hotter and likely drier future; and</li> <li>Variable abiotic conditions resulting from geologic substrates and variable topography will enable species to stay within their adapted climate envelopes during relatively short-</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Cayan et al. 2008 TNC 2010 Morelli et al. 2016	



Figure 2: Santa Cruz Mountains to Gabilan Range Bay Area Critical Linkage



Figure 3: Omniscape Linkage Illustrating Land According to its Conductivity to Animal Movement



Figure 4: Rare Species and Aquatic Communities (Wetlands and Streams) based on Regional Datasets

# 2 Conservation Threats and Opportunity

Due to its areas of relatively gentle terrain and proximity to US Highway 101, habitat in Rocks Ranch is threatened by intensified land use that could degrade and fragment its habitat, and potentially several the critical landscape linkage between the Santa Cruz Mountains and Gabilan Range. The Land Trust is working to safeguard sensitive habitat and wildlife connectivity in Rocks Ranch as part its larger *Southern Santa Cruz Mountains Connectivity Project*—a collaboration with other conservation organizations and transportation agencies to protect and enhance connectivity between the Santa Cruz Mountains and the Gabilan Range.

## 2.1 Threat

Rocks Ranch is situated in an area that makes it a prime target for residential and commercial development. The property is located along Highway 101, which is a major thoroughfare and provides access to commerce centers in Silicon Valley, where housing supply is limited and costs are high; Rocks Ranch is also close to the rapidly growing communities of Salinas and Hollister. Much of the land in Rocks Ranch has steep slopes (>30%); however, the valleys and areas along the streams have gentler terrain that is developable. These gently sloping areas also have some of the highest conservation value.

A 2007 conceptual plan developed on behalf of Standard Pacific Homes envisioned the construction of residential homes, a golf course, and retail centers in the San Benito parcels, with thoroughfare access across the northern portion of the property between Highway 101 and Rocks Road (EDAW and AECOM 2007; Figure 5). In 2015, San Benito County approved a new general plan that designated the area that includes Rocks Ranch as part of a "new community study area." According to the general plan, this area is designed to feature commercial development that would "capture sales tax dollars", and "provide middle to higher end housing with access to major roads" (San Benito County 2015). As part of work to implement the general plan, the County of San Benito rezoned 71.9 acres for as part of a 52-acre flat area along the creek separating the property from Highway 101, and a disjunct 19.9-acre hilltop area further inland that could support a hotel (Figure 1). As with the other four nodes envisioned to be developed along Highway 101 in San Benito County, the Rocks Ranch Node is intended to serve tourist traffic by providing accommodations, supplies, and services geared to travelers and visitors (EMC 2019).

Development of Rocks Ranch has the potential to impede wildlife movement between the Santa Cruz Mountains and Gabilan Range at this critical but tenuous part of the landscape linkage through a variety of mechanisms ('choke point'; JMc 2019); development would also negatively impact the site's sensitive habitats including ponds, streams, grasslands, and oak woodlands, and degrade habitat for rare species.

## 2.2 Opportunity

The Land Trust has signed a letter of intent with the owners of Rock Ranch to purchase the property for conservation. If successful, the acquisition will safeguard the site's value as a critical part of the choke point in the landscape linkage connecting the Santa Cruz and Gabilan ranges through the Aromas Hills. As part of its due diligence, the Land Trust is having the property appraised with and without the lower 52-acre area that was recently rezoned as a commercial regional node along US Highway 101 (Section 2.1), in anticipation that including this area in the acquisition will greatly increase the price. The Land Trust will work with partners to evaluate all conservation options as part of its work.



Figure 5: Conceptual Framework for a Prior Proposed Development (EDAW and AECOM 2007)

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