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Rare butterfly makes a royal South Bay comeback

The delicate little insects were in decline but hundreds of them have turned up munching and mating on native vegetation.>

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By Kristin S. Agostoni

STAFF WRITER

It slowed for a few seconds, fluttering its blue-gray wings around a bushy cluster of dune buckwheat. And then in a flash, the tiny specimen was gone, moving from plant to plant until it became lost along the steep hillside.

It's been weeks since scientists and wildlife experts first spotted the El Segundo blue butterfly on a 4-acre swath of coastal bluffs in Redondo Beach and Torrance, but the tiny insect's resurgence still has their hearts aflutter.

Even after a lengthy restoration project that involved pulling out invasive ice plant and replacing it with native vegetation, scientists never expected the endangered butterfly to return without human intervention.

"We didn't think it would happen," said Ann Dalkey, who serves as co-chair of the Beach Bluffs Restoration Project, a regional effort that started taking shape in 2001.

"No one figured that they would just do it on their own," Dalkey said. "You can see them like crazy. They're everywhere."

Dalkey and other experts agree the butterflies wouldn't have returned without the re-introduction of the native vegetation, and the butterflies prefer dune buckwheat. That work began in 2003 along a small stretch of land in Torrance, she said, followed by plantings the next year across the Redondo Beach border.

Redondo's part comes as a pilot program of the Beach Bluffs Restoration Project, a committee of residents, conservationists, government officials and representatives from the Urban Wildlands Group and Los Angeles Conservation Corps' SEA Lab. The goal is to one day bring native shrubs and wildflowers back to the coast from Malaga Cove to Ballona Creek.

Known populations of the El Segundo blue butterfly exist on property at Los Angeles

International Airport, El Segundo's Chevron Refinery and at Malaga Cove, said Travis Longcore, a science director with the Urban Wildlands Group who formerly served as Dalkey's co-chair.

The newcomers likely gravitated from the southernmost habitat roughly 1,000 feet away from the Torrance bluffs, contradicting a previous report, Longcore said; a study conducted in the early 1980s determined the species was fairly sedentary and wasn't likely to move more than 200 feet.

But now he admits the species and the new habitat have proved experts wrong. Scientists counted 238 butterflies in one recent survey, but considering the number of pupae on the buckwheat plants, the total count is much more than that, Longcore said.

Because it's mating season, the male butterflies can be spotted by the blue hues of their wings, fluttering from plant to plant "looking for action," Longcore added. The females, in contrast, are more gray or brown and can be found resting on the buckwheat flower heads.

Jane Hendron, a spokeswoman with the Carlsbad office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, called the butterflies' resurgence "phenomenal" in a beach area with such heavy traffic.

She said the office asks only that visitors stay on designated paths so the habitat can be preserved.

Dalkey said the first El Segundo blue butterfly was spotted June 19 by Monica Acosta, who oversees the SEA Lab plant nursery and coordinates volunteer programs. Dalkey walked the area the following day, and experts identified the insects not long afterward.

The discovery came just as project volunteers were planning to meet with the County Department of Beaches and Harbors in response to concerns about the restoration project, said Giancarlo Cetrulo, the SEA Lab's director and project co-chair.

The county, which has jurisdiction over the beach and bluffs, had received complaints that the native plants looked dead and couldn't stop the sand from blowing as well as the ice plant, said Chief Deputy Director Kerry Silverstrom. In addition, Silverstrom said visitors had begun to wander onto the bluffs, presumably because the native vegetation doesn't cover the area like the invasive ice plant.

Beaches and Harbors spokeswoman Dusty Crane said project officials had wanted the county to support an expansion of the restoration program. But with complaints mounting, Crane said both sides instead agreed to fill in the existing areas with new vegetation, a quarter-acre at a time.

City officials had also voiced concerns, prompting a meeting last week between Cetrulo and Mayor Mike Gin. Councilman Steve Aspel said he's received roughly 30 complaints about aesthetics alone.

"I understand we're in a drought, but they've got to do something more," Aspel said. "Blue butterfly or not, it's still pretty ugly."

In response to complaints, Cetrulo said plans are in the works to fill in the barren patches of hillside with greener native vegetation, including quail bush and sand verbena. The latter even

looks like ice plant, he said - it's just more delicate to the touch.

And after the dry summer season, project officials plan to focus on a better irrigation system that should help the leaves turn green. The existing plants aren't dead, he added, but have put more energy into growing and strengthening their root systems.

"Could it be better? Yes," Cetrulo said. "We could make it more aesthetically pleasing."

Still, the existing vegetation has already given scientists more than they imagined.

"We added this habitat, with the intention of just adding habitat," said Dalkey, who oversees science programs for the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy. "Well, nature has its own mind. This has been a tremendous surprise."

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- Gerrard

*posted: Tuesday, July 10th at 17:30 PM*

Are my prized petunias considered native vegetation?  
- David W.

*posted: Tuesday, July 10th at 10:57 AM*

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Chuck Bennett / Staff Photographer

The El Segundo blue butterfly, an insect on the federally endangered species list, rests on a buckwheat plant at Miramar Park in Torrance. El Segundo blues are making a comeback along the coast southwest of Los Angeles.

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The female of the El Segundo blue butterfly isn't blue. That honor is reserved for the males. The female is mostly speckled grey-brown. The butterflies are about the size of a thumbnail.

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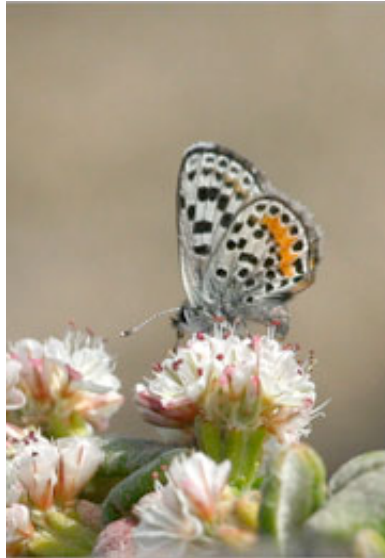
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The El Segundo blue butterfly, an insect on the endangered species list, has been seen on the bluffs at Miramar Park in Torrance.

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Scientists have been working to restore the habitat of the federally endangered El Segundo blue butterfly, but the tiny insects have suddenly made a resurgence on their own on the Torrance and Redondo beach bluffs.

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The El Segundo blue butterfly atop a dune buckwheat blossom in Miramar Park in Torrance.

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