



USC

Native Species Project

Californian nature information & conservation
Newsletter, July 2026



Next hike July 22: Marine life, Long Beach (subject to change). Email sigurdse@usc.edu

Common, but commonly overlooked (part deux). Squirrels and corvid birds are among the most common vertebrates around us, and are often found at the edge between human habitation and wilderness. Squirrels are important rodents in our environment, helping to spread plants through their storing caches of seeds. Ravens have apparently become more “people-friendly”, although they still like hilly wilderness. They have learned how to live close to us relatively recently (Kimball L. Garrett pers. Comm.), sometimes even in the middle of LA.

Common raven (*Corvus corax*). This “brainy” bird is the among the largest within Corvidae (crows, jays etc.). Being shiny black, it looks rather similar to the American crow, but is bigger, with heavier bill, and more wedge-shaped tail. They are quite omnivorous, but many ravens like to feed on carrion. Nests are large stick constructions, and abandoned raven nests are a favorite among species that don’t build their own nests (e.g. falcons). **Sound:** very varied, can even mimic human voices, but “rrah” “korrp” and smacking “cluck, cluck, cluck” are common. They often fluff up their throat feathers when vocalizing (see illustration, top left). **Fun fact:** The raven is perhaps the most intelligent bird species, often finding individual solutions to problems involved in getting food. They can also be quite playful, sometimes even somersaulting while flying, either for fun or to impress their mating partner.



Common raven living near human habitation, Agoura Hills. Photo: Trond Sigurdson.

Western gray squirrel (*Sciurus griseus*). Often found in the forested hills, seeing the western gray squirrel is usually a sign that you’re getting into the wilderness. Somewhat larger than the more “domestic” fox squirrels, they are mostly gray, but the belly is almost white. Favorite foods include pine nuts and acorns. **Fun fact:** this squirrel makes large nests made from twigs and leaves. It may look messy, but it has a cozy space inside. They are usually placed above ground, in branches or hollow trees.



Gray squirrel in San Gabriel Mts. Photos: Sooki Beeley.

Supporting local flora and fauna: Planting native species of trees (e.g. coast live oak in the lowlands, or sugar pine in the hills) supports both mammals and birds in our area.



<https://dornsife.usc.edu/bisc/undergraduate/usc-native-species-project/>

