

## **No Helicopter Noise Means Quieter Skies ... for Wildlife, Too!**

Helicopter noise is often intrusive and invasive for those enjoying trails in our parks and open space areas, especially in the vast expanse of the Santa Monica Mountain Range. Visitor experience is improved when the tranquil sounds of nature are not interrupted by loud helicopters in the sky. Noisy helicopters can also pose a direct hazard to equestrians who use the incredible network of trails, in that horses are susceptible to “spooking.”

While a peaceful soundscape for passive recreation is a significant goal for enjoyment and safety of people in open space areas, it is lesser known that wildlife also benefits by a quieter sky.

Scientific literature shows that noise can cause negative behavioral impacts in wildlife, for example, panic-escape behavior and nest abandonment. Communications between animals within a given species is important, and noise can both confuse and mask signals, leading to detrimental consequences.

The effect of sonic disturbance on various species is highly variable. For example, some bird species have become highly adapted to man-made sounds, while others have not. For some bird species, only “naïve” birds respond negatively to low-flying helicopters and then become habituated to them. Some species can turn up the volume of their vocalizations when it’s noisy, while others can’t, making them underdogs in a loud environment.

Behavioral ecologists are just now starting to dabble in modeling the energy economies related to sonic disturbance. In principle there is a cost to every animal’s response to noise disturbance, analogous to what has been shown to be the cost for anti-predator behavior, where there’s a trade-off with other activities such as eating. A deer, for example, is more efficient nibbling away on grass than standing attentively with ears erect or fleeing into dense cover. More dramatically, a deer may also become susceptible to predation if it can’t hear a pack of coyotes approaching.

A loud and disruptive environment may have global implications on otherwise healthy ecosystems, as the species comprising the system experience changes in their reproductive success and energy efficiencies, such as foraging behavior and anti-predatory behavior. Balances, densities and animal community structure may be jeopardized.

Griffith Park is a very highly impacted open space area, where the Hollywood Sign and the Griffith Observatory attract streams of tour helicopters. This rich and biodiverse wildland, in the middle of a sprawling city, supports many bobcats, deer, gray foxes, an abundance of birds, and for nearly four years, an adult mountain lion. Studies have shown that the noise “annoyance level” for hikers is generally “dose-related”, and one gets many doses here. The adverse impacts on wildlife are dose-related, as well.

In 2000, the National Park Service showed its concern about acoustical environment by establishing “Soundscape Policies.” Now, some National Parks have protections from helicopter noise.

It is clear that the FAA has the “authority to preserve, protect, and enhance the environment by minimizing, mitigating, or preventing the adverse effects of aircraft.” The FAA needs to do so in Los Angeles area soon, for people and for nature.

To learn how you can help reduce helicopter noise, look into the activities of the Los Angeles Area helicopter Noise Coalition at [LAHelicopterNoise.org/Mobilize/](http://LAHelicopterNoise.org/Mobilize/).