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News Articles

1. Drivers, Cyclists Learn To Share

Orange County Register

When it comes to drivers and bicyclists in Orange County, it's as if there are two warring tribes.

The problem is one tribe brought a fly swatter to what might as well be a gunfight. And many in that tribe act like they're invulnerable if not invisible.

Yes, the tribe seriously outmanned and lacking any defensive armor is the cyclists. The tribe with one- and two-ton speeding steel steeds? The drivers.

I'm on a ride-along with Newport Beach police during an operation that focuses on violations that lead to bike-vehicle collisions.

Finding cyclists shooting through red lights is about as difficult as catching Charlie Sheen doing something dumb.

Whoosh. There go two riders wearing orange-and-black Team Duke jerseys ripping through a red light.

Whoosh. There goes another cyclist, this one wearing a blue jersey. She slows to a near-stop, decides Coast Highway is clear and blows the red light.

But blaming cyclists for the crashes that maim and kill (in Orange County, we average a cyclist death a month; more than half involve crashes) ignores reality. Sure, there are errant cyclists. And they need to change their behavior.

But most cyclists are good people – Team Duke represents the John Wayne Cancer Foundation – and many crashes are driver error.

The law says that cyclists have a legal right to the road. And as drivers and citizens, we have a responsibility to help ensure everyone's safety.

Sgt. Damon Psaros pilots a Chevy Tahoe painted blue and white with NBPD plastered all over it.

We're at a red light at Coast Highway and Avocado Avenue. Psaros shakes his head in disbelief as the woman in blue pedals through the red saying, under his breath, "With a police vehicle right next to her."

Psaros is supervising Day 2 of Newport Beach's new Bicycle Safety Enforcement Operation. He wasn't planning on pulling anyone over. But geez.

Psaros gives his siren a short blast – woow – and maneuvers the Tahoe so it blocks other drivers from hitting the cyclist.

He grabs a black mic hanging near an array of computers and radios. The external loudspeaker crackles to life. "Please pull a few feet ahead."

The woman complies and dismounts. The goal of the operation is education, not enforcement, and this time Psaros lets the cyclist go with a warning. A ticket would have cost more than \$400.

The operation is also about building relations with a skittish cycling community that sometimes believes police don't care about it.

That attitude annoys me, a cyclist, but it's understandable when your friends are getting killed.

Psaros gives the cyclist the department's new Bicycle Safety brochure. Among other things it states: "Ride in the bicycle lane or the farthest right of the lane."

If you're a driver, that might sound like common sense. But some cyclists have different advice:

"Take the lane."

I ride the road. Sometimes taking a lane makes safety sense, particularly when there are parked cars or a cyclist is turning left. Sometimes it doesn't. But cyclists need to be clear about signaling their intentions, especially when turning.

There is something else in the Police Department's brochure sure to drive many cyclists bananas: "Ride in single file."

For many recreational cyclists, especially clubs, them's fightin' words.

But Newport Beach Police Chief Jay Johnson is a cyclist himself. He enlisted cyclists for input. He just wants people to obey the law and save lives.

California Vehicle Code 21202-A states: "Any person operating a bicycle upon a roadway at a speed less than the normal speed of traffic ... shall ride as close as practicable to the right-hand curb."

Of group riders, Psaros says: "They're impeding. They shouldn't be riding five abreast."

Like the chief, Psaros is a cyclist. A mountain biking dad who lives in Rancho Santa Margarita, he says he was riding the other week from a trailhead along Live Oak Canyon Road when a car nearly hit him.

Newport Beach averages nearly 100 cycling accidents a year, and Laguna Beach, Costa Mesa and Huntington Beach have joined it in the education/crackdown operation. But all cities deal with cyclist-vehicle crashes, and the program should be countywide.

The radio crackles. Someone else has broken the law.

This one's a driver.

Finding drivers who break the law is even easier than spotting scofflaw cyclists. I know. I've sat next to them in traffic school.

Psaros stops on Newport Coast Drive. Officer Shawn Dugan gives the driver of a sedan a ticket for going 89 mph in a 60 mph zone.

"People driving at that speed," Dugan explains, "can create a vacuum and pull a cyclist into the roadway."

Four cyclists have been killed in Newport Beach in crashes over the past two years. Drivers turning left are especially dangerous.

In the most recent fatality, which occurred Feb. 21, police say the cyclist, Amine Britel, was doing everything correctly.

Britel earned his MBA at Harvard, represented Morocco as a triathlete in the 2004 Olympics and had his own tour company in Newport Beach.

My heart goes out to Britel's family. And it goes out to the driver and her family. She's 22 years old, a year younger than my daughter. But if she's guilty, her life is changed forever.

I check out Britel's bicycle. It's a broken mess of carbon fiber and titanium. It looks like other bikes I've seen hit by cars.

I know a widow and a widower. Both lost their spouses when sober but distracted drivers drifted into bike lanes.

Obey the laws. Share the road. Save a life.

2. For The Birds

By Janet Wilson

University of California, Irvine

UCI biologists are creating a welcoming habitat near campus that they hope will help the cactus wren thrive. Credit: Steve Zylus / University Communications
Kristine Preston steps softly onto UC Irvine's Ecological Preserve, 62 acres of cheerful wildflowers and sweet-smelling sage scrub tucked above University Hills. "We had a pair of birds using this plant two days ago, which is just incredible," she whispers, pointing to a large prickly pear cactus. The 40-year-old plant is one of a whole stand recently transplanted from a campus area slated for development to a formerly weed-strewn four-acre patch of the preserve.

Preston, science program director for the Nature Reserve of Orange County, is glad to see the cacti seem to be doing well. But she's more interested in what could be hiding in the dense, bristling pads. Slowly, she draws close, binoculars at the ready. Disappointment. No noise, no flash of feathers.

Preston is on the hunt for a cactus wren, a cheeky brown-and-white bird once common in coastal Southern California. She's thrilled that she spotted a male and female in this little stretch of sage scrub earlier in the week. Born last year in nearby territory, the male was caught and banded with orange over white on his right leg. He appears to have taken up with a female born in 2009, banded in red and dubbed a "floater" because she has no established territory. The male's father rules the adjacent land, so if this pair has already made itself at home in the newly transplanted cactus, it will be a major success — with babies possible by spring. But even when cactus wrens do hatch, they face tough odds finding their own home. Most of the bird's habitat has been chopped, lopped and crisscrossed by highways, housing tracts and shopping malls. The Laguna Beach fire of 1993 and Santiago fire of 2007 each killed most of the birds on county reserve lands and scorched 75 percent of their precious remaining habitat.

"There's been massive overdevelopment, and the fires really hurt," says Peter Bowler, a UCI senior lecturer in ecology & evolutionary biology who has been studying or teaching at the campus since 1970. He gazes from the hilltop preserve at a slope filled with houses. "This all used to be wilderness."

But biologists in suburbia learn to work with what they've got, as do the creatures they study. Bowler, Preston and Margot Griswold, a veteran restoration ecologist hired by the Orange County Transportation Corridor Agencies, are spearheading a collaborative effort to bring the birds back.

The four-acre cactus restoration program is part of a \$600,000 project funded by the California Department of Transportation and the Orange County Transportation Authority in exchange for bulldozing sage scrub for roads elsewhere. Another eight acres at the preserve will be stripped of invasive plants with no natural predators that are crowding out beautiful native grasses and wildflowers.

The aim is to nurture a loose chain of cactus wren habitat patches stretching from near the Fashion Island mall to above the Coyote Canyon Landfill. These bits of habitat could serve as signposts to cactus wrens that there are other homes available — which could prevent inbreeding and genetic loss.

The transplanted mini cactus forest, on a knobby knoll and adjoining slopes above State Route 73, is a key piece. Biologists hope the normally sedentary birds will perch there, spy the distinctive outlines of existing cacti and sage scrub on the other side of the freeway and fly over eight lanes of traffic to reach it.

"The UCI preserve has one of the largest wren populations in the area, and in addition to providing new cacti for them to use here, cacti will be placed in line-of-sight locations to link the preserve with other populations," Bowler says. "This is a very exciting project."

On a sparkling morning at the preserve, birdsong rises over the drone of traffic and planes taking off from John Wayne Airport. Dozens of birds are happily chirping, whirring and circling. A flock of tiny bushtits dances between silvery green artemisia and blooming pink lemonade berry bushes.

Sparrows, towhees, even Bewick's wrens and federally threatened California gnatcatchers are all visible. The cactus wrens, though, have vanished. A good-sized Cooper's hawk perches hungrily on a fence post, worrying Preston.

The cactus wren has a long, hooked beak; a razor-top head; and a sleek, dark bar across its cheeks and beady red eyes. It's a medium-sized bird that takes shelter from hawks, snakes and other predators in a cactus's piercing needles. But it doesn't always get there in time.

Slowly, Preston circles the preserve, narrating a virtual wren soap opera: A first "wife" was booted out by a younger "wife" and flew across the toll road, finding a new mate and home. There have been a lot of cactus wren "divorces" lately, Preston says, and she's not sure why.

The male bird she's looking for may have been driven out by its father, anxious to preserve his own precious habitat. Preston has also forgotten her bird-call tape, which she hoped to use to rustle up the wren. It's been that kind of morning. Still, it's a beautiful day.

There's a click-clicking in a low tangle of buckwheat and coastal cholla cacti. It is a cactus wren, annoyed by noisy intruders but not the one she's seeking.

Finally, Preston turns to head back to her car. Something catches her attention, way back on the first cactus. It's her bird, perched on the very top, preening and cocking an eye at the blue sky.

3. Los Angeles Adopts Plan To Quadruple Bike Lane Miles

Associated Press

Los Angeles officials approved a plan Tuesday that aims to get residents of the notoriously auto-centric city out of cars and onto bicycles by linking its sprawling communities with an extensive network of bicycle lanes and trails.

The bicycle master plan unanimously approved by the City Council sets a long-term goal of some 1,680 miles of interconnected bikeways and calls for 200 miles to be added every five years.

The city now has fewer than 400 miles of bikeways in a patchwork of segments. "We've always given the automobile the priority, and the bicycles were secondary," Councilman Ed Reyes said. "Now we're changing and we're having a cultural shift." Bike enthusiasts had lobbied vigorously for the plan, arguing that sharing streets with cars, as most do now, is too dangerous.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa also became a fierce advocate for designated bike lanes last year, after he shattered an elbow in a bike accident with a taxi cab.

The mayor was scheduled to lead a morning rally today to celebrate the plan's passage with city officials, cycling activists, health advocates and others.

"We are investing in bicycling as a viable transportation option and in the process encouraging Angelenos to lead healthy, active lifestyles," Villaraigosa said in a statement after the council voted.

"Los Angeles is on the path to becoming a world-class city for bicycling," he said.

Councilman Bill Rosendahl said Measure R, a transportation sales tax approved by county voters in 2008, could provide some \$1.75 million each year for bike infrastructure, with additional funding coming from state and city transit agency sources.

Bike infrastructure improvements were a wise investment for a growing metropolis, said Reyes, his council colleague.

“It's estimated that the population of the city will double in the next 10 to 15 years, and we don't have any more room for bigger cars,” he said.

4. CA High Speed Rail Authority Meets in Los Angeles, Tomorrow

By Dana Gabbard
L.A. Streetblog

As Damien has noted the California High Speed Rail Authority is coming to L.A. this week, specifically to the Metro Board Room (3rd floor of the Taj Mahal, as some of us like to call the Metro Headquarters Building). Wednesday afternoon its Executive/Administrative Committee is meeting at 1 p.m., followed by the Finance Committee at 2 p.m. and the Operations Committee at 3:30 p.m.

Then on Thursday starting at 9 a.m. the Board is meeting; its agenda and the various reports being presented are available online.

Besides the alignment updates being presented the meeting is significant for Southern California because it will be the first since Alex Clifford left his role as Metro's high speed rail liaison. It was in 2009 that Metro CEO Art Leahy appointed Alex Clifford (then General Manager of Metro's Gateway Cities Service Sector) to be Executive Officer (EO), High Speed Rail for the agency. In that capacity Clifford provided executive direction to project management staff and consultants to facilitate the implementation of High Speed Rail (HSR) projects, including planning and implementing the Los Angeles to Anaheim, Los Angeles to Palmdale and Los Angeles to San Diego HSR corridors. The position also had responsibility for representing Metro for the Los Angeles-San Diego-San Luis Obispo (LOSSAN), Amtrak and Metrolink service corridors (Per agenda item #24 heard at the Metro Board Sept. 24, 2009 meeting).

Clifford was an ideal choice for the position due to his unique qualifications. He spent eight years serving on the Riverside City Council (1991-2000) and in that capacity represented the City of Riverside on the Riverside County Transportation Commission (RCTC) and was elected chairman for two consecutive years. He also represented the City of Riverside on the Riverside Transit Agency for eight years. Clifford also was appointed by the RCTC to represent Riverside County on the Southern California Regional Rail Authority (SCRRA/Metrolink) and served as

chairman for two consecutive years. His other transportation experience included the Intercity Rail Joint Powers Authority, the RCTC/SANBAG California High Speed Rail Subcommittee and the California/Nevada Super Speed Train Commission (Per a Metro press release announcing Clifford's appointment to being General Manager of the Gateway Service Sector). A balance of technical knowledge and political savvy helped Clifford calm the waters when various local jurisdictions started to rebel at the potential magnitude of the impact of constructing the high speed line.

So where did Clifford go? To be the new head of Chicago's Metra System (their equivalent of Metrolink, albeit serving nearly 8 times the ridership — 42,000 for Metrolink versus 307,000 for Metra). The Chicago Tribune describes him as quickly taking action to begin shaking up the agency by posting a message on Metra's website promising reform and soliciting input from riders with a survey. Clifford's task is to pick up the pieces in the wake of a scandal in which longtime Executive Director Phil Pagano was caught engaged in financial improprieties and last May committed suicide by walking in front of one of his own agency's trains. Obviously Clifford has a lot on his plate at his new job.

And where does that leave Metro in dealing with bullet train issues? I have to think it will be difficult to find someone with the skill set and background Clifford brought to the task. And I've heard no hint how far the search has progressed for Clifford's successor.

5. Correction

Orange County Register

A Register editorial ["California should kill 'train to nowhere,'" Feb. 24] said the initially approved segment of the proposed high-speed rail project would connect "the tiny towns of Borden and Corcoran." On Dec. 9, 2010, the High Speed Rail Authority approved using an additional \$616 million in federal funds to extend that segment farther south, but how far is largely dependent on pending environmental reviews, Authority Deputy Executive Director Jeffrey M. Barker said. At most, the line could be extended about 58 miles, to the outskirts of Bakersfield. At the least, it could be extended 15 miles beyond Corcoran.

We regret the reporting error.

6. Derail High-Speed Rail

Orange County Register
(Letter to the Editor)

-RANCHO SANTA MARGARITA, Ted Mizerek: I don't believe we need or want a high-speed rail line in California, and I'd like to know how much compensation the board members and staff of the California High-Speed Authority receive. They are

projecting transit times for this ride. Are they projecting what the fares will be? How much cheaper will it be to take the train than to fly?

7. Cyclist Hit By Train Dies From Injuries

By Steven Barrie
Riverside Press-Enterprise

A bicyclist hit by a train Tuesday afternoon in Riverside died several hours later after suffering head injuries and broken bones, authorities said.

Police did not release the man's name. An ambulance took him to Riverside Community Hospital, where he died at 7:15 p.m., confirmed Riverside police Lt. Andy Flores.

The cyclist and his girlfriend, also on a bicycle, waited at the railroad crossing on Adams Street, east of Highway 91, for a train to pass just after noon, Riverside police said in a news release.

After the westbound train had cleared the crossing, the man rode around the still-down crossing arms and into the path of an eastbound BNSF Railway freight train on a parallel track, police said.

Riverside fire and American Medical Response paramedics treated the man at the scene for the head wound and broken bones.

The accident was the third time in less than two years that someone has crossed railroad tracks in Riverside after a train passed, only to be struck by a train coming from the other direction on a parallel track.

Alana Joy Kerr, 15, was walking home when she was struck and killed Feb. 8 by a westbound Metrolink train.

Alana waited for an eastbound freight train to pass on tracks crossing Buchanan Street near Magnolia Avenue, then, although the crossing gate was down and warning lights were flashing, walked into the path of the commuter train on a parallel track. She was a sophomore at Norte Vista High School in Riverside.

In April 2009, Arlington High School student Samuel Sung-Jae Shin, 14, was on his way to school when he waited for a westbound commuter train to pass, then walked in front of an eastbound Metrolink train at the Jackson Street crossing in Riverside. His death prompted the city to install signs at rail crossings warning people of multiple tracks with trains passing from both directions.