

ALERT

TOP STORY

Oro Valley resident already writing the book on new nature preserve

Henry Brean

Jul 15, 2022



A bobcat with its roadrunner prey inside the Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve in Oro Valley on June 25. Jake Smith, a neighbor of the preserve who is documenting species he sees there, took the photo and said watching the bobcat stalk the roadrunner was his favorite observation there so far.

Jake Smith photos

Henry Brean

By the time Oro Valley officially opened its new nature preserve on Friday, Jake Smith had already gotten to know more than 250 of the residents there.

Smith lives about a block from Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve, and he rides his bicycle there almost every day. Since February, he has identified more than 1,000 plants and animals from 255 different species within the preserve, recording each of them using the biodiversity social networking website **iNaturalist.org**.

Now he has turned his observations — and some of the photographs he took to go with them — into a digital field guide for visitors to the new preserve, which snakes through the Rancho Vistoso community north of Tangerine Road.

“The goal is to reflect what’s most common and most notable out there,” Smith said.



Residents gathered for a ribbon cutting ceremony for the Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve in Oro Valley on Friday. The former golf course, which is 202 acres, is now a nature preserve and can never be developed.

Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star

The 202-acre desert green space surrounded by homes used to be an 18-hole golf course that operated for more than 20 years before going out of business in 2018.

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When the owners of the property floated plans to cover it with homes or an assisted-living facility, a group of neighborhood activists teamed up with national nonprofit The Conservation Fund to buy the land and save it from development.

The neighborhood group known as Preserve Vistoso raised \$1.8 million in just five weeks late last year to acquire the abandoned Golf Club at Vistoso.

The land was donated to the town of Oro Valley earlier this month, but not before a conservation easement was placed on the property to ensure it is only ever used as a park.

Miles of trails

On Friday morning, more than 100 people gathered under shade tents on what used to be the ninth hole, as town officials, members of Preserve Vistoso and others involved in the conservation effort held a celebratory ribbon cutting for the preserve.

Later this year, with input from Oro Valley residents, the town will begin drafting a master plan to guide improvements to its newest outdoor amenity, which already features 6 miles of paved pathways perfect for walking, bicycling and bird watching.

Smith and his wife moved into Rancho Vistoso with their son, Kip, 8, and daughter, Bell, 5, less than two years ago. They started using the trails through the abandoned golf course in January.

“It’s been a real resource for our family to be outdoors with our kids out there,” he said.

Smith didn't set out to make a field guide for the preserve. He was just trying to log as many iNaturalist entries as he could from the area.

The website, now operated jointly by the California Academy of Sciences and the National Geographic Society, is designed to make it easy for citizen scientists to observe, map and share information on biodiversity around the world. It is free and open to anyone who wants to report a plant or animal sighting.



A red-spotted toad sits at the Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve.

Jake Smith

Smith said he started posting his nature encounters on the site about a year ago. As of now, he is responsible for about two-thirds of all the observations that appear on iNaturalist for the Vistoso Trails area, though he said there are also sightings on there that date back to when the golf course was still open.

Those older observations include “stuff that’s not there anymore” such as water fowl that used to hang out in the ponds on the golf course before they went dry, Smith said.

His quest to document stuff living in the preserve intensified about two months ago, when he set out to compile all the iNaturalist sightings for the area into a field guide for the new park.

“Hours turned into probably hundreds of hours spent out there making observations and taking pictures,” he said.



The Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve was home to a golf course that closed in 2018. The land was initially bought by a national nonprofit, The Conservation Fund, which partnered with a local group called Preserve Vistoso. The preserve now falls under the town of Oro Valley's parks and recreation.

Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star

Wildlife aplenty

The resulting guide is 167 pages long, with sections devoted to mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, insects, plants and even fungi. There are roughly 180 photos, all but about a dozen of which he took himself.

Smith said his favorite observation came on June 25, when he got to watch a bobcat stalk and catch a roadrunner. "I got some good pictures of it, too," he said.

The guide is now undergoing final edits and rewrites with the help of some experts who are more well-versed in desert flora and fauna than he is.

Once that's done, Smith plans to hand the whole thing over to Preserve Vistoso so it can be made available for free on the group's website, perhaps in as little as a few weeks.

Watch now: Vistoso Trails Nature Preserves

There are no immediate plans for a printed version of the guide, though he said Preserve Vistoso might decide to sell it that way someday as a fundraiser for the preserve.

Smith was still adding entries to the guide as recently as Tuesday night.

That's when he went for a ride through Vistoso Trails after a monsoon storm and encountered what he described as "a biblical quantity of toads" hopping along the old golf cart paths in search of, um, playing partners.

He cataloged four different types of amorous amphibians during his bike ride that evening, including two species that were new to him.

Until this week, Smith hadn't seen a Couch's spadefoot or a Great Plains toad out at the preserve. Now he's bumped into them both, and he has the pictures to prove it.

Photos: 202-acre Oro Valley golf course becomes a nature preserve

Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve



The Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley, Ariz. on July 15, 2022. The preserve was once home to a 202-acre golf course that closed in 2018.

Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star

Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve



Mike Ford, of the Conservation Fund, talks during a ribbon cutting ceremony for the Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve, on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley, Ariz. on July 15, 2022. The former golf-course which is 202-acres of land is now a nature preserve and can never be developed.

Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star

Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve



Residents gathered for a ribbon cutting ceremony for the Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley, Ariz. on July 15, 2022. The former golf-course which is 202-acres of land is now a nature preserve and can never be developed.

Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star

Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve



Joe Winfield, mayor of Oro Valley, talks during a ribbon cutting ceremony for the Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve, on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley, Ariz. on July 15, 2022. The former golf-course which is 202-acres of land is now a nature preserve and can never be developed.

Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star

Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve



John McAlister takes a walk at the Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley, Ariz. on July 15, 2022.

Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star

Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve



Remnants of the golf course can be seen at the Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley, Ariz. on July 15, 2022. The preserve was once home to a 202-acre golf course that closed in 2018.

Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star

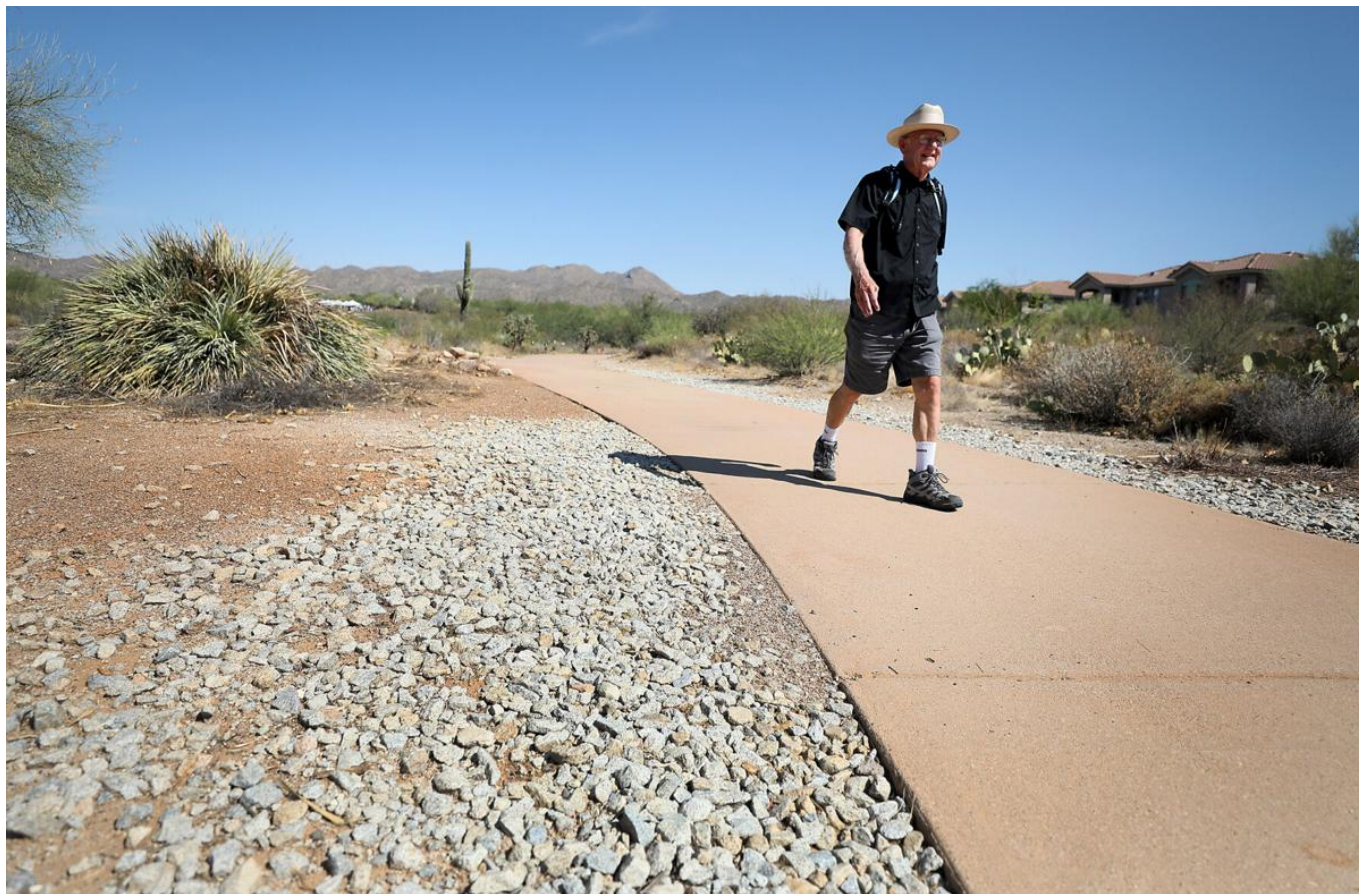
Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve



The Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley, Ariz. on July 15, 2022. The preserve was once home to a 202-acre golf course that closed in 2018.

Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star

Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve



Rich Bingle takes a walk at the Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley, Ariz. on July 15, 2022.

Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star

Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve



The Vistoso Trails Nature Preserve on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley, Ariz. on July 15, 2022. The land was initially bought by a national nonprofit, The Conservation Fund, which partnered with a local group called Preserve Vistoso. The preserve now falls under the town of Oro Valley's parks and recreation.

Mamta Popat, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, conservation, open space



A lone javelina strolls along the fairway that has gone fallow since 2018 at the 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, Oro Valley, conservation



Mother Nature is reclaiming the water-intensive, all-grass fairways on the 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley. Once inside the former golf course, there is little evidence it is ringed by homes and apartments.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

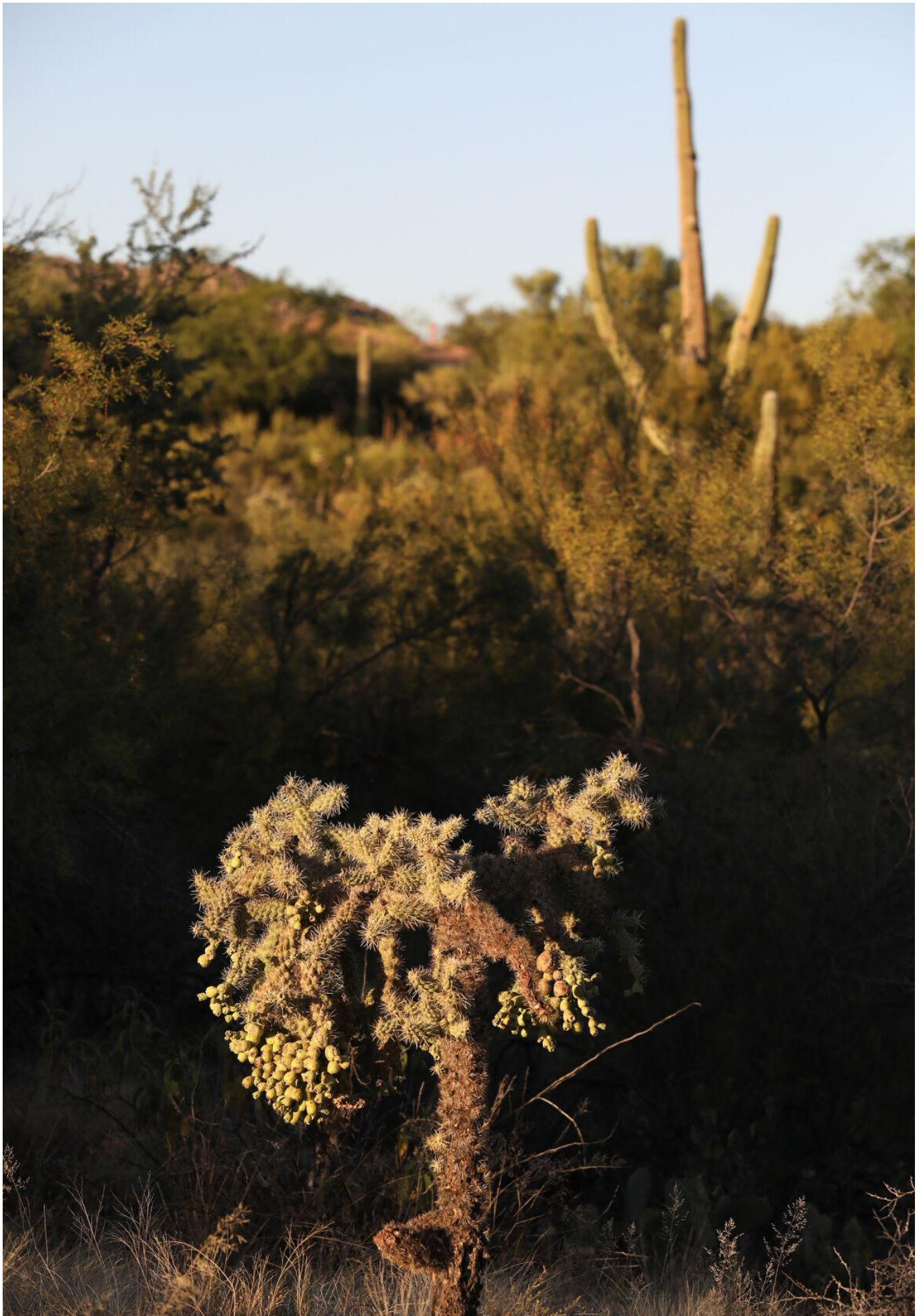
Golf Club at Vistoso, Oro Valley, conservation



Grasses, some non-native, have overtaken areas of the 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, Oro Valley, conservation





The evening sun spotlights a cholla cactus on the 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, Oro Valley, conservation



Then: A golfer retrieves his ball from the cup on the 3rd hole at the Golf Club at Vistoso in May, 2018, shortly before the course was closed. Now: By October, 2021, there is little evidence that the 3rd hole existed.

Mike Chirsty and Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, Oro Valley, conservation



Then: Golfers on the ninth hole near the clubhouse at the Golf Club at Vistoso in Oro Valley in 2010. Now: Three years after the irrigation was turned off, weeds poke through the desiccated sod on the ninth hole in October, 2021.

Jill Torrance and Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, Oro Valley, conservation



Morning doves rest on tree branches on the 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, Oro Valley, conservation



Apartments along Vistoso Highlands Drive peak above the lush landscape on the 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, conservation, open space



The fairway is slowly returning to nature, looking east to Pusch Ridge from a tee box at the 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, Oro Valley, conservation



The cart path makes a sharp turn on the way to the 3rd tee on the 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, conservation, open space



A couple walks their dog long the patch that fronts the driving range at the 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, conservation, open space



The six miles of high-quality concrete cart paths are a major feature in the conservation plans for the abandoned Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, conservation, open space



A volunteer mesquite tree and scrub overtake the once-grassy driving range at the 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, conservation, open space





A petroglyph off the cart path at the 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, conservation, open space



The extensive irrigation system throughout the the abandoned 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley could be used to jump start native revegetation.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, conservation, open space



Bathrooms near the first tee, as well as two other locations, are included in the plan for the abandoned 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, conservation, open space



Residents can walk and ride the six-miles of cart paths on the 202-acre Golf Club at Vistoso on W. Vistoso Highlands Drive in Oro Valley.

Rick Wiley, Arizona Daily Star

Golf Club at Vistoso, conservation, open space