Guthrie, D.A., "Bird Observations for Spring 2000 in the Proposed Potrero and Long Canyon Development Area near Valencia, California" (July 17, 2000; 2000A)

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BIRD OBSERVATIONS FOR SPRING 2000 IN THE PROPOSED POTRERO AND LONG CANYON DEVELOPMENT AREA NEAR VALENCIA, CALIFORNIA

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Nature and Scope of Surveys

During the spring and early summer of 2000 surveys were conducted within the boundaries of the proposed Potrero and Long Canyon Project (Figure 1). Surveys were focused on determining presence or absence of burrowing owl, raptoral birds and California gnatcatcher, and followed U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Guidelines for the gnatcatcher. Numbers of all species observed were noted (Table 1), and, in addition to the species noted above, special attention was placed on locating species considered rare and endangered or of Special Concern, and on determining numbers of brown-headed cowbirds.

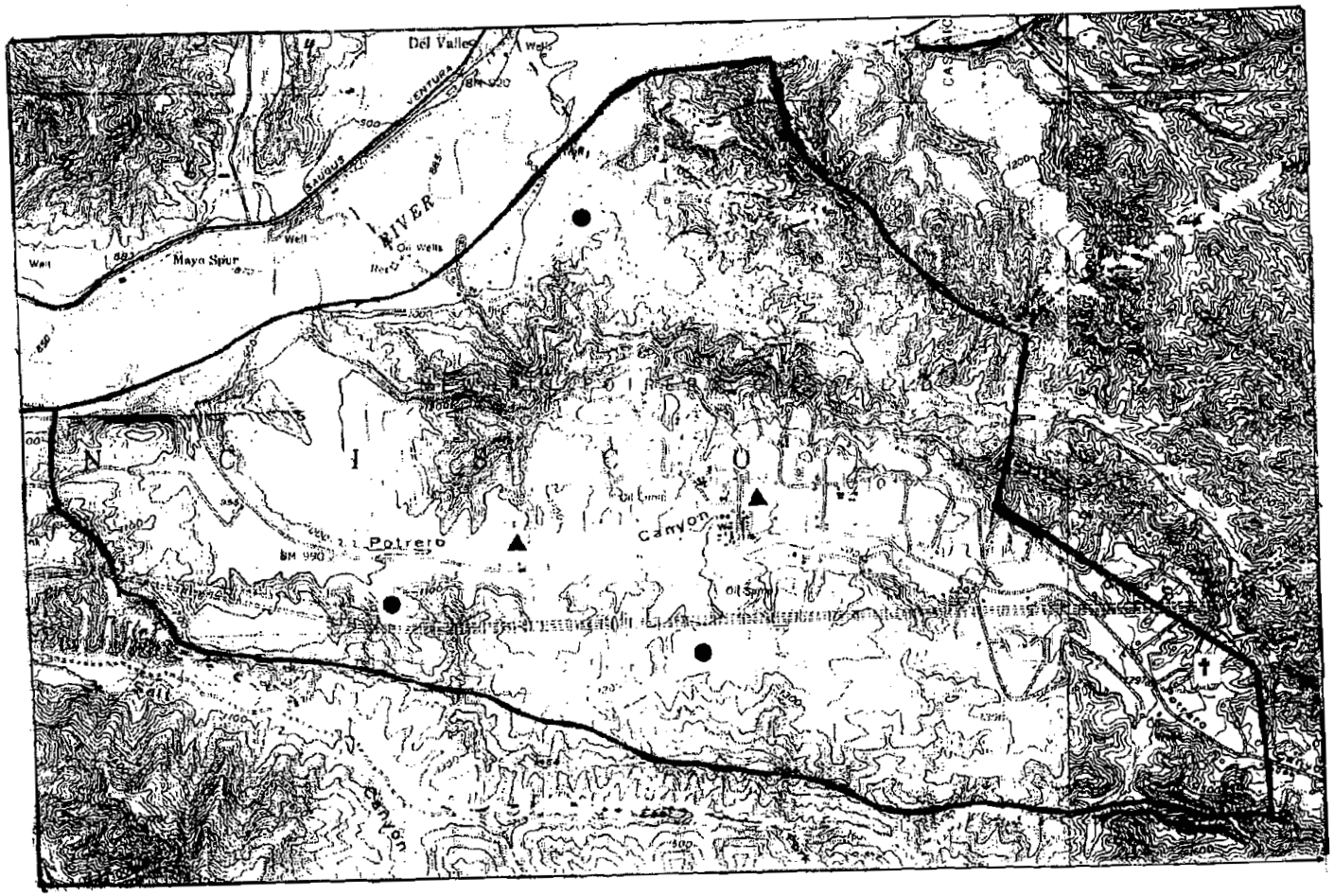
Each survey was conducted on foot by observers well acquainted with both visual and auditory characteristics of southern California birds. Except for a single survey at night for owls and other nocturnal species, all surveys occurred between 5:30 and 10:30 a.m. If focus species (California gnatcatcher), were not visually observed, tapes of their calls were played in an attempt to elicit a response. Survey routes were designed to visit all areas within the Proposed Project Area. However, routes for regular coverage were selected through preliminary surveys and with the aid of detailed aerial photographic vegetational maps and were designed to cover all areas of appropriate habitat for each focus species. Personnel for all surveys were Daniel A. Guthrie and Judith A. Sugden, both working under Federal Fish and Wildlife Service Permit number TE810394-1, issued under section 10(a)(1)(A) of the Endangered Species Act.

Habitat Condition and Bird Observations

The project area is roughly triangular in shape, bounded on the south by a ridge between Potrero and Salt Canyons, on the northeast by a ridge along the northern side of Long Canyon, and on the northwest by the Santa Clara River. The property consists of two valleys, Potrero Canyon to the south and the lower half of Long Canyon to the north. Both valleys are generally east –west valleys, running westward into the Santa Clara River.

Potrero Canyon is a wide, gently sloping valley. Most of the valley is an active cattle ranch and cattle were grazing throughout the study period. Native plants have been removed from most of the valley and replaced with pasture grasses. The floor of the valley was mowed in May and June. Small streambeds with a narrow band of riparian vegetation meandered down

Figure 1. Topographic map of Potrero and Long Valleys, Valencia, California, showing raptor observations.



- Boundary of Study area
- ● - red-tailed hawk nest
- ▲ - American kestrel nest
- † - Western Screech Owl sighting

Base Map: U.S.G.S. 7.5 minute topographic map for Newhall, 1952 and Val Verde, 1968, California, both photorevised 1988.

the valley but were dry during the study period. Alkaline moist soils formed marshy areas in several spots on the western end of this valley. Scattered oak trees dot the hills on the southern side of the valley and coastal sage is found on higher slopes on both sides of the valley.

The top (eastern) half of Portrero Canyon is an active oil field, and during this study there was much activity associated with closing the oil field and removing equipment and contaminated soils. For this reason most field work was done on weekends to avoid this disturbance.

Long Valley forms a narrow canyon with steep sides. The canyon bottom supports scattered oaks and Great Basin sage while the canyon sides are covered with coastal sage vegetation. The mouth of the canyon and the hilltop between the mouth of this canyon and Potrero Canyon are actively farmed and were under cultivation during the survey. Long Valley is also an active oil field, and oil activity was being curtailed during this study, involving removal of oil equipment and contaminated soil. Access to Potrero Valley, Long Valley, and the ridges between these two valleys and along the north side of Long Valley was greatly facilitated by a network of oil field roads.

Observations of all birds are shown in Table 1. The numbers shown are of birds seen and heard, with heard individuals forming the majority of the observations. Numbers vary between censuses for several reasons. First, there was fog on some censuses which decreased bird activity. Secondly, some censuses were not complete but, rather, were focused on particular places or areas. Thirdly, bird activity varies with season. Different species breed at different times of the year. In general, species are most easily observed when they are actively defending territories by song during the establishment of breeding pairs. Once pairs are established and nesting begins song often decreases and the numbers of birds observed, therefore, also decreases. After young leave the nest, numbers observed increase. Thus, for most resident species, numbers of adult birds are most accurately censused in April and May, when territorial activity is at a maximum. A few species such as Anna's hummingbird that nest early in the season may be underestimated. Numbers of nesting species observed may be higher than normal in May due to migratory birds passing through the area, then decrease slightly in June and early July when birds are less active during nesting, and increase in late June and July when young birds leave the nest.

The avifauna of Potrero Canyon consists of species common to grasslands, such as western meadowlark, lark Sparrow, red-winged blackbird and kingbirds. Swallows nesting on cliffs along the Santa Clara River were frequently observed foraging over the area. In the oak trees acorn woodpecker and oak titmouse are found while in the areas of coastal sage California quail, Bewick's wren, lazuli bunting, California towhee, California thrasher and rufous-crowned sparrow are the common species. House finch, orioles and phainopepla were common in elderberry and tree tobacco along the valley floor.

The avifauna of Long Canyon consists mostly coastal sage species on the canyon sides and oak woodland species along the canyon bottom. The irrigated agricultural fields at the mouth of Long Canyon attract ravens and a few riparian species such as blue grosbeak and

yellowthroat. Cliffs along the Santa Clara River and an isolated canyon extending up from the Santa Clara River between Long and Potrero Canyon provided nesting places for ravens, swallows and probably owls.

Comments on Threatened and Endangered Species

California Gnatcatcher

The California Gnatcatcher is listed as a Threatened species under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Survey routes were selected to cover prime habitat for California Gnatcatcher, namely, stands of dense Coastal Sage Scrub. Surveys followed the protocol for non-NCCP areas, involving 6 surveys of each area, occurring between March 15 and June 30 (see Table 1 for exact dates). Each survey involved two observers and lasted about 4 hours (6 to 10 am), with each observer covering an area containing about 80 acres of suitable habitat. Although all areas of coastal sage scrub habitat were surveyed, particular attention was placed on more open scrub areas dominated by California sage as this type of vegetation has been shown to be preferred by gnatcatchers (see below). Tapes of California gnatcatcher calls were played at regular intervals along all survey routes. No California gnatcatchers were heard or observed.

Weaver, in his study of coastal sage scrub variations and their influence on the California gnatcatcher (Western Birds v. 29, 1998, pp. 392-405) noted that black sage scrub replaced other coastal sage scrub types in which California sage was more dominant as one proceeded inland in San Diego County. He observed that black sage forms a closed canopy resulting in a poorly developed herb layer. He also noted that California gnatcatcher was only found in this association when California sage was a co-dominant plant. The coastal sage scrub vegetation in the study area consists of a mixture of black sage (*Salvia mellifera*) and California sage (*Artemisia californica*) on the hillsides and Great Basin sage (*Artemisia tridentata*) in the valleys. Thus, although the valley floor vegetation is unsuitable for gnatcatchers, the hillside coastal sage community seems suitable for gnatcatchers.

It was observed that, on days when rain and heavy fog occurred in the Los Angeles and Ventura Basins, the area around Newhall was sunny, with this clear weather extending down the Santa Clara River canyon to just beyond the Ventura County line. This lack of coastal fog in the Newhall area results in both hotter and drier conditions in the study area during the summer, and cooler temperatures at night. It is known that the California gnatcatcher is limited in its range by energetic constraints, namely cold temperatures (see Mock, Western Birds 29:413-420, 1998) which can be caused by higher elevation and lack of insulation by cloud cover. Although temperatures at the Newhall weather station (reported by Mock) are not too cold for gnatcatchers, the surviving coastal sage scrub habitat, restricted to the higher elevations on the property, may be colder than the weather station location.

Although no California gnatcatcher were observed, blue-gray gnatcatchers were found and probably nested within the study site. This species, as well as young of wrens and

towhees were frequently found when searching for the source of calls similar to those of gnatcatchers. All calls that were investigated turned out to be from species other than the California gnatcatcher.

Comments on Sensitive Species

Burrowing Owl

The burrowing owl is a Bird of Management Concern of the Fish and Wildlife Service. No burrowing owls were observed, in the study area, nor was this species observed by us in areas to the north and east of the project that were surveyed for this species during 2000.

Raptors

Several hawks were observed. A northern harrier, observed on March 24th and a prairie falcon, observed on April 7th, were probably in migration. White-tailed kites, which breed in the Santa Clara River riparian forest directly north of the Mesa Project area, were observed over the edge of the project on one occasions. This species, formerly the Black-shouldered Kite, is considered a Species of Special Concern by the State of California. Turkey vultures in small numbers regularly flew over the area, congregating on June 12 around a dead cow.

Red-tailed hawks were the most commonly observed species. Three nests were found on the site, all located in large oaks (Figure 1). Successful nesting resulted in an increase in observations in June when young fledged. Two kestrels also nested, both in nests associated with oil field buildings (Figure 1). This species is a hole nesting species and probably picked these sites as they provided artificial cavities for nesting. Cooper's hawk was observed only once, but appeared to nest in canyons on the south side of the property. Cooper's Hawk is considered a Special Concern species by the State of California.

Barn owls were occasionally encountered and probably nested on isolated cliffs near the Santa Clara River. A western screech owl was flushed from a tree on June 12th but this species was not heard in a nighttime survey. Screech owls are probably more common than indicated by this observation and nest in hollow oak trees.

California Horned Lark

This species is a Special Concern species of the State of California. Larks were observed on the pasture areas of Potrero Canyon. Birds were paired and acted as if nesting, but these areas were heavily grazed by cattle until late May and this may have prevented successful reproduction.

Loggerhead Shrike

This is a California Special Concern species. At least one and possibly two pairs of shrikes were present in Potrero Canyon and probably nested.

Yellow Warbler

The Yellow Warbler is considered a Species of Special Concern by the State of California. Yellow Warblers prefer wet riparian habitat but are also found in large cottonwoods in drier riparian areas. The only yellow warbler observed was on July 4th and may have been an early southward migrant rather than a summer resident species. Although no suitable habitat for this species occurs on the study site, yellow warblers nest nearby along the Santa Clara River.

Southern California Rufous-crowned Sparrow

This species is considered a California Special Concern species by the Department of Fish and Game and by the Fish and Wildlife Service. Rufous-crowned sparrows are a fairly common resident and breeding species in coastal sage habitat throughout the study site.

Lawrence's Goldfinch

This species is a highest priority species on the Audubon Birds to Watch list for 1996 and listed as a Bird of Management Concern by the Fish and Wildlife Service. This species was observed rarely in coastal sage areas. It is probably more common than observations indicated and undoubtedly nests on the site.

Comments on Brown Headed Cowbird

Cowbirds were sparingly observed in the study area, mostly along the northern edge of the property adjacent to the Santa Clara River. Cowbirds are nest parasites, especially of song sparrow, lesser goldfinch and other riparian species. They seem not to parasitize coastal sage species, which nest in much lower density.

Summary

Neither of the focus species, California gnatcatcher and burrowing owl, were observed. Several of the more common raptoral species reside on the site. Species of concern on the site include the coastal sage species Southern California rufous-crowned sparrow and Lawrence's goldfinch, both of which are fairly common, and loggerhead shrike, which is rare. A few horned lark, a grassland species, are on pasture areas and one riparian species, the yellow warbler, was observed along the edge of the property along the Santa Clara River.

Table 1. Bird observations for Spring 2000; Potrero and Long Canyons, Valencia, California.

Species date:	24-Mar	7-Apr	23-Apr	8-May	21-May	12-Jun	20-Jun	4-Jul	status
Great Blue Heron	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	M
Turkey Vulture	9	0	5	1	1	64	0	1	R*
White-tailed Kite	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	R*
Northern Harrier	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	M
Cooper's Hawk	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	R*
Red-tailed Hawk	3	8	7	6	4	12	2	12	R*
American Kestrel	6	6	2	4	0	0	1	8	R*
Prairie Falcon	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	M
California Quail	42	96	160	34	10	64	20	90	R*
Killdeer	1	2	2	0	0	0	1	2	R*
Common Snipe	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	M
Domestic Pigeon	3	0	47	14	6	6	2	25	R*
Mourning Dove	13	6	34	42	10	38	7	33	R*
Greater Roadrunner	1	1	0	2	0	1	0	1	R*
Barn Owl	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	R*
W. Screech Owl	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	R*
White-throated Swift	0	0	4	0	0	0	11	7	R*
Bl.-ch.Hummingbird	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	8	S*
Anna's Hummingbird	15	13	2	2	1	3	4	6	R*
Costa's Hummingbird	0	0	3	2	0	1	1	4	S*
Selasphorus sp.	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	M
Lewis' Woodpecker	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	W
Acorn Woodpecker	4	10	3	0	0	4	0	4	R*
Nuttall's Woodpecker	7	11	2	2	1	7	6	3	R*
Downy Woodpecker	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	R*
Northern Flicker	4	2	3	1	1	3	0	6	R*
Western Wood Pewee	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	M
Black Phoebe	1	4	4	3	1	2	2	10	R*
Say's Phoebe	3	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	R*
Ash-throated Flycatcher	0	1	7	9	1	10	9	22	S*
Cassin's Kingbird	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	4	S*
Western Kingbird	0	33	17	3	4	14	2	21	S*
Horned Lark	0	0	4	0	2	0	0	0	R*
Tree Swallow	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	28	M
Violet-green Swallow	16	5	0	2	0	7	0	28	S*
N. Rough-winged Swallow	6	13	2	8	0	32	7	46	S*
Cliff Swallow	21	16	14	6	20	0	3	90	S*
Scrub Jay	32	13	16	11	6	8	11	30	R*
American Crow	0	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	R*
Common Raven	15	43	19	18	6	13	10	16	R*
Plain Titmouse	12	17	4	2	0	4	7	10	R*
Bushtit	11	18	18	4	0	35	17	56	R*
Bewick's Wren	22	41	30	27	4	19	17	50	R*
House Wren	5	11	5	2	0	4	0	4	R*
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	W
Blue-grey Gnatcatcher	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	R*
Western Bluebird	3	6	0	4	0	6	3	13	R*

Table 1 (cont.). Bird observations for Spring 2000; Potrero and Long Canyons, Valencia, California

Species date:	24-Mar	7-Apr	23-Apr	8-May	21-May	12-Jun	20-Jun	4-Jul	status
Swainson's Thrush	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	M
American Robin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	R*
N. Mockingbird	4	1	5	3	4	2	1	15	R*
Wrentit	55	38	33	26	7	24	19	36	R*
California Thrasher	18	8	12	12	1	5	0	33	R*
Phainopepla	0	2	2	12	4	45	6	19	S*
Loggerhead Shrike	3	2	0	0	0	1	0	2	R*
European Starling	22	21	9	26	14	70	9	128	R*
Orange-crownbed Warbler	2	6	4	0	0	0	0	1	M
Yellow Warbler	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	M
Yellow-rumped Warbler	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
Common Yellowthroat	5	18	10	2	3	4	25	2	R*
Wilson's Warbler	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	M
Black-headed Grosbeak	0	0	7	6	0	7	6	17	S*
Blue Grosbeak	0	0	6	17	2	4	0	7	S*
Lazuli Bunting	0	0	18	28	6	29	4	0	S*
Spotted Towhee	50	59	27	30	8	15	17	33	R*
California Towhee	76	72	72	42	40	82	19	64	R*
Rufous-crowned Sparrow	8	7	12	8	0	4	18	21	R*
Vesper Sparrow	14	41	0	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
Savannah Sparrow	22	14	13	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
Lark Sparrow	14	1	12	4	6	27	0	18	R*
Song Sparrow	28	37	14	26	4	4	4	6	R*
Lincoln's Sparrow	2	32	0	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
Golden-crowned Sparrow	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
White-crowned Sparrow	46	43	4	0	4	0	0	0	W,M
Dark-eyed Junco	5	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
Red-winged Blackbird	69	260	122	68	20	140	3	84	R*
Western Meadowlark	18	25	28	4	4	5	0	26	R*
Brewer's Blackbird	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	21	R*
Brown-headed Cowbird	0	1	6	11	0	8	11	4	S*
Hooded Oriole	0	0	0	1	0	8	3	0	S*
Bullock's Oriole	4	7	14	2	5	16	2	14	S*
House Finch	32	89	40	36	20	70	17	71	R*
Lesser Goldfinch	6	62	20	2	12	8	12	78	R*
Lawrence's Goldfinch	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	2	R*
American Goldfinch	0	64	4	0	0	0	0	0	W,R*
House Sparrow	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	R*
Total Species:	50	56	54	50	34	50	41	59	

Total Species on all visits: 85

Total Potential Breeding species: 66 (marked with *)

Status: M- Migrant; R- Resident; S- Summer Only; W- Winter only

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