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Valencia

**BIRD SURVEYS IN THE PROPOSED MAGIC MOUNTAIN
ENTERTAINMENT PROJECT AREA,
NEAR VALENCIA, CALIFORNIA, 2000**

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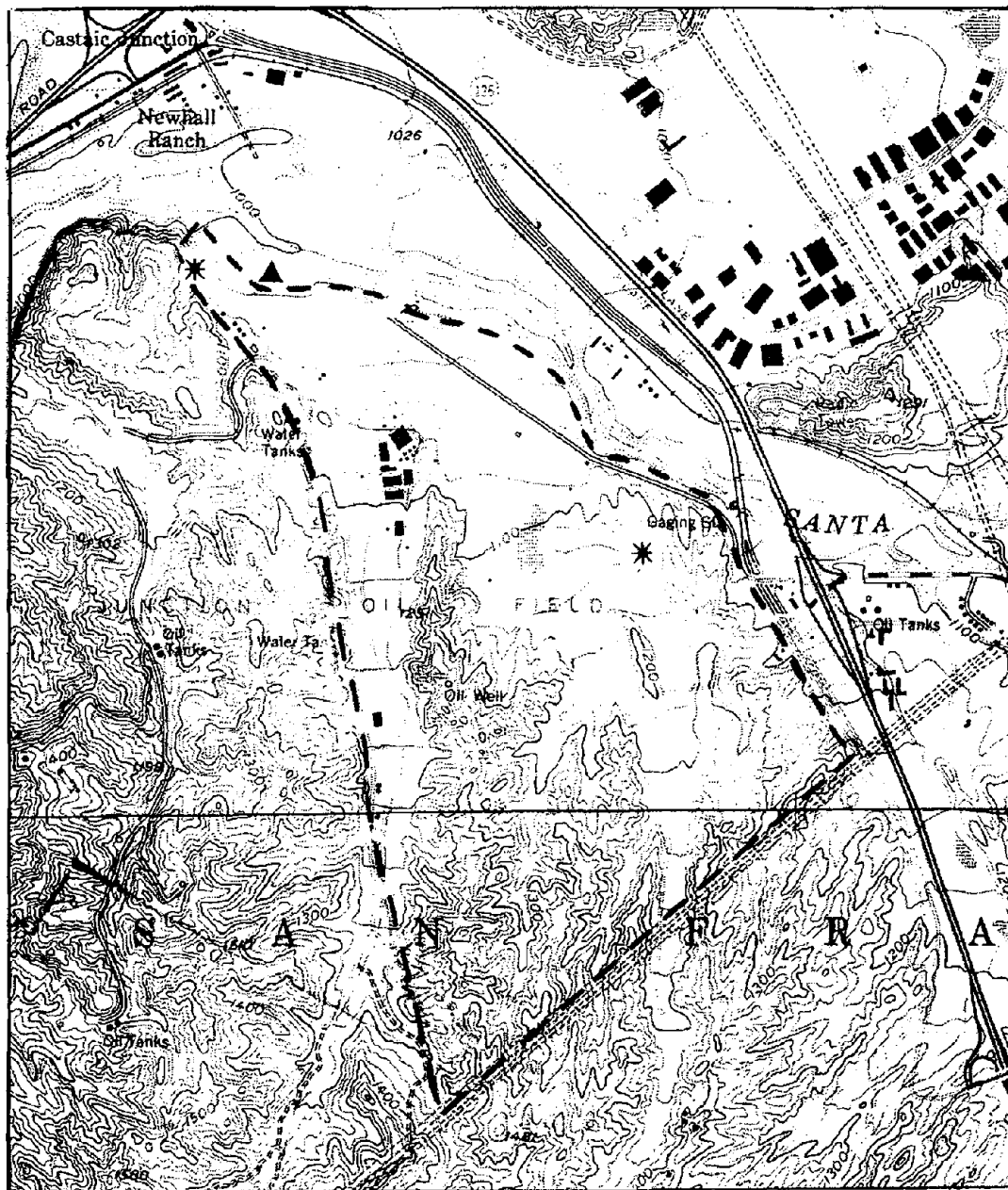
Nature and Scope of Surveys

During the spring and early summer of 2000 surveys were conducted within the boundaries of the proposed Magic Mountain Entertainment Project and adjacent Magic Mountain area. The area surveyed is roughly triangular in shape, bounded on the northeast by the Santa Clara River and the Old Road, on the southeast by Southern California Edison power lines, and on the west by a wide valley (Figure 1). The area includes the Six Flags Magic Mountain development (which was not surveyed) as well as undeveloped hillsides and some agricultural fields to the east and north of Magic Mountain.

Surveys were focused on determining presence or absence of burrowing owl and California gnatcatcher, and followed U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Guidelines for the latter species. Numbers of all species observed were noted and, in addition to the two species noted above, special attention was placed on locating species considered rare and endangered or of Special Concern, and on determining numbers of raptorial birds.

Each survey was conducted on foot by observers well acquainted with both visual and auditory characteristics of southern California birds. Except for one nighttime survey for owls and other nocturnal species, all surveys occurred between 5:30 and 10:30 a.m. If focus species 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.

Figure 1. Map of the proposed Magic Mountain Entertainment Project Area study site near Valencia, California



----- Approximate boundary of survey area.

* - Red-tailed hawk nest

▲ - American kestrel nest

Base Map: U.S.G.S. 7.5 Minute topographic map for Newhall, California, 1952, photorevised 1988.

Habitat Condition and Bird Observations.

Immediately north of the Magic Mountain parking lots are agricultural fields that were actively cultivated during the study period. East of Magic Mountain are planted grassy mesas that have been cleared of most native vegetation and that were cut for hay in late June. The only trees in the study area are a few solitary oaks that dot this section and planted introduced trees within and along the edges of the Magic Mountain development and its main entrance. South of Magic Mountain is an area that is used for cattle grazing. Roads constructed as access to oil fields, transmission lines and the grazing operation traverse the area. Cattle were present during early spring (March – April) but were removed by late May.

The hillsides in this section for the most part lack steep slopes or cliffs, with the result that cattle have grazed over nearly all parts of the area. The result is that the coastal sage is broken into isolated fragments and contains many introduced grasses. Valleys within the site contain deep sandy soil and support Great Basin sage.

The avifauna (see Table 1) is dominated by coastal sage species, with mourning dove, California quail, Bewick's wren, lazuli bunting, California towhee, and rufous-crowned sparrow being the common species. Grassy areas support mourning dove and lark sparrow. Elderberry bushes in the area attracted orioles, mockingbird and phainopepla. Food waste at Magic Mountain provided some attraction to starlings, house finch and ravens and trees around this developed area provided nest sites for orioles.

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. Some censuses were not complete but, rather, were focused on particular places or areas. Also, 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.

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 in canyon bottoms and on north facing hillsides. 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 valley habitat contains the wrong species of sage, hillside coastal sage communities seem 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 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 the Newhall weather station reported temperatures that are not too cold for gnatcatchers, (see Mock), the surviving coastal sage scrub habitat, restricted to the higher elevations on the property, may be colder than the weather station location.

Comments on Sensitive Species

Burrowing Owl

The burrowing owl is a Bird of Management Concern for the Fish and Wildlife Service. Although the study area supported many Beechey ground squirrels whose burrows are commonly used by burrowing owls, no burrowing owls were observed on the study site nor on areas to the

west which were also censused for this species in 2000.

Raptors

The study site contained few suitable trees and no suitable cliffs for nesting. Only one raptor nest was found within the site on an isolated tree within the grassy fields northeast of Magic Mountain. Two other nests, one of a red-tailed hawk and one of an American Kestrel were found on the edges of the site and red-tailed hawks may also have nested on the Southern California Edison power poles along the southern edge of the site (Figure 1).

Although the site contained few suitable trees or cliffs for nesting, several red-tailed hawks and American kestrels regularly hunted on the site. Although no owls were seen on the site, barn owls and great horned owls regularly foraged on neighboring areas and can be expected to forage over this site as well. Turkey vultures regularly hunted over the site and were seen in numbers when attracted to steer carcasses.

Loggerhead Shrike

This is a California Species of Special Concern. Shrikes are resident in the coastal sage scrub and one was observed in the study area and may have nested on the property.

Yellow Warbler

The Yellow Warbler is considered a Special Concern species of the State of California. Yellow Warblers prefer wet riparian habitat but are also found in large cottonwoods in drier riparian areas. A single migrant of this species was observed in the study area.

Southern California Rufous-crowned Sparrow

This species is considered a California Special Concern species by the Department of Fish and Game and a Species of Concern 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.

Summary

Neither of the focus species, burrowing owl and California gnatcatcher, were observed on the site. Birds of the site are those typical of dry coastal sage scrub habitat and two of the observed species which probably nest on the site, loggerhead shrike and Southern California rufous-crowned sparrow, are considered Species of Concern.

**Table 1. Bird Observations at the Magic Mountain Entertainment Project
Site, Valencia, California, 2000**

<u>Species</u>	<u>date:</u>	<u>15-Mar</u>	<u>24-Apr</u>	<u>3-May</u>	<u>18-May</u>	<u>6-Jun</u>	<u>19-Jun</u>	<u>Status</u>
Turkey Vulture		2	5	0	1	5	35	R*
Red-shouldered Hawk		0	0	1	0	0	0	R*
Red-tailed Hawk		5	3	3	1	4	6	R*
American Kestrel		1	0	0	0	0	1	R*
California Quail		20	60	18	66	10	1	R*
Killdeer		0	0	3	1	0	0	R*
Domestic Pigeon		0	0	0	0	6	0	R*
Mourning Dove		3	10	25	34	20	17	R*
Greater Roadrunner		0	1	2	0	2	0	R*
Vaux's Swift		115	0	0	0	0	0	M
Black-ch. Hummingbird		0	0	0	0	2	4	S*
Anna's Hummingbird		0	2	11	8	4	0	R*
Costa's Hummingbird		0	7	2	2	1	1	S*
Nuttall's Woodpecker		0	0	1	2	4	1	R*
Downy Woodpecker		0	0	0	1	0	0	R*
Northern Flicker		0	0	1	0	0	0	R*
Black Phoebe		0	0	0	0	8	0	R*
Say's Phoebe		0	0	0	0	2	0	R*
Ash-throated Flycatcher		0	1	10	4	9	6	S*
Western Kingbird		6	6	11	14	12	6	S*
Violet-green Swallow		0	0	1	0	0	0	S*
N. Rough-winged Swallow		0	2	6	2	8	0	S*
Cliff Swallow		0	20	2	2	7	0	S*
Barn Swallow		0	20	7	0	5	0	S*
Scrub Jay		2	8	10	10	10	6	R*
American Crow		0	0	0	0	2	0	R*
Common Raven		20	20	10	16	14	80	R*
Plain Titmouse		0	0	3	0	0	0	R*
Bushtit		1	8	10	20	53	0	R*
Rock Wren		0	0	1	0	0	0	R*
Bewick's Wren		0	10	12	22	15	7	R*
House Wren		0	1	3	0	0	0	R*
Western Bluebird		0	4	3	2	7	0	R*
American Robin		0	0	0	4	0	0	R*
Northern Mockingbird		2	14	7	10	6	13	R*
Wrentit		0	5	6	14	4	2	R*
California Thrasher		0	0	0	2	3	0	R*
Cedar Waxwing		0	0	8	0	0	0	W,M
Phainopepla		0	3	34	32	33	4	S*
Loggerhead Shrike		1	0	0	0	0	0	R*
European Starling		6	2	32	22	4	2	R*

**Table 1 (cont.). Bird Observations at the Magic Mountain Entertainment Project Site
Valencia California, 2000**

Species	date:	15-Mar	24-Apr	3-May	18-May	6-Jun	19-Jun	Status
Orange-crowned Warbler		0	8	3	0	0	0	M
Yellow Warbler		0	0	1	0	0	0	M
Wilson's Warbler		0	0	4	3	0	0	M
Blue Grosbeak		0	0	1	0	0	0	M
Lazuli Bunting		0	0	5	8	5	6	S*
Lark Sparrow		0	30	8	10	36	1	R*
Song Sparrow		0	0	0	3	1	0	R*
White-cr.Sparrow		8	17	0	0	0	0	W,M
Western Meadowlark		0	1	0	0	2	0	R*
Brewer's Blackbird		0	0	1	34	0	0	R*
Brown-headed Cowbird		0	1	2	3	2	0	S*
Hooded Oriole		0	0	2	0	4	2	S*
Bullock's Oriole		1	6	12	9	22	16	S*
House Finch		10	40	44	40	60	70	R*
Lesser Goldfinch		0	10	12	6	13	5	R*
American Goldfinch		0	0	2	2	2	0	W,R*
House Sparrow		0	0	4	8	0	0	R*
Total Species:		14	34	46	37	40	25	

Total Species on all visits: 61

Total Potential Breeding species: 54 (marked with *)

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