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BIRD SURVEYS OF CASTAIC JUNCTION,

AN AREA ON THE NORTH SIDE OF THE SANTA CLARA RIVER

AT THE JUNCTION OF STATE ROUTE 126 AND INTERSTATE 5.

NEAR VALENCIA, CALIFORNIA

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Bird Surveys of Castaic Junction, an area on the north side of the Santa Clara River at the Junction of State Route 126 and Interstate 5, near Valencia, California

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Nature and Scope of Surveys

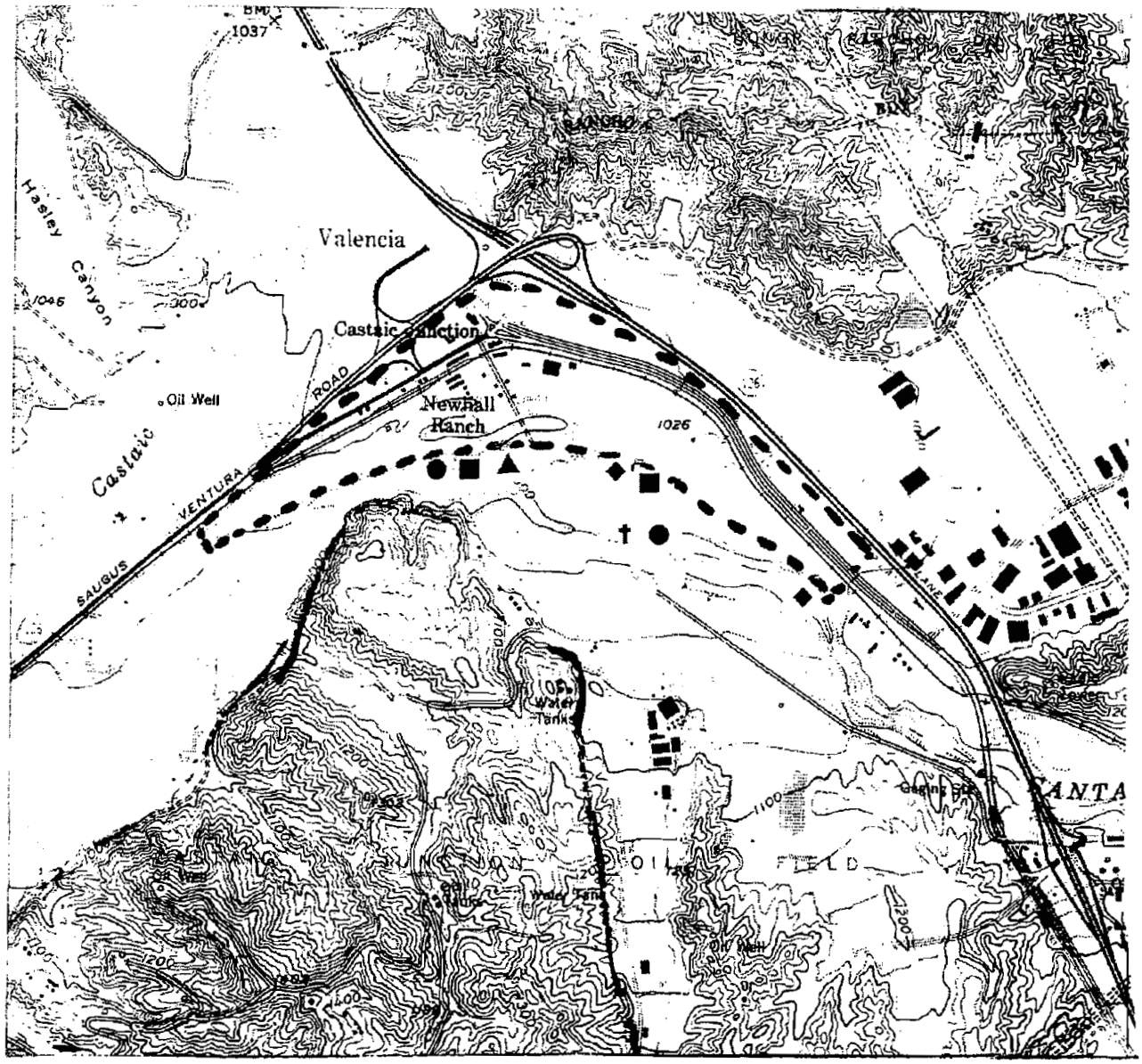
During the spring and early summer of 2000 bird surveys were conducted on the north side of the Santa Clara River at Castaic Junction. The surveys covered an area roughly triangular in shape and bounded on the northeast by Interstate 5, on the northwest by State Route 126 and on the southern edge by the Santa Clara River (Figure 1). Because any development of the area surveyed would affect the adjacent Santa Clara River, and because the boundary between the survey area and the riparian zone of the river was not clearly defined, surveys included some birds found within the riparian zone directly adjacent to the survey area.

Six surveys were conducted. Three of these surveys were within the time frames recommended in the protocol for southwestern willow flycatcher. All surveys after April 10 searched for least Bell's vireo, but given the small area of suitable habitat in the study site, only 5 surveys for this species were conducted. However, a full complement of 8 surveys for least Bell's vireo were conducted in the adjacent riparian zone of the Santa Clara River. Although these surveys are reported elsewhere, data from them involving endangered species are included here.

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 brown-headed cowbirds. All bird observations are presented in Table 1.

Each survey was conducted on foot by observers well acquainted with visual, auditory and behavioral characteristics of southern California birds. Survey routes were designed to cover all areas of the study area and included many species that entered the study area from private property located inside the study area and from the adjacent riparian zone of the Santa Clara River. All surveys occurred between 5:30 and 10:00 a.m. If focus species (Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Least Bell's Vireo, and Southwestern Willow Flycatcher), were not visually observed, tapes of their calls were played in an attempt to elicit a response. 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 2. Observations of Rare and Endangered Species.



- - - - Approximate boundary of survey area.

◆ - Least Bell's vireo nest site.

● - additional Least Bell's vireo sighting

■ - Willow flycatcher sighting

▲ - Yellow warbler nesting

† - White-tailed kite nest

Base Map: U.S.G.S. 7.5 minute topographic map for Newhall, California, 1952, photorevised 198

Habitat Condition and Bird Observations.

Over 80 % of the study area consists of agricultural fields. These fields were under cultivation throughout the study period. At times of active irrigation of crops, the fields attracted few birds. However, during fallow periods after harvest, when the fields were full of unharvested crop and weeds, many birds from the adjacent riparian area visited and red-winged blackbirds and song sparrows nested. During periods after plowing, horned larks and killdeer were found foraging on the bare dirt areas.

A series of flowering eucalyptus trees along the frontage road in the area were attractive to starlings, orioles and wintering and migrating warblers. A pair of kestrels nested in one of these trees and both red-tailed hawk and red-shouldered hawk often hunted over uncultivated sections of the area.

A ditch containing irrigation and urban runoff (Figure 1) entered the site from the east and formed the southern border of the agricultural field. This ditch, containing cattails, was the only place within the study site where wet riparian species successfully nested, namely black phoebe, song sparrow and common yellowthroat.

Bordering the Santa Clara River, but located on the bluff above the river channel was a small area of dry riparian woodland. This grove contained several large willow and cottonwood trees and was regularly visited by several normally riparian species (downy woodpecker, yellow-breasted chat).

The southwestern side of the study area bordered the Santa Clara River, with little or no transitional zone between the agricultural field area and the riparian river channel. Along most of this edge the river had cut into the bank, resulting in a cliff up to 15 feet high with agricultural field at the top and riparian vegetation directly below. In order to prevent further erosion of the river bank in this section, a new channel for the river was created by bulldozing in the spring of 1998. This new channel has moved the active river channel away from the field and road edge and has created a zone of low lying land along the north side of the riparian zone that is protected from erosion and scouring by spring floods. This protected section is wet from seepage from the main channel and from agricultural and urban runoff, with the result that a dense stand of willows has developed along the north edge of the riparian zone. These willows are now three years old and are prime habitat for both willow flycatchers and least Bell's vireo. This proximity of excellent riparian habitat to the agricultural area, and the need for any development of the lands adjacent to the river to encroach into the riparian area while stabilizing this bank are the reasons why some species from the riparian area immediately adjacent to the agricultural fields are mentioned in this report.

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.

Comments on Threatened and Endangered Species

California Gnatcatcher

Lack of any coastal sage scrub vegetation in the study area make it an unsuitable habitat for this species, and none were observed.

Southwestern Willow Flycatcher

This subspecies is listed under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Willow flycatchers were once widespread in wet riparian woodland in southern California but now only a few individuals remain. The main California breeding populations of this species are along the Kern River and the Santa Ynez River north of Santa Barbara.

Following the Protocol outlined by Sogge (Technical Report NPS/NAUCPRS/NRTR-97/12) four surveys were conducted specifically for Southwestern willow flycatcher. All surveys occurred between 5:30 and 10:00 am. and used taped calls to elicit a response if flycatchers were not first observed.

Single willow flycatchers were observed on two separate occasions (May 18 and June 10) at the locations shown on Figure 1. Both locations are in the willow riparian area of the Santa Clara River immediately adjacent to the study site. Both sighting locations were checked on subsequent visits but the birds were not relocated, despite use of taped calls. These sightings occurred during the period when this species migrates through the area and are, therefore, considered to be of migrant birds rather than of nesting individuals.

Least Bell's Vireo

The least Bell's vireo is a both a Federally Endangered and a State Endangered species. Surveys were conducted of the wet riparian areas along the Santa Clara River and followed U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Guidelines for Least Bell's Vireo. Eight surveys were conducted between April 10 and July 31. All surveys occurred between 5:30 and 10:00 am. and taped vireo calls were played if no vireos were heard or seen. Once vireos were found, no attempt was made to determine nesting success or presence of leg bands on birds.

Although no least Bell's vireos were found on the study site, this species was heard at four locations in the riparian zone immediately south of the study area and were repeatedly heard or seen at two of these sites, where they nested (Figure 1). One of these nesting sites is immediately adjacent to the agricultural field. At two other sites, birds were heard for periods of a week in mid May but then could not be found on subsequent visits. It is believed that these sightings were of single males and not of mated pairs. One of these sightings was adjacent to the study area while the other was about 100 yards away (Figure 1).

Comments on Sensitive Species

White-tailed Kite

This species, formerly the black-shouldered Kite, is considered a Bird of Management Concern by the Fish and Wildlife Service and is Fully Protected by the California Dept. of Fish and Game. A pair of kites nested successfully in the riparian zone of the Santa Clara River approximately 150 yards from the edge of the agricultural area (Figure 1). A second nesting attempt nearby proved unsuccessful apparently due to the large numbers of ravens attracted by Magic Mountain parking lot trash. Kites hunted primarily over the bare hills south of the Santa Clara River or over the riparian zone. Hunting in the study area was not observed and is not to be expected given the scarcity of their preferred prey of voles and mice in the agricultural fields.

Burrowing Owl

The burrowing owl is a Bird of Management Concern for the Fish and Wildlife Service. Although searched for both during the daytime and at night, no burrowing owls were observed on the study site nor on surrounding areas that were also censused for this species in 2000.

California Horned Lark

This species is a California Special Concern species. Although none were observed nesting on the study site, horned larks do nest on dry hillsides and ruderal sites in the vicinity and were observed in late summer feeding on recently plowed agricultural fields.

Yellow Warbler

The yellow warbler is considered a Special Concern Species by the State of California. Yellow warblers prefer wet riparian habitat. A pair of yellow warblers nested in young willows along the edge of the riparian section of the Santa Clara River (Figure 1).

Yellow-breasted Chat

The yellow-breasted chat is considered a Special Concern Species by the State of California. Several chats nested along the wet sections of the Santa Clara River immediately adjacent to the study site. None were observed outside of the riparian zone of the Santa Clara River.

Lawrence's Goldfinch

This species is a highest priority species on the Audubon Birds to Watch list for 1996 and is listed as a Bird of Management Concern by the Fish and Wildlife Service. This species nests in chaparral vegetation. Lawrence's goldfinch were occasional visitors to weedy fields within the study area at the beginning of the breeding season.

Comments of Brown-headed Cowbirds

Although not a Species of Concern, comments about this species are warranted due to its influence on several endangered species. Cowbirds were regularly observed along all sections of the Santa Clara River, searching for either mates or potential nests to parasitize. Cowbird females often responded to taped calls of least Bell's vireo, and are a serious nest parasite for this species.

Summary of Bird Sightings

The only species of concern observed actually on the site were Lawrence's goldfinch and horned lark. Lawrence's goldfinch forage widely in weedy fields and although they nest on nearby coastal sage and chaparral hillsides, there is no evidence that they nest on the site. Horned larks nest widely in bare areas on nearby hills but also nest on bare ruderal fields. The continuous agricultural activity on the site has precluded nesting by this species, but foraging on bare soil areas, especially after the breeding season, is a regular occurrence.

White-tailed kite, yellow-breasted chat, yellow warbler, least Bell's vireo and willow flycatcher, while not observed on the site, were found in the riparian corridor immediately adjacent to the site and would be affected by construction activities along this riparian edge if these were to occur during the nesting season for these species.

Table 1. Bird Surveys of an area along the north side of the Santa Clara River at the Junction of State Route 126 and Interstate 5, near Valencia, California, 2000

Species date:	22-Mar	5-Apr	24-Apr	18-May	6-Jun	17-Jun	Status
Green Heron	0	0	0	1	0	1	R
Red-shouldered Hawk	1	0	1	0	4	2	R*
Red-tailed Hawk	1	0	0	0	1	2	R*
American Kestrel	2	1	0	0	0	0	R*
California Quail	0	0	0	0	2	18	R*
Killdeer	0	0	1	0	1	0	R*
Domestic Pigeon	0	3	3	0	6	15	R*
Mourning Dove	2	1	10	8	7	25	R*
Common Ground Dove	0	0	1	0	0	0	R
Black-ch. Hummingbird	0	0	0	0	0	3	S*
Anna's Hummingbird	0	2	4	5	2	2	R*
Costa's Hummingbird	0	1	1	1	1	0	S*
Nuttall's. Woodpecker	0	0	4	1	4	2	R*
Downy Woodpecker	0	0	0	1	3	0	R*
Hairy Woodpecker	0	0	0	0	0	1	R*
Northern Flicker	0	0	0	0	0	2	R*
Willow Flycatcher	0	0	0	1	1	0	M
Black Phoebe	0	2	3	1	2	0	R*
Ash-throated Flycatcher	0	0	2	4	4	8	S*
Cassin's Kingbird	0	0	0	0	2	0	S*
Western Kingbird	0	4	5	0	2	0	S*
Horned Lark	0	0	0	0	4	6	R*
Violet-green Swallow	0	2	0	0	0	0	S*
N.Rough-winged Swallow	1	6	4	0	2	0	S*
Cliff Swallow	0	6	0	0	4	8	S*
Scrub Jay	0	1	2	4	3	4	R*
American Crow	0	4	5	0	2	0	R*
Common Raven	0	4	5	10	14	20	R*
Plain Titmouse	0	0	1	0	0	2	R*
Bushtit	0	0	2	2	2	15	R*
Bewick's Wren	1	6	4	12	7	20	R*
House Wren	1	4	0	0	0	12	R*
Western Bluebird	0	2	0	0	2	0	R*
American Robin	0	0	1	0	0	0	R*
Wrentit	0	0	0	0	0	1	R*
California Thrasher	0	0	0	0	0	1	R*
Phainopepla	0	0	0	0	3	5	S*
European Starling	30	14	26	14	14	18	R*
Least Bell's Vireo	0	0	0	3	3	1	S*
Yellow Warbler	0	0	0	4	0	2	S*
Yellow-r.Warbler	35	4	3	0	0	0	W,M
Common Yellowthroat	3	0	5	8	20	30	R*
Wilson's Warbler	0	0	2	3	0	0	M
Yellow-breasted Chat	0	0	0	1	4	7	S*
Black-headed Grosbeak	0	0	0	5	3	10	S*
Blue Grosbeak	0	0	2	0	1	1	S*

Table 1.(cont.) Bird Surveys of an area along the north side of the Santa Clara River at the Junction of State Route 126 and Interstate 5, near Valencia, California, 2000

Species date:	22-Mar	5-Apr	24-Apr	18-May	6-Jun	17-Jun	Status
Lazuli Bunting	0	0	3	0	0	6	S
Spotted Towhee	0	0	1	1	6	6	R*
California Towhee	0	2	2	10	5	4	R*
Savannah Sparrow	12	0	0	0	0	0	W
Song Sparrow	6	6	26	22	28	23	R*
Lincoln's Sparrow	7	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
White-crowned Sparrow	36	40	2	0	0	0	W,M
Red-winged Blackbird	0	2	40	50	28	8	S*
Brewer's Blackbird	21	22	11	8	20	14	R*
Brown-headed Cowbird	0	5	17	0	6	15	S*
Hooded Oriole	0	0	1	0	4	0	S*
Bullock's Oriole	0	0	0	0	9	6	S*
House Finch	20	43	32	60	18	22	R*
Lesser Goldfinch	0	8	2	0	10	8	R*
Lawrence's Goldfinch	0	0	1	0	0	0	R
Amer. Goldfinch	0	2	0	0	7	1	W,R*
House Sparrow	0	1	2	10	0	0	R*
Total Species:	**16**	**28**	**38**	**26**	**41**	**41**	

Total Potential Breeding species: 51 (marked with *)

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