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**Guthrie, D.A., "Bird Observations for Spring 2004 in the Proposed Potrero Valley, Long Canyon, Oak Valley and Onion Fields Development Areas near Valencia, California" (August 24, 2004; 2004D)**

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**BIRD OBSERVATIONS FOR SPRING 2004 IN THE PROPOSED  
POTRERO VALLEY, LONG CANYON, OAK VALLEY AND ONION FIELDS  
DEVELOPMENT AREAS NEAR VALENCIA, CALIFORNIA**

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**REVISED**

August 24, 2004

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**Nature and Scope of Surveys**

During the spring of 2004 surveys were conducted within the boundaries of the proposed Potrero Valley, Long Canyon, Oak Valley and Onions Fields Projects (Figure 1). Surveys were focused on determining presence or absence of 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. All surveys occurred between 6:30 and 10:30 a.m. If the focus species (California gnatcatcher), was 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 California gnatcatcher.

Personnel for all surveys were David Crawford, Guy Bruyey and Scott Cameron, working under Federal Fish and Wildlife Service Permit numbers TE-821229-4 (Crawford), TE-837439-4 (Bruyey) and and TE-808242 (Cameron), 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 main 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 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 Potrero 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.

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 dense chaparral with sections of 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 was 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.

A third section of the site, named Onion Fields, consists of active agricultural fields at the mouth of Long Canyon. A riparian woodland along the Santa Clara River and adjacent to these fields is a nesting site for least Bell's vireo. This area was not included in these surveys but has been regularly censused as part of studies along the Santa Clara River.

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. Many species that nest in the area also migrate through the area to more northern portions of their ranges. Thus, numbers of nesting species observed in May, which include migratory birds passing through the area, do not give an accurate count of actual resident birds.

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 chaparral and 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 from the adjacent Santa Clara River 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 (*Polioptila californica*)**

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). Because of the size of the area of sage scrub vegetation, two sets of surveys were completed, one primarily in Long Canyon and one primarily in Potrer and Oak Valley areas. 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 with a slope of less than 40% and dominated by California sage as this type of vegetation has been shown to be preferred by gnatcatchers (Federal Register, 2003). Tapes of California gnatcatcher calls were played at regular intervals along all survey routes. No California gnatcatchers were heard or observed during this study.

### **Comments on Sensitive Species**

#### **Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*)**

Great Blue Herons are listed on the California Natural Diversity Data Base as a species that warrants monitoring. Individuals of this species are observed sparingly along the Santa Clara River before and after breeding season and occasionally visit agricultural fields and grasslands in the project area to hunt for mice and toads.

### **White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*)**

This species, formerly the black-shouldered kite, is considered a Species of Special Concern by the State of California. Kites nest in the riparian forest along the Santa Clara River and a pair were observed once hunting over the grassy sections of this area.

### **Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperi*)**

Cooper's hawk is considered a Species of Special Concern by the State of California. Cooper's hawks nest in woodlands along the Santa Clara River immediately north of the study area. Cooper's hawk were regularly observed hunting in the wooded areas of the project.

### **Southern California Rufous-crowned Sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps canescens*)**

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 denser sections of sage scrub habitat throughout the study site.

### **Lawrence's Goldfinch (*Carduelis canescens*)**

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.

### **Summary**

No California gnatcatcher were observed during this study. Species of Concern on the site include the coastal sage species Southern California rufous-crowned sparrow and Lawrence's goldfinch, both of which may nest. Three other Species of Concern, great blue heron, Cooper's hawk and white-tailed kite were observed hunting on the site. The two latter species probably nest in riparian woodland along the Santa Clara River just north of the study area while the great blue heron is a migrant through the area.

### **References**

Federal Register, 2003. Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Designation of Critical Habitat for the Coastal California Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) and Determination of Distinct Vertebrate Population for the California Gnatcatcher *Polioptila californica*). Vol 68, no 79 April 24, 2003, p. 20228.

**Table 1. Observations of Birds in Potrero Valley, Oak Valley, Onion fields and Long Canyon, 2004:**

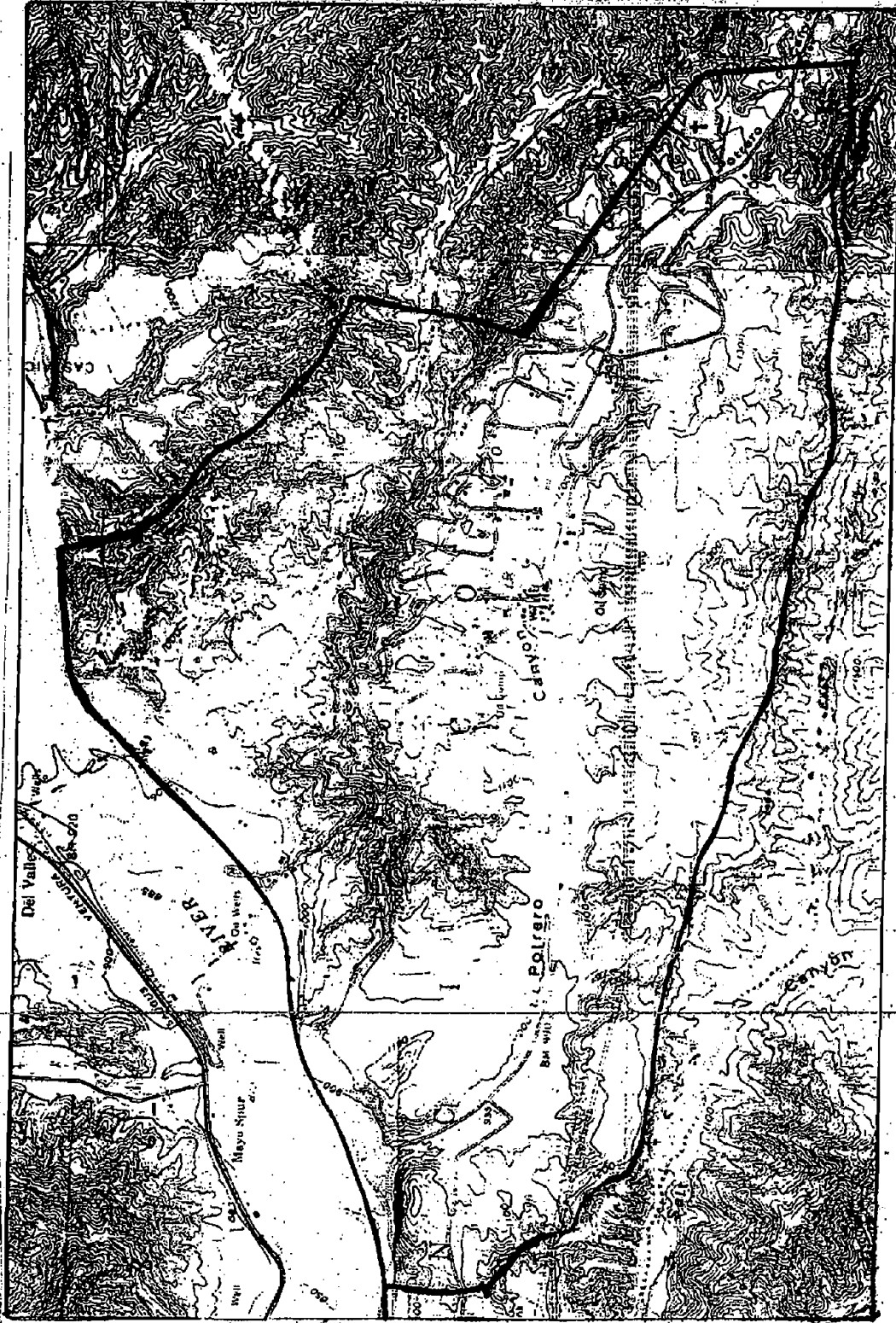
Endangered Species and Species of Concern Shaded													
SPECIES	STAT.	Dates of Surveys											
		3/16	3/20	3/27	4/3	4/10	4/17	4/24	5/1	5/8	5/15	5/22	5/29
Great Blue Heron	m	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Turkey Vulture	s	3	1	3	1	0	3	2	1	2	5	2	3
White-tailed Kite	r	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cooper's Hawk	r	0	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Red-tailed Hawk	r	1	3	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	4
American Kestrel	r	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
California Quail	r	18	24	30+	18	24	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+
Killdeer	r	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0
Rock Dove	r	6	2	5	5	2	14	2	5	0	5	12	8
Mourning Dove	r	2	9	4	3	9	8	6	6	6	5	4	8
Greater Roadrunner	r	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	1	1	1	2
Barn Owl	r	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
White-th. Swift	r	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Black-chin. Hummingbird	s	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Anna's Hummingbird	r	6	11	10	5	4	5	6	4	5	8	6	11
Costa's Hummingbird	s	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	0	0	0
Rufous Hummingbird	m	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Acorn Woodpecker	r	3	3	6	0	0	1	0	0	3	1	3	3
Northern Flicker	r	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
Black Phoebe	r	0	3	0	0	1	2	2	1	0	2	1	3
Cassin's Kingbird	s	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Western Kingbird	s	0	0	8	3	4	6	5	2	7	1	5	9
Western Scrub Jay	r	17	9	11	9	12	18	15	10	14	13	10	17
American Crow	r	12	8	9	4	0	3	10	6	9	8	10	13
Common Raven	r	4	2	0	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	2	2
Violet-green Swallow	s	0	0	0	0	5	2	0	0	0	0	1	0
N. Rough-winged Swallow	s	0	0	0	0	0	5	4	5	2	5	8	6
Cliff Swallow	s	0	0	0	2	4	2	6	2	6	6	5	7
Barn Swallow	s	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Oak Titmouse	r	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bushtit	r	9	16	7	8	2	11	8	8	2	0	0	4
Bewick's Wren	r	19	21	26	9	20	7	11	4	11	7	15	18
House Wren	r	1	0	3	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	r	0	2	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Western Bluebird	r	0	2	3	0	0	1	2	2	2	0	1	0
Wrentit	r	7	14	13	11	8	6	10	3	8	6	10	14
Northern Mockingbird	r	0	4	5	0	2	2	3	3	4	5	3	5
California Thrasher	r	5	2	5	5	2	8	3	2	5	1	4	6
European Starling	r	8	26	14	8	6	9	4	8	11	3	5	4
Phainopepla	r	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	6	8

Table 1 (cont.). Observations of Birds in Potrero Valley, Oak Valley, Onion fields and Long Canyon, 2004													
Endangered Species and Species of Concern Shaded													
SPECIES	STATUS	Dates of Surveys											
		3/16	3/20	3/27	4/3	4/10	4/17	4/24	5/1	5/8	5/15	5/22	5/29
Yellow-rumped Warbler	w,m	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Spotted Towhee	r	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+
California Towhee	r	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+	30+
Rufous-crowned Sparrow	r	0	2	4	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	0
Lark Sparrow	r	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Savannah Sparrow	r	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	4	0	6
Fox Sparrow	w,m	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Song Sparrow	r	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	2
White-crowned Sparrow	w,m	6	11	4	4	10	4	6	0	0	0	0	0
Black-headed Grosbeak	s	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	3	0	2	0	0
Blue Grosbeak	s	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	1
Lazuli Bunting	s	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Red-winged Blackbird	s	0	0	0	0	5	18	12	9	19	10	12	12
Western Meadowlark	r	0	0	0	0	5	1	3	0	2	3	5	4
Brewer's Blackbird	r	8	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	6	3
Bullock's Oriole	s	0	0	0	1	5	2	3	3	3	5	4	8
House Finch	r	2	9	13	4	4	10	13	9	14	12	13	22
Lesser Goldfinch	r	0	2	0	0	0	1	4	4	5	1	3	11
Lawrence's Goldfinch	r	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Status: m, migrant; r, resident; s, summer only; w, winter



Figure 1. Outline of areas surveyed for the proposed Potrero Valley, Long Canyon, Oak Valley and Onion Fields Development.



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