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2005
Birds

BIRD SURVEYS ALONG THE SANTA CLARA RIVER, 2005
MOUTH OF CASTIAC CREEK DOWNSTREAM TO
JUST BELOW LAS BRISAS CROSSING

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Nature and Scope of Surveys

During the spring and early summer of 2005 surveys were conducted along the section of the Santa Clara River between its confluence with Castaic Creek and a point 1/4 mile below the Las Brisas bridge over the Santa Clara River. The total length of the section surveyed was 7.5 miles.

Two surveys were conducted in accordance to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Protocol for least Bell's vireo. Surveys were conducted within the time frames recommended by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Protocol for southwestern willow flycatcher. In order to follow least Bell's vireo protocol on kilometers covered per day, each portion (one in Los Angeles and one in Ventura County) was divided into two sections, each surveyed separately. However, observations from these two surveys are combined in data presentation (Tables 1-2).

Each survey was conducted on foot by observers well acquainted with both visual and auditory and behavioral characteristics of southern California birds. Surveys occurred approximately every other week between mid April and mid July (there was some variation in timing to avoid periods of poor weather) and occurred between 6:30 and 10:30 a.m. All birds sighted were counted, but special emphasis was placed on finding focus species, Species of Special Concern, and brown-headed cowbirds. If focus species (yellow-billed cuckoo, least Bell's vireo, 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 TE810394-2, issued under section 10(a)(1)(A) of the Endangered Species Act and permitted for both least Bell's vireo and southwestern willow flycatcher, and under an MOU from State of California Department of Fish and Game, dated April 23, 2003, also for these species.

Habitat Condition and Bird Observations

Severe flooding during the spring of 2005 scoured many sections of the river bed, particularly in the portion in Los Angeles County. The result was extensive sandy areas and little wet riparian vegetation during April through June. The flooding also carved into banks along the river, removing large cottonwoods and sections of agricultural land adjacent to the riparian vegetational zone. The result was that there was very little wet riparian annual vegetation in 2005 and the zone of larger perennial vegetation, consisting of willow thickets, was considerably reduced in some areas.

Observations of all birds are shown in Tables 1-2. 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. 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, the number of birds 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 may increase in late June and July when young birds leave the nest. Increases in some species also occur in July when species resident in nearby habitats visit the riparian zone to feed on elderberry and other wet riparian plants.

Comments on Threatened and Endangered Species

Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*)

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo is listed as a State Endangered Species. Despite playing taped calls of this species during June and July surveys, when this species might be present, no individuals of this species were observed in 2005.

Southwestern Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*)

This subspecies is listed as Federally Endangered under the Federal Endangered Species Act; Willow flycatchers were once widespread in wet riparian woodland in southern California but now fewer than 70 pair remain, with the major concentrations being along the Kern River and the Santa Margarita River in San Diego County. Following the Revised Protocol (Fish And Wildlife Service, July 2000) five surveys (see tables 1-2 for dates) were conducted specifically for southwestern willow flycatcher. All surveys occurred between 6:00 and 10:00 am, and used taped calls to elicit a response if flycatchers were not first observed.

A single willow flycatcher was observed on July 13th approximately 300 yards upstream from the pipeline crossing in Ventura County (see Figure 1). Although this date is at the end of the nesting season for willow flycatchers, no observations were made at this site earlier in the season. Although the habitat seems suitable for flycatcher nesting, it is more likely that this bird was a migrating individual heading south after nesting further north in California.

Willow flycatchers are fairly common migrants through southern California and most of the migrants are believed to be of the more northern common subspecies of willow flycatcher, *E. t. brewsteri*, which breeds throughout southern Canada and the northern United States, rather than representatives of the southwestern subspecies *E. t. extimus*. Southwestern willow flycatchers are positively identified primarily by nesting within the geographic area of their range or by measurements of in hand specimens.

The report forms required by the survey protocol for this species are attached and will be forwarded to the Ventura Office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Least Bell's Vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*)

Surveys of the wet riparian areas along the Santa Clara River followed U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Guidelines for least Bell's vireo. Eight surveys were conducted between April 10 and July 31 (see tables 1-2 for dates). All surveys occurred between 6:00 and 10:00 am. The least Bell's vireo is a very vocal species and most birds were located without the use of taped calls. However, tapes were used to elicit responses in early spring, before vireo arrival, in late summer, when vireos were less vocal, and in areas of marginal habitat or where vireos were expected from previous sightings but could not be heard. A calling vireo was considered a territorial male. If a second, silent bird was observed in the same area, a pair was considered to be present. However, to avoid disturbance, no efforts were made to find nests, locate with certainty females in territories, or to locate fledged young in established territories. Numbers of vireos shown in Tables 1 and 2 are actual numbers of birds observed. These numbers include all vireos, both singing and silent. In order to avoid disturbing vireos, no special efforts were made to determine nesting success or presence of leg bands once birds were observed. However, at each location where vireos were found, they were observed at least once, and no leg bands were observed.

In Ventura County approximately 8 territorial male least Bell's Vireos were regularly encountered (Figure 2). Vireos have been regular along this section of the river in past years, but this year, for the first time, the area of vireo activity has extended upstream above the pipe crossing. Numbers of vireos seen were approximately the same as in previous years. There were fewer vireos downstream where spring flooding removed much streamside vegetation.

In Los Angeles County up to 10 territorial male least Bell's Vireos were regularly encountered (Figure 3). Three vireos were regularly found on the north side of the river just below the road crossing at the mouth of Castaic Creek. Five vireos were regularly found on the south side of the river in dense willow and cottonwoods adjacent to agricultural fields. For the first time this year, a vireo was found on the north side of the river in this area. Finally, a single vireo was found near the lower crossing. This is a larger number of vireos than found in previous years in Los Angeles County. It is not clear whether this increase (from approximately 5 pair in 2004) is due to local nesting success or due to movement of birds from downstream locations along the Santa Clara River. Much of the regular habitat of vireos along the river was destroyed in the spring floods of 2005 and some movement of vireo nesting sites may have resulted from this.

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 were observed sparingly along the river after the breeding season and along other sections of the river during winter and migration. No nesting was observed.

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*)

The great egret is listed on the California Natural Diversity Data Base as a species that warrants monitoring. Individuals of this species was observed sparingly along the river after the breeding season and along other sections of the river during winter and migration. No nesting was observed.

White-tailed Kite (*Elanus leucurus*)

This species is considered a Species of Management Concern by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Hunting kites were regularly observed along the river. Nesting occurred near the mouth of Castaic Creek and also in a forested area north of the river in Ventura County. In both cases, at least two young were successfully fledged.

Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*)

Cooper's hawk is considered a Species of Special Concern by the State of California. Cooper's hawks were regularly observed hunting along Ventura County section of the river and presumably nested in the area.

California Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris actia*)

This is a California Special Concern species. Although none were observed nesting on the study site, horned larks are ground nesters that prefer bare hillsides and abandoned fields. A few were observed feeding on bare fields adjacent to the riparian zone.

Yellow Warbler (*Dendroica petechia*)

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. Singing yellow warblers were observed throughout the survey period in small numbers. Most sightings were in the areas where least Bell's vireos were present (Figures 2-3)

Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*)

The yellow-breasted chat is considered a Species of Special Concern by the State of California. The numbers of chats calling from territories along this section of riparian woodland are about the same

number as observed here in previous years. . Most sightings were in the dry forest adjacent to agricultural fields in Los Angeles County where least Bell's vireos were also present (Figure 3) . A few additional birds were regularly heard in a dry riparian woodland on the north side of the river (Area 4 in Figure 2).

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 is also a Federal Special Concern species. Two birds were observed visiting the river channel near from coastal sage areas on the south side of the river.

Comments on Brown Headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*)

Cowbirds were regularly observed in all sections of the study area and seemed to be attracted by tapes of least Bell's vireo calls. Numbers seemed lower than in previous years.

Summary

No yellow billed cuckoos were observed during 2005. There was a single observation of a willow flycatcher. Because of the date of observation and failure to find the bird in the same area on earlier visits, it is likely that this bird represented the common northern subspecies of willow flycatcher (*E. l. brewsteri*) rather than the endangered southern California subspecies (*E. l. extimus*).

Nearly 20 pair of least Bell's vireos were observed in 2005. This is an increase from previous years. It is not known whether this increase is the result of past local nesting success or is due to movement of vireos into the area from other downstream sections of the river where their nesting habitat was destroyed by spring floods.

Among species of concern, the riparian species; yellow warbler and yellow-breasted chat occurred in small numbers in riparian woodlands along the river. There were several observations of two raptors, the white-tailed kite and Cooper's hawk. Both species nest in riparian woodlands. Two wintering and migrant species of concern, great blue heron and great egret, were observed feeding in small numbers on the river, but did not nest in the area. A single Species of Concern that is a resident in the coastal sage habitat along the river, the rufous-crowned sparrow, was observed once. Finally, one dry field species, the horned lark, was observed along the river in small numbers as a visitor from nearby plowed fields.

Table 1. BIRDS OBSERVATIONS ALONG THE SANTA CLARA RIVER, 2005: Santa Clara River from the mouth of Castaic Creek downstream to the Los Angeles/Ventura County Line.

Endangered Species and Species of Concern in bold

SPECIES	STAT.	Dates of Surveys							
		4/21,26	5/8,9	5/23,24	6/2,3	6/11,13	6/22,23	7/3,4	7/12,13
Great Blue Heron	m,w	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Green Heron	r	0	0	1	0	1	2	0	0
Black-crowned Night-heron	m,w	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Turkey Vulture	s	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Mallard	r	7	0	4	12	2	0	7	10(6)
White-tailed Kite	r	0	3	3	8	5	1	3	2
Cooper's Hawk	r	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Red-shouldered Hawk	r	1	0	1	3	1	2	4	2
Red-tailed Hawk	r	2	0	4	1	1	2	0	4
American Kestrel	r	2	2	1	2	5	1	4(4)	0
California Quail	r	27	67	82	22	33	31	13	22
Killdeer	r	6	3	5	13	9	15	27	20
Spotted Sandpiper	s	0	0	0	0	2	6	8	6
Western Gull	m,	0	3	35	1	0	5	0	0
Mourning Dove	r	10	7	10	7	5	8	6	12
Greater Roadrunner	r	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Great Horned Owl	r	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Black-ch. Hummingbird	s	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Anna's Hummingbird	r	2	2	5	2	3	2	1	1
Costa's Hummingbird	s	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Belted Kingfisher	m,w	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Nuttall's Woodpecker	r	8	6	5	7	10	8	8	9
Downy Woodpecker	r	2	3	0	0	0	0	1	0
Hairy Woodpecker	r	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Northern Flicker	r	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	2
Pacific Slope Flycatcher	s	0	0	2	0	2	0	1	0
Black Phoebe	r	1	4	2	1	0	2	2	7
Say's Phoebe	r	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Ash-throated Flycatcher	s	14	18	15	9	11	11	19	14
Western Kingbird	s	4	4	3	2	6	0	0	2
Bell's Vireo	s	0	1	11	10	8	10	9	10
Western Scrub Jay	r	8	8	6	5	13	6	5	10
American Crow	r	8	20	10	18	15	45	60	15
Common Raven	r	4	6	6	6	6	14	33	22
Tree Swallow	s	12	5	5	5	5	2	0	0
Violet-green Swallow	s	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
N. Rough-winged Swallow	s	4	6	2	5	0	25	0	0
Cliff Swallow	s	6	58	20	40	70	8	14	15
Barn Swallow	s	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Oak Titmouse	r	7	8	1	2	2	6	0	2
Bushtit	r	13	0	15	2	2	0	0	0
Bewick's Wren	r	30	24	29	19	16	12	17	13
House Wren	r	30	30	30	22	6	1	0	1

Table 1 (cont.). BIRDS OBSERVATIONS ALONG THE SANTA CLARA RIVER, 2005: Santa Clara River from the mouth of Castaic Creek downstream to the Los Angeles/Ventura County Line.

Endangered Species and Species of Concern in bold

<u>SPECIES</u>	<u>STAT.</u>	<u>Dates of Surveys</u>							
		<u>4/21,26</u>	<u>5/8,9</u>	<u>5/23,24</u>	<u>6/2,3</u>	<u>6/11,13</u>	<u>6/22,23</u>	<u>7/3,4</u>	<u>7/12,13</u>
Western Bluebird	r	6	2	10	16	4	11	22	19
Wrentit	r	6	6	9	5	3	6	6	11
California Thrasher	r	0	1	1	2	0	0	2	1
European Starling	r	12	21	17	17	6	2	13	1
Cedar Waxwing	w,m	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Phainopepla	r	0	0	2	4	0	1	0	0
Yellow Warbler	s,m	8	4	8	3	9	6	9	4
Common Yellowthroat	r	4	14	20	1	13	5	6	5
Wilson's Warbler	m	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Yellow-breasted Chat	s	1	3	2	4	5	1	4	2
Western Tanager	m	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Spotted Towhee	r	15	16	19	15	5	6	6	2
California Towhee	r	26	33	34	25	23	16	12	21
Lark Sparrow	r	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	22
Savannah Sparrow	w,m	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Song Sparrow	r	50	56	50	20	48	16	10	9
Black-headed Grosbeak	s	30	21	14	21	10	12	4	9
Blue Grosbeak	s	2	7	2	0	0	3	4	3
Lazuli Bunting	s	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Red-winged Blackbird	s	12	1	4	15	0	3	5	0
Western Meadowlark	r	0	0	0	3	2	0	0	0
Brewer's Blackbird	r	14	2	3	0	0	0	0	0
Brown-headed Cowbird	s	3	0	7	0	3	0	5	0
Bullock's Oriole	s	10	8	2	7	5	0	0	1
House Finch	r	31	43	31	15	34	24	13	10
Lesser Goldfinch	r	13	9	0	2	4	2	0	0
American Goldfinch	w,m	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Zebra Finch	r	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3

Status: m, migrant; r, resident; s, summer only; w, winter numbers in parentheses are nestlings.

Table 2. Bird Observations along the Santa Clara River, 2005; Los Angeles/Ventura County Line West to 1/4 mile beyond Las Brisas Bridge.

Endangered Species and Species of Concern in bold

SPECIES	STAT.	Dates of Surveys							
		<u>26-</u> <u>Apr</u>	<u>8-</u> <u>May</u>	<u>24-</u> <u>May</u>	<u>3-</u> <u>Jun</u>	<u>13-</u> <u>Jun</u>	<u>23-</u> <u>Jun</u>	<u>4-</u> <u>Jul</u>	<u>13-</u> <u>Jul</u>
Great Blue Heron	m,w	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Great Egret	m,w	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Snowy Egret	m,w	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Green Heron	r	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
Mallard	r	4	0	4	4	7	0	2	0
Northern Pintail	w,m	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
White-tailed Kite	r	0	0	1	0	0	7	0	0
Cooper's Hawk	r	0	0	1	1	1	2	0	0
Red-shouldered Hawk	r	2	0	1	1	0	1	2	4
Red-tailed Hawk	r	3	4	4	5	3(1)	1	5	2
American Kestrel	r	1	0	1	2	1	0	0	2
California Quail	r	43	30	29	45	27	23	25	9
Killdeer	r	4	4	3	9	10	9	11	21
Spotted Sandpiper	s	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Rock Dove	r	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Mourning Dove	r	16	25	13	31	34	24	36	27
Greater Roadrunner	r	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Lilac-crowned Amazon		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Selasporus sp.		0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Black-chinned Hummingbird	s		0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Anna's Hummingbird	r	4	8	5	14	3	6	3	1
Costa's Hummingbird	s	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	0
Acorn Woodpecker	r	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nuttall's Woodpecker	r	5	11	6	18	10	12	15	9
Downy Woodpecker	r	2	1	3	6	6	7	4	1
Hairy Woodpecker	r	0	0	1	5	2	1	1	2
Northern Flicker	r	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Western Wood Pewee	s,m	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Willow Flycatcher	s	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Pacific Slope Flycatcher	s	3	4	3	0	3	4	4	7
Black Phoebe	r	1	8	6	16	6	2	8	14
Ash-throated Flycatcher	s	16	14	15	20	14	18	22	8
Western Kingbird	s	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Horned Lark	r	0	0	1	0	0	3	0	0
Bell's Vireo	s	8	6	4	8	6	8	6	5
Western Scrub Jay	r	7	13	16	9	12	12	15	16
American Crow	r	12	23	29	48	20	27	59	46
Common Raven	r	9	11	10	4	32	7	52	34
Tree Swallow	s	0	0	2	2	0	0	1	1
Violet-green Swallow	s	1	2	0	0	0	1	5	0
N. Rough-winged Swallow	s	4	7	13	7	0	5	4	1
Cliff Swallow	s	400	212	129	225	82	275	335	210
Oak Titmouse	r	9	5	5	6	13	8	12	10
Bushtit	r	2	13	15	35	13	2	52	16

Table 2. Bird Observations along the Santa Clara River, 2005; Los Angeles/Ventura County Line West to 1/4 mile beyond Las Brisas Bridge.

Endangered Species and Species of Concern in bold

SPECIES	STAT.	Dates of Surveys							
		26- Apr	8- May	24- May	3- Jun	13- Jun	23- Jun	4- Jul	13- Jul
Bewick's Wren	r	84	50	56	35	23	40	32	18
House Wren	r	30	24	24	23	15	0	2	0
Western Bluebird	r	2	2	1	4	5	8	6	0
American Robin	r	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Wrentit	r	7	8	13	6	5	4	10	19
Northern Mockingbird	r	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
California Thrasher	r	5	5	2	1	2	2	2	0
European Starling	r	27	21	2	7	6	17	8	0
Phainopepla	r	0	3	7	2	2	2	1	0
Orange-crowned Warbler	m	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Yellow Warbler	s,m	9	8	11	13	9	4	2	4
Yellow-rumped Warbler	w,m	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Common Yellowthroat	r	19	9	39	21	21	33	9	8
Wilson's Warbler	m	4	14	1	0	0	0	0	0
Yellow-breasted Chat	s	2	2	6	4	6	4	6	0
Western Tanager	m	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Spotted Towhee	r	35	39	30	26	23	23	21	22
California Towhee	r	54	61	54	21	67	33	26	19
Rufous-crowned Sparrow	r	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lark Sparrow	r	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0
Song Sparrow	r	73	76	73	76	81	63	24	17
Black-headed Grosbeak	s	23	20	17	29	13	15	14	18
Blue Grosbeak	s	2	2	2	3	1	2	2	2
Lazuli Bunting	s	3	0	0	0	0	5	4	9
Red-winged Blackbird	s	1	0	4	17	5	3	9	0
Brewer's Blackbird	r	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
Brown-headed Cowbird	s	16	8	8	14	19	21	7	8
Hooded Oriole	s	3	0	2	0	0	0	1	1
Bullock's Oriole	s	1	2	5	1	0	2	7	0
House Finch	r	41	26	28	35	34	44	137	23
Lesser Goldfinch	r	3	14	1	22	5	18	48	28
American Goldfinch	m	3	0	0	0	0	0	2	1
House Sparrow	r	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0

Status: m, migrant; r, resident; s, summer only; w, winter
numbers in parentheses are nestlings.