
Guthrie, D.A., "White-Tailed Kite Populations along the Upper Santa Clara River" (July 26, 2005; 2005C)

**WHITE-TAILED KITE POPULATIONS
ALONG THE UPPER SANTA CLARA RIVER**

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Revised

July 26, 2005

White-tailed Kite Populations along the Upper Santa Clara River

For over ten years I have been surveying sections of the upper Santa Clara River and its tributaries. The areas surveyed are indicated in Figure 1, and include the main river from the mouth of Castiac Creek upstream to 2.5 miles above the Bouquet Canyon Bridge, and the lower portions of Castaic Creek, San Francisquito Creek and the South Fork of the Santa Clara River. The surveys were conducted following the protocols for least Bell's vireo and southwestern willow flycatcher. These surveys extended from early April through August 1st with typically 8 surveys a year along the wet stretches of the river (Castaic Creek and the main river from Bouquet Canyon to Castaic Creek; sections 1-3 and 5 on Figure 1) and 5 surveys along the drier sections (San Francisquito Creek, South Fork and the Santa Clara River above Bouquet Canyon Bridge, sections 4,6-8 in Figure 1). All bird observations on each survey were recorded, and particular attention was paid to Species of Concern, including the white-tailed kite.

Table 1 presents a summary of kite observations from 1993 to 2005 in the areas surveyed. Each number on the table represents a pair of kites which, based on repeated observations and behavior, were known to be nesting. Question marks indicate kites seen only once or twice with no evidence of nesting. Zeros on the table indicate no kite observations or observation of a single kite once.

Kites were most often encountered in the dry riparian forest near the mouth of Castaic Creek and behind the Travel Village trailer park. Kites were also seen many years along the Santa Clara River between McBean Parkway and Interstate 5, along Castaic Creek, and along San Francisquito Creek. Prior to 2005, kites were observed only once (1999) above Bouquet Canyon Crossing. Kites were never observed along South Fork and between Bouquet Canyon Road and McBean Parkway.

The sections of the river where kites were never observed (sections 3,7,8,) are very restricted, bordered by developed land, and contain little or no water and little or no grassland or coastal sage habitat. Kites were most often observed in Sections 1,2, 5 and 6. All these sections of the river have either continuous flow of water (sections 1,2), or, in the case of Castaic Creek (section 5) and San Francisquito Creek (section 6) are usually wet in early spring (March and April) due to water release from upstream dams.

Section 4, the area above Bouquet Canyon Crossing, had nesting kites only during two years, 1999 and 2005. Both of these years were much wetter than normal and there was flowing water in this section in March and April.

From the data presented, it would appear that kites prefer several things.

1. An area with large, dense trees somewhat isolated from human habitation
2. An area along the wet section of the river
3. An area with adjacent grassland, coastal sage, or fallow agricultural field.

Kites were absent from all surveyed sections four out of the 13 years despite their being water along some sections of the river. This complete absence of kites during some years is unexplained. Kites are fairly visible birds and it is unlikely that their presence would have been undetected. Kites were most numerous during wet years (1999 and 2005).

Kite Activity Above Bouquet Canyon Road

This year is the first time in several years that kites have nested in the section above Bouquet Canyon Road. This is also the first year that the Santa Clara River had flow along this section, with wet areas continuing through the end of July. Spring rains also rejuvenated the dry riparian woodland adjacent to this section of the river and resulted in excellent growth of annual plants and a large spring and early summer rodent population.

Two pair of kites nested in the section of the river above Bouquet Canyon Bridge in 2005 (Figure 2). The first pair nested in a grove of cottonwoods approximately ½ mile upstream from Bouquet Canyon Bridge on the north side of the river and was observed from March 25th through June 25. This pair fledged two young and both young and adults have not been observed in the area since June 25th. The second pair nested in a large oak tree on the north side of the river just east of the aqueduct crossing. Adult birds were still present on July 22, but the two young birds have not been observed since July 16th. On July 22nd the kites were not near their nesting area but were observed perched out in the river wash a quarter mile to the west where they often had been observed hunting in the past. Both pair of kites appeared to hunt almost exclusively over the coastal sage habitat in the wash rather than over the grass covered hillsides to the north (Figure 2).

Effect of Construction Activities on Kites

Both of the pairs of kites that nested above Bouquet Canyon Rd. successfully raised young in 2005 and we have seen no evidence that they are attempting a second brood. Although kites are somewhat secretive in selection of nest sites, they are often observed hunting near freeways and other areas of human activity. We have observed no hunting by kites over the grasslands and hills north of the river corridor. Rather, all hunting has been observed in vegetated sections of the river bottom (see figure 2). Planned construction activities on the hillsides north of the river, including construction of a pipeline just north of the eastern nest site is not likely to affect the white-tailed kites as this construction does not impinge on the area where we have observed hunting.

The likelihood of construction affecting kite nesting in the area in future years is unclear. Kites have not nested in the surveyed area above Bouquet Canyon Rd. in dry years. It would appear that the habitat is acceptable only in wet years, which have been infrequent, occurring two years (1999 and 2005) out of the last 13. Current construction plans will leave several large, dense trees in this section of the river which would be suitable for nesting. Use of the area in the future, however, seems more dependent upon presence of water in the Spring.

Table 1. Status of White-tailed Kite along upper reaches of the Santa Clara River and its tributaries.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Section of River</u>								<u>total Pair</u>
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>	
2005	1	?	0	2	1	?	0	0	4
2004	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
2003	1	1	0	0	0	?	0	0	2
2002	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2001	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2000	?	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1999	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	4
1998	1	?	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
1997	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	3
1996	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1995	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
1994	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
1993	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1

Numbers represent the number of pairs observed nesting each year along each section of the river

Question marks indicate limited observations and no evidence of nesting.

Section 1; Santa Clara River: Old Road downstream to mouth of Castaic Creek

Section 2: Santa Clara River; McBean Crossing to Old Road

Section 3: Santa Clara River; Bouquet Canyon Rd to McBean Crossing

Section 4: Santa Clara River: Bouquet Canyon Rd upstream 2.5 miles

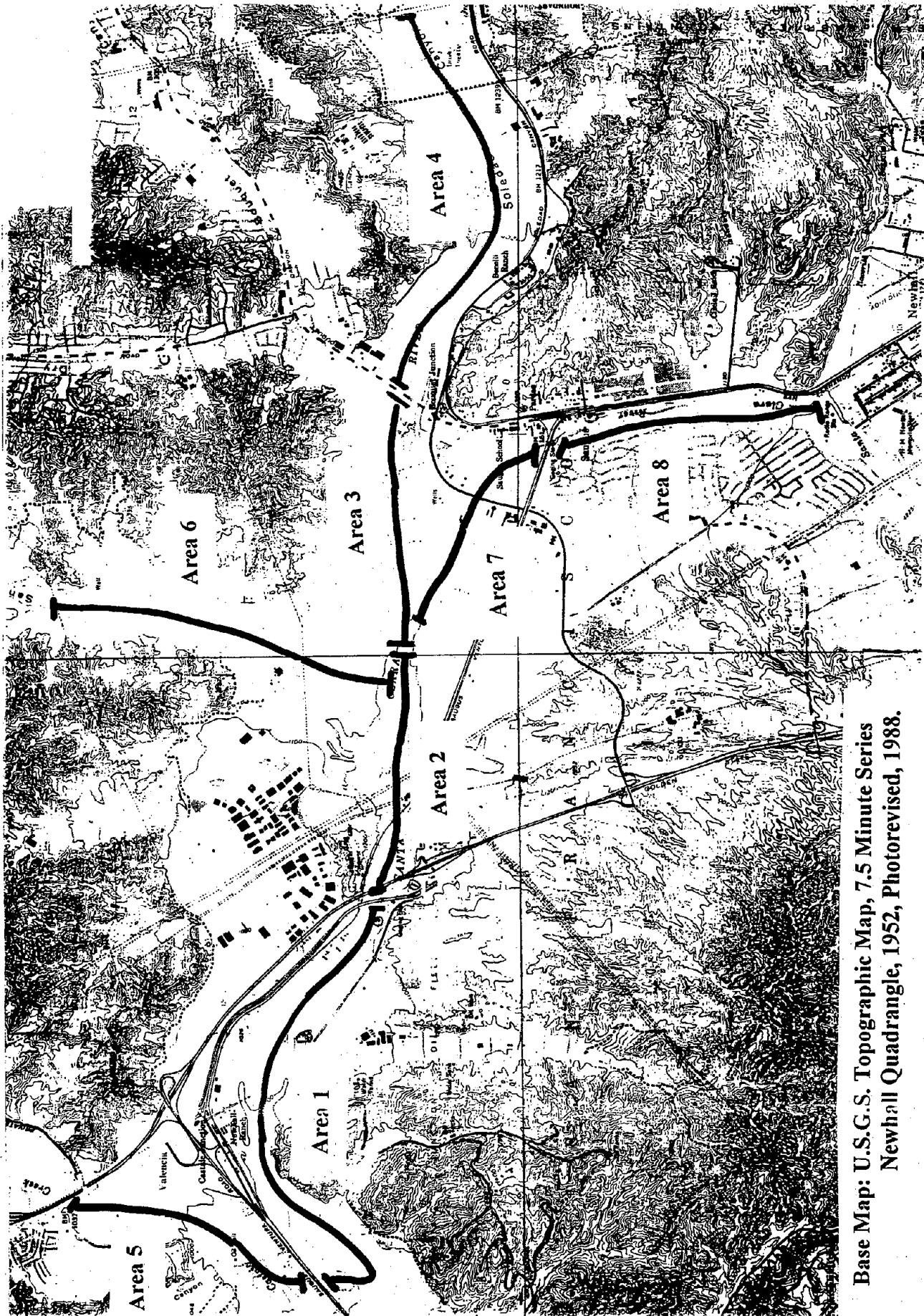
Section 5: Castaic Creek, Interstate 5 to Santa Clara River

Section 6: San Francisquito Creek; Copper Hill Rd to Santa Clara River

Section 7: South Fork, Rte 126 to Santa Clara River

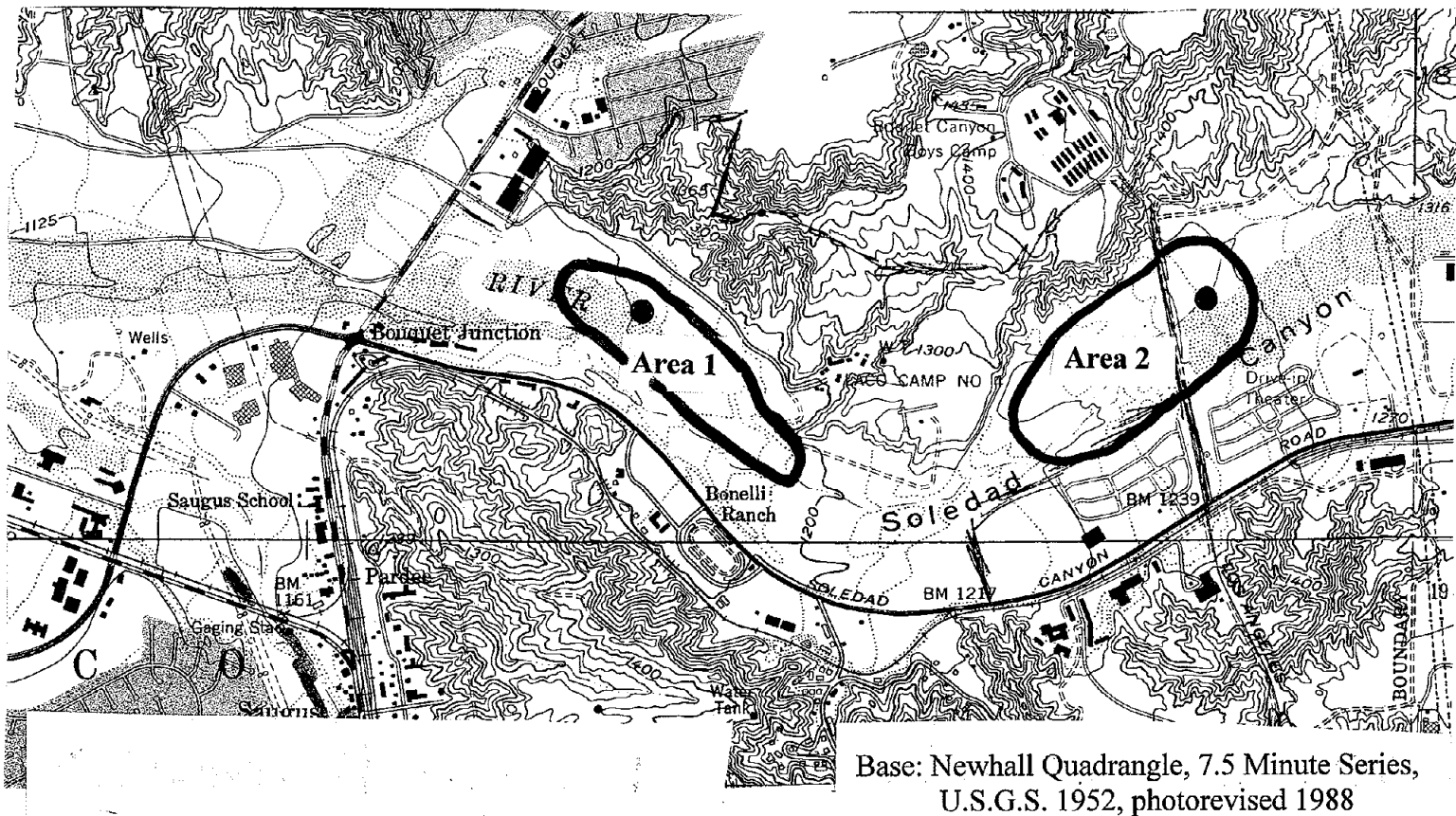
Section 8: South Fork, Coyote Creek downstream to Rte. 126

Figure 1. Survey Areas along the Santa Clara River and Tributaries.



Base Map: U.S.G.S. Topographic Map, 7.5 Minute Series
Newhall Quadrangle, 1952, Photorevised, 1988.

Figure 2. Sightings of White-tailed Kites above Bouquet Canyon Bridge



● Location of Nest Sites, 2005

Area of observed foraging

Area 1. Kites observed from first survey on March 25th through June 25th (last sighting). No kites observed during July. Two young fledged.

Area 2. Kites observed from first survey on March 25. Two young not observed after July 16th. Parents observed on July 22nd but no kites observed on July 26th