
**Impact Sciences, Inc., "Results of Focused Surveys for the Coastal California
Gnatcatcher, ±156-Acre Project Site, Santa Clarita, Los Angeles County,
California" (July 7, 2000)**



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July 7, 2000

Mr. Michael Weinstein
Science Applications International Corporation
816 State Street, Ste. 500
Santa Barbara, California 93101

Subject: Results of Focused Surveys for the Coastal California Gnatcatcher, ±156-acre Project Site, Santa Clarita, Los Angeles County, California

Dear Mr. Weinstein:

This letter report summarizes the methodology and findings of surveys for the federally listed threatened coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) conducted by Impact Sciences, Inc. within the boundaries of the subject ±156-acre project site. These surveys were conducted to determine the presence/absence of the California gnatcatcher on the project site. A regional survey area location map (Figure 1) is attached to illustrate gnatcatcher survey locality information.

Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) routinely requests that focused surveys be conducted in potentially suitable coastal sage scrub vegetation located within this species range which includes portions of Los Angeles County. As such, we understand that the project applicant requested that focused gnatcatcher surveys on the project site as part of the environmental review process in support of this project.

The Service listed the California gnatcatcher as Threatened on March 25, 1993, under a proposed special ruling that recognizes regional conservation efforts already underway in Southern California. Because the gnatcatcher is an obligate resident of coastal sage scrub vegetation, potentially suitable sage scrub habitat present at the project site was systematically surveyed for this sensitive bird species. The preferred plant structure in gnatcatcher territories is described as low growing with moderate gaps in the shrub canopy. The California gnatcatcher generally avoids dense or high stands of sage scrub habitat and areas with steep slopes.

Survey Location

The project site is located in Santa Clarita area of Los Angeles County. In general, the site is located west of Interstate 15, south of Highway 126, and north of Pico Canyon Road (see Figure 1).

General Plant Community Description of Areas Surveyed

Coastal Sage Scrub

The amount and density of coastal sage scrub occurring on the site varies based on soil type and aspect. The site supports sage scrub habitat generally characterized by coastal sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*), bush sunflower (*Encelia californica*), California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*), laurel sumac (*Malosma laurina*), chaparral mallow (*Malacothamnus fasciculatum*), purple sage (*Salvia leucophylla*), elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*), coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*), mule fat (*Baccharis salicifolia*), yerba santa (*Eriodictyon californicum*), California broom (*Lotus scoparius*), poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*), oaks (*Quercus* spp.), and chamise (*Adenostoma fasciculatum*). Understory components were a combination of non-native annual grasses with native and non-native forbs.

Methodology

Federal survey guidelines (February 28, 1997) mandate that three surveys shall be conducted at least one week apart between February 15 through August 30 in those areas participating in the Natural Communities Conservation Program (NCCP) interim section 4(d) process. For other jurisdictions (non-NCCP areas) *a minimum of six surveys shall be conducted at least one week apart between March 15 through June 30*, and from July 1 through March 14, a minimum of nine surveys shall be conducted at least two weeks apart. As such, six surveys were completed for the project based on our understanding that the site is located outside a NCCP planning area and that the seasonal timing of the surveys require six separate visits. Per protocol, surveys were: (1) completed between 6:00 a.m. and 12 p.m., and (2) avoided periods of inclement weather or excessive heat, rain, wind, and fog, and (3) coverage was no more than 80 acres per day per person. In addition, Mr. Rick Farris of the Service was contacted for authorization to proceed prior to initiation of the survey effort.

The surveys were conducted by Impact Sciences Senior Biologist, Scott Cameron (federal permit number PRT-808242) and assisted by Project Biologist, Dave Crawford. Mr. Cameron has extensive experience conducting California gnatcatcher

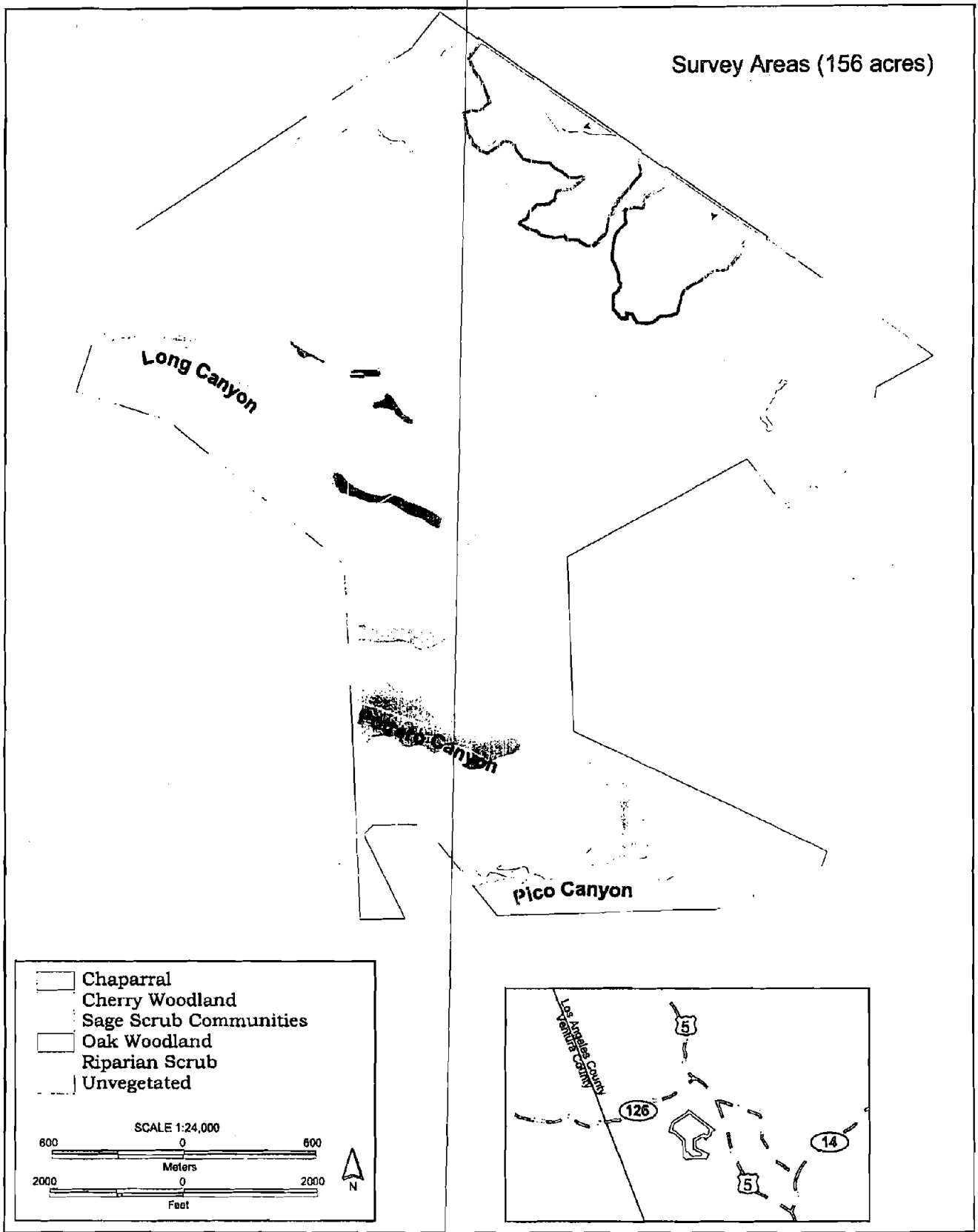


Figure 1. Vegetation Map and Survey Areas

surveys throughout Southern California since 1993. Impact Sciences conducted gnatcatcher surveys on May 1 and 2 (Survey 1), May 11 (Survey 2), May 21 and 22 (survey 3); June 1 (survey 4), June 8 and 9 (survey 5), and June 15 and 16 (survey 6).

Each survey covered areas supporting coastal sage scrub communities considered suitable for gnatcatcher habitation. Potential habitat areas were systematically surveyed on foot by walking slowly and methodically along pre-determined transect routes. The location of each transect and survey points along each transect were based on the vegetation and topographic conditions (size, location, and shape of habitat) of the area to be surveyed to ensure complete sage scrub coverage (to the extent practical). Calling points were separated by approximately 50 meter to 70 meter intervals, or as needed, depending upon the vegetation and topography in each area. A combination of taped vocalizations (played at 15-second increments) and "pishing" sounds were used at each calling point to elicit responses from gnatcatchers potentially present on site.

Weather conditions during the surveys were generally conducive to a high level of bird activity. Because of the relatively moderate air temperatures (13.8-21.1 degrees centigrade) and generally calm, clear skies, gnatcatcher surveys were conducted each day from between at least 6:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m.

Results

No coastal California gnatcatchers were recorded during surveys conducted on the project site. A total of 35 species of birds were recorded during the focused California gnatcatcher survey effort. Only one of the species detected is considered "special-status" by resource agencies, specifically, the southern California rufous-crowned sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps canescens*). This species was observed in coastal sage scrub habitat during the first two focused surveys. No nests or nesting behavior was observed. Appendix A presents a complete list of bird species detected during the surveys. Parasitic brown-headed cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) were also present on site.

Conclusions

Although the quality and quantity of coastal sage scrub habitat appears to be superficially adequate to support California gnatcatchers, this sensitive taxon is unlikely to occur on the site in view of the negative 2000 survey results and lack of occurrence records for this taxon in the immediate area. As such, proposed development of the site will not likely result in adverse impacts to potentially occurring coastal California gnatcatchers.

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It has been a pleasure conducting focused California gnatcatcher surveys on the subject ±156-acre site located in Los Angeles County, California. If you have any questions regarding results presented in this report, please don't hesitate to call.

Very truly yours,

IMPACT SCIENCES, INC.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott Cameron", written over a horizontal line.

Scott D. Cameron
Senior Biologist

References

- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). 1997. Coastal California Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) Presence/ Absence Survey Guidelines. July 28. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Carlsbad Field Office, California.