
Guthrie, D.A., "Bird Observations for Spring 2000 in the Proposed Mesa Development near Valencia, California" (July 17, 2000; 2000B)

**BIRD OBSERVATIONS FOR SPRING 2000
IN THE PROPOSED MESA DEVELOPMENT
NEAR VALENCIA, CALIFORNIA**

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Office

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REVISED

July 17, 2000

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Nature and Scope of Surveys

During the spring and early summer of 2000 surveys were conducted within the boundaries of the proposed Mesa Project (Figure 1). Surveys were focused on determining presence or absence of borrowing owl, raptorial birds and 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.

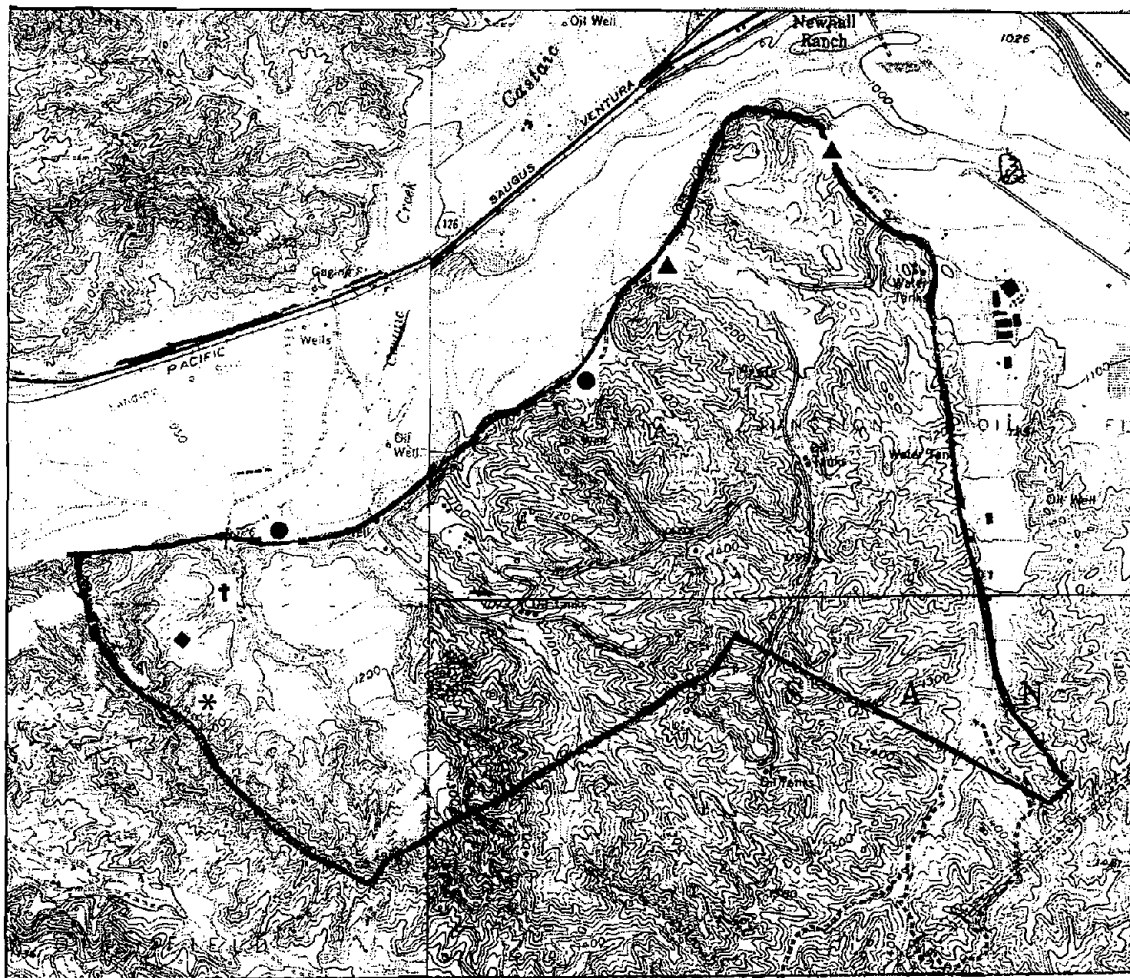
Each survey was conducted on foot by observers well acquainted with both visual and auditory characteristics of southern California birds. Except for a single survey at night for owls and other nocturnal species, all surveys occurred between 5:30 and 10:30 a.m. If focus species (California gnatcatcher), were 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 each focus species. 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.

Habitat Condition and Bird Observations

The Mesa Project involves an irregular area bounded on the east by Magic Mountain and on the west by a steep ridge separating the study area from the drainage of Long Canyon. On the north the area is bordered by the Santa Clara River. The southern boundary of the area is marked by cattle gates on the property boundary but not by any topographic feature (Figure 1).

The area surveyed consists of a series of canyons trending in a southeast to northwest direction and running down to the Santa Clara River. Although there is no stream flow

Figure 1. Topographic map of Mesa Project area, Valencia, California, showing raptor observations.



- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| — Boundary of Mesa Project | † - red-shouldered hawk nest area |
| ● - red-tailed hawk nest | ◆ - Cooper's hawk nest area |
| ▲ - American kestrel nest | * - Golden eagle observations |

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

within these canyons, the more narrow canyons support a dry woodland of oak and sycamore which can be dense in places, forming a closed canopy over the canyon bottoms. Wider canyons have a sandy soil and support a Great Basin sage community. The easternmost canyon is currently being used for agriculture and contains irrigated fields and some cottonwoods and willows. This area, due to irrigation and a small number of natural seeps at the base of cliffs along the Santa Clara River are the only places within the study area where wet riparian species were found.

Some of the mesa tops between the canyons have, at various times been used as agricultural fields and the top of the most northeast mesa in the study area was under active cultivation. Agriculture on the other mesas has been abandoned and these mesas now support introduced grasses and weeds, a few of the hardier coastal sage plants, and tree tobacco.

At one time the whole area, except for its westernmost portion, was an active oil field. The oil operations have been since removed and many pads and access roads plowed. However, enough oil roads remain to provide excellent access to the area.

The study area is currently used for cattle range in the winter and spring, and cattle were present from the beginning of this study (March) until late May.

Except for dry woodlands in the canyon bottoms, the whole area was probably once covered by coastal sage and chaparral communities. Today, due to cattle grazing, past agricultural activities and oil field road and pad construction, much of the area is pastureland covered with introduced grasses and weeds. Coastal sage survives in dense stands on the steeper hillsides. On more gradual slopes grazing activities have broken the coastal sage community into more isolated and open patches containing many introduced grasses.

The avifauna of the Mesa area (Table 1) consists of species common to the coastal sage community with mourning dove, California quail, Bewick's wren, lazuli bunting, California towhee and rufous-crowned sparrow being the common species. Less abundant are species of a dry oak woodland (oak titmouse, spotted towhee, nuttall's woodpecker). Swallows nesting on cliffs along the Santa Clara River were frequently observed foraging over the area. House finch, orioles and phainopepla were common in elderberry and tree tobacco. Pastureland supported horned lark, lark sparrow and mourning dove. A few isolated cliffs at the western edge of the property were roosting and nesting places for barn owl and possibly a golden eagle.

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

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). 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 dominated by California sage as this type of vegetation has been shown to be preferred by gnatcatchers (see below). Tapes of California gnatcatcher calls were played at regular intervals along all survey routes. No California gnatcatchers were heard or observed.

Weaver, in his study of coastal sage scrub variations and their influence on the California gnatcatcher (Western Birds v. 29, 1998, pp. 392-405) noted that black sage scrub replaced other coastal sage scrub types in which California sage was more dominant as one proceeded inland in San Diego County. He observed that black sage forms a closed canopy resulting in a poorly developed herb layer. He also noted that California gnatcatcher was only found in this association when California sage was a co-dominant plant. The coastal sage scrub vegetation in the study area consists of a mixture of black sage (*Salvia mellifera*) and California sage (*Artemisia californica*) on the hillsides and Great Basin sage (*Artemisia tridentata*) in the valleys. Thus, although the valley floor vegetation is unsuitable for gnatcatchers, the hillside coastal sage community seems suitable for gnatcatchers.

It was observed that, on days when rain and heavy fog occurred in the Los Angeles and Ventura Basins, the area around Newhall was sunny, with this clear weather extending down the Santa Clara River canyon to the Ventura County line. This lack of coastal fog in the Newhall area results in both hotter and drier conditions in the study area during the summer, and cooler temperatures at night. It is known that the California gnatcatcher is limited in its range by energetic constraints, namely cold temperatures (see Mock, Western Birds 29:413-420, 1998) which can be caused by higher elevation and lack of insulation by cloud cover. Although the Newhall weather station reports temperatures that are not too cold for gnatcatchers, (see Mock), the surviving coastal sage

scrub habitat, restricted to the higher elevations on the property, may be colder than the weather station location.

Although no California gnatcatcher were observed, several pair of blue-gray gnatcatchers were found and probably nested within the study site. This species, as well as young of wrens and towhees were frequently found when searching for the source of calls similar to those of California gnatcatchers. All calls that were investigated turned out to be from species other than the California gnatcatcher.

Comments on Sensitive Species

Burrowing Owl

The burrowing owl is considered a Bird of Management Concern by the Fish and Wildlife Service. No burrowing owls were observed, in the study area, nor was this species observed by us in areas bordering the Mesas project to both the north, west and east that were surveyed for this species during 2000.

Raptors

Several hawks were observed. An osprey, observed on March 31st was probably in migration. A peregrine falcon was observed on April 21st flying south over the area. This bird may be breeding to the south in the Santa Susanna Mountains. White-tailed kites, which breed in the Santa Clara River riparian forest directly north of the Mesa Project area, were observed over the edge of the project on two occasions. This species, formerly the Black-shouldered Kite, is considered a Species of Management Concern by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Turkey vultures in small numbers regularly flew over the area.

Red-tailed hawks were the most commonly observed species. Two nests were found on the site, one located on the cliff along the Santa Clara River at the northern edge of the property and the other in a large oak tree, also along the river (Figure 1). Successful nesting resulted in an increase in observations in June when young fledged. Two kestrels also nested, both in trees along the northern edge of the property (Figure 1). A Cooper's hawk and a red-shouldered hawk nested in the undisturbed dry canyon woodlands near the western edge of the property. Cooper's Hawk is considered a Special Concern Species by the State of California.

This was also the area where a golden eagle was twice flushed (Figure 1). The area provides suitable roosting places for this species.

Both great horned owls and barn owls were encountered during the study. Both hunted widely over the property but seemed to prefer more isolated canyons along the southern and western edge of the property for roosting. Both probably nest on the property.

California Horned Lark

This species is a California Special Concern species. Larks were observed on abandoned agricultural fields within the study area. Birds were paired and acted as if nesting, but these areas were heavily grazed by cattle until late May and this may have prevented successful reproduction.

Loggerhead Shrike

This is a California Special Concern species. Shrikes are resident in the coastal sage scrub areas and were observed twice around suitable nesting habitat in the study area.

Yellow Warbler

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. A singing yellow warbler was observed on June 11th near the edge of the Santa Clara River and was probably a visitor from the riparian forest along the river

Yellow-breasted Chat

The Yellow-breasted Chat is considered a Species of Special Concern by the State of California. Chats were observed sparingly in the dry riparian forest bordering the Santa Clara River along the northern edge of the study area.

Southern California Rufous-crowned Sparrow

This species is considered a California Special Concern species by the Department of Fish and Game and is also a Federal Special Concern species. Rufous-crowned sparrows are a fairly common resident and breeding species in coastal sage habitat throughout the study site.

Lawrence's Goldfinch

This species is a highest priority species on the Audubon Birds to Watch list for 1996 and is a Bird of Management Concern for the Fish and Wildlife Service. Flocks of this species were observed in the active agricultural field at the eastern edge of the study area in March and pairs were observed sparingly throughout the area during April through June. This species probably nests on the site.

Comments on Brown Headed Cowbird

Cowbirds were sparingly observed in the study area, mostly along the northern edge of the property adjacent to the Santa Clara River. Cowbirds are nest parasites, especially of song sparrow, lesser goldfinch and other riparian species. They seem not to parasitize coastal sage species, which nest in much lower density.

Summary

Neither of the focus species, California gnatcatcher and burrowing owl, were observed. Several of the more common raptorial species reside on the site and a golden eagle was observed twice. Species of concern on the site include the coastal sage species Southern California rufous-crowned sparrow and Lawrence's goldfinch, both of which are fairly common, and loggerhead shrike, which is rare. A few horned lark, a grassland species, are on pasture areas and two riparian species, yellow warbler and yellow-breasted chat, were observed along the edge of the property along the Santa Clara River.

Table 1. Bird observations for Spring 2000 at the Mesa Site, Valencia, California.

<u>Species</u> <u>date:</u>	<u>22-Mar</u>	<u>31-Mar</u>	<u>21-Apr</u>	<u>5-May</u>	<u>16-May</u>	<u>11-Jun</u>	<u>26-Jun</u>	<u>status</u>
Turkey Vulture	0	3	1	1	1	1	0	R*
Osprey	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	M
White-tailed Kite	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	R*
Cooper's Hawk	0	2	0	0	1	1	2	R*
Red-shouldered Hawk	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	R*
Red-tailed Hawk	3	5	6	5	5	10	3	R*
Golden Eagle	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	R*
Peregrine Falcon	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	M
American Kestrel	2	0	0	0	1	3	3	R*
California Quail	12	35	114	140	18	46	30	R*
Killdeer	2	0	0	0	0	0	3	R*
Domestic Pigeon	0	107	0	24	0	0	0	R*
Mourning Dove	16	8	13	22	16	54	64	R*
Greater Roadrunner	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	R*
Great horned Owl	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	R*
Barn Owl	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	R*
White-throated Swift	1	2	8	0	3	7	17	R*
Vaux's Swift	0	0	22	5	0	0	0	M
Black-ch. Hummingbird	0	0	0	1	5	3	6	S*
Anna's Hummingbird	1	10	2	11	3	6	1	R*
Costa's Hummingbird	0	0	5	13	2	2	7	S*
Nuttall's Woodpecker	1	6	4	5	3	11	3	R*
Downy Woodpecker	0	0	0	1	0	7	4	R*
Acorn Woodpecker	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	R*
Northern Flicker	1	2	1	0	1	1	5	R*
Western Wood Pewee	0	0	0	0	5	1	1	S*
Pac. slope Flycatcher	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	M
Black Phoebe	0	0	0	0	2	4	0	R*
Say's Phoebe	0	2	0	0	1	3	0	R*
Ash-throated Flycatcher	0	0	8	19	10	15	22	S*
Cassin's Kingbird	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	M
Western Kingbird	4	10	1	11	8	18	2	S*
Horned Lark	0	0	2	0	0	7	0	R*
Tree Swallow	0	2	0	0	4	10	4	S*
Violet-green Swallow	0	10	6	0	4	0	7	S*
N. Rough-wing. Swallow	2	19	4	4	2	22	8	S*
Cliff Swallow	0	280	152	50	50	200	158	S*
Barn Swallow	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	M
Scrub Jay	2	9	15	22	20	14	30	R*
American Crow	5	0	0	0	0	0	2	R*
Common Raven	15	36	69	6	13	8	28	R*
Plain Titmouse	2	2	9	6	16	6	10	R*
Bushtit	0	5	11	12	31	42	41	R*
White-breasted Nuthatch	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	R*
Rock Wren	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	R*
Bewick's Wren	8	8	31	43	24	34	48	R*
House Wren	5	24	12	28	31	28	6	R*
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	0	0	0	0	2	0	8	R*

Table 1 (cont.). Bird observations for Spring 2000 at the Mesa Site, Valencia, California.

<u>Species</u> <u>date:</u>	<u>22-Mar</u>	<u>31-Mar</u>	<u>21-Apr</u>	<u>5-May</u>	<u>16-May</u>	<u>11-Jun</u>	<u>26-Jun</u>	<u>status</u>
Western Bluebird	4	5	9	2	7	24	2	R*
Swainson's Thrush	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	M
American Robin	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	R*
Wrentit	10	8	34	14	102	68	54	R*
N. Mockingbird	1	1	1	6	4	3	0	R*
California Thrasher	7	2	2	10	9	6	4	R*
American Pipit	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
Phainopepla	0	0	0	5	51	36	36	S*
Loggerhead Shrike	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	R*
European Starling	7	23	10	34	10	16	7	R*
Hutton's Vireo	1	2	0	2	0	0	0	R*
Warbling Vireo	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	M
Orange-cr. Warbler	0	0	10	0	2	0	0	M
Yellow Warbler	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	S*
Yellow-r. Warbler	6	4	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
Common Yellowthroat	0	2	0	2	0	10	9	R*
Wilson's Warbler	0	0	9	6	3	0	0	M
Yellow-breasted Chat	0	0	0	1	0	5	1	S*
Black-headed Grosbeak	0	0	8	1	0	8	3	S*
Blue Grosbeak	0	0	0	12	2	5	0	S*
Lazuli Bunting	0	0	6	36	23	22	5	S*
Spotted Towhee	15	8	48	29	34	37	44	R*
California Towhee	18	30	59	76	67	82	70	R*
Rufous-crowned Sparrow	3	9	18	13	2	44	6	R*
Chipping Sparrow	1	0	14	0	0	0	0	W,M
Vesper Sparrow	0	9	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
Lark Sparrow	2	13	21	22	11	32	15	S*
Savannah Sparrow	6	2	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
Song Sparrow	2	11	1	11	11	38	3	R*
Lincoln's Sparrow	0	10	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
White-cr. Sparrow	21	41	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
Dark-eyed Junco	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	W,M
Western Meadowlark	0	8	0	0	0	0	0	R*
Brewer's Blackbird	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	R*
Brown-headed Cowbird	3	0	5	0	4	5	4	S*
Bullock's Oriole	1	2	3	6	3	8	3	S*
House Finch	50	53	28	22	20	160	39	R*
Lesser Goldfinch	31	22	30	36	26	75	64	R*
Lawrence's Goldfinch	30	25	6	8	4	0	6	R*
American Goldfinch	3	0	0	2	2	1	2	R*

Total Species: 46 49 43 47 54 55 51

Total Species on all visits: 88

Total Potential Breeding species: 70 (marked with *)

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