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# MEMO

**Client:** Friends of the Los Angeles River  
**Attn:** Lewis MacAdams  
**Date:** April 29, 2011  
**Re:** Nesting bird and sensitive-species surveys of sites along the Los Angeles River and tributaries.

## Description of work

We conducted a pre-work survey for nesting birds and sensitive species at several areas along the Los Angeles River and its tributaries, in preparation for a large, multi-site river cleanup scheduled for 30 April 2011. The cleanup will involve teams of volunteers at pre-determined sites along the river hauling trash and non-natural debris out of the riverbed and up onto the levee for disposal. Potential impacts to riverine habitats include trampling and disruption of soil and vegetation through trash removal. Noise and general human activity is not felt to be an impact due to the existing high noise level along the river channel (the Los Angeles River runs adjacent to freeways and/or train tracks for most of its length), and because of the high human usage of much of the study area, including unauthorized camping by homeless people.

Pre-work surveys consisted of a biologist walking slowly and deliberately through or adjacent to the habitat targeted for trash cleanup, making note of all visible wildlife encountered. Special attention was paid to species deemed to have special status by regulatory agencies, including Species of Special Concern (CDFG), as well as nesting birds likely to be impacted by river-cleanup activity. Three biologists were used for the surveys: Daniel S. Cooper (DSC; president, Cooper Ecological Monitoring, Inc.), Robert A. Hamilton (RAH; president, Hamilton Biological), and Michael C. Long (MCL; retired Natural Areas Director, County of Los Angeles). All have extensive professional experience conducting bird surveys in Los Angeles County, and Michael “Mickey” Long is a local plant expert active in the San Gabriel Mountains chapter of the California Native Plant Society.

Areas identified for the cleanup, the surveyors, and the dates and times surveyed, were as follows (all 2011):

25 April

- Tujunga Wash, east/upstream of the 210 Freeway in Tujunga (DSC, MCL, 8:00 – 10:00 AM)

- Two sites in Sepulveda Basin, the Los Angeles River east of Balboa Ave., and Haskell Creek north of the Wildlife Area (DSC, MCL, 10:30 AM – 12:30 PM)
- The Los Angeles River at Gage Ave. (RAH, 9:30 AM – 1:30 PM)
- Compton Creek at Del Amo Blvd. (RAH, “ “)
- Los Angeles River at Willow St. (RAH, “ “)

27 April

- Los Angeles River adjacent to Bette Davis Park (DSC, 2:00 – 3:00 PM)

28 April

- “Glendale Narrows”; L.A. River just north of Los Feliz Dr., south to vic. Glendale Blvd. (DSC, 9:00 – 9:30)
- “Elysian Valley”; several L.A. River sites reached by road-ends from near the Glendale (2) Fwy. south to the I-5 crossing (DSC, 9:40 – 11:20 AM)
- Los Angeles River vic. Sunnynook Ave. footbridge (DSC, 11:30 AM – 12:00 PM)

Weather was ideal for observation on each day, with mild-to-warm temperatures (60-75 F), clear skies, and little wind.

## Survey Results

### Nesting birds

In coastal southern California, the bird nesting period typically extends from late February through mid-August, and all active/occupied nests are protected by the State of California under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act. We encountered a few active nests, as well as several areas likely to hold nesting birds on the day of the cleanup, but none that were likely to be impacted by the proposed cleanup event.

### Sensitive species

Concurrent to the nesting bird survey, we searched for individuals of several special-status plant and wildlife species known to occur along the Los Angeles River and its tributaries. Only one was encountered, the yellow warbler (*Dendroica petechia*; Calif. Bird Species of Special Concern), which was especially numerous in the Glendale Narrows and Elysian Valley areas. No longer considered special-status but retained on some lists as a “Watch list” species, the Cooper’s hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) was observed at two sites, a displaying bird in the Sepulveda Basin east of Haskell Creek (adjacent to the 405 Fwy), and a lone individual hunting along the Los Angeles River channel adjacent to Marsh Park. No other sensitive wildlife was encountered.

No special-status plant species was encountered; however, the Tujunga Wash site was found to support a fairly pristine example of **Alluvial Fan Scrub**, considered by the State of California to be a rare habitat type, with abundant native wildflowers (Fig 1). We encountered a very high diversity of wildflowers here, for example, which was in sharp contrast to all other sites surveyed, which had a relatively depauperate flora in terms of native species, particularly native forbs (virtually none).

### Site detail

#### **Tujunga Wash**

A single nest of a bushtit (*Psaltiriparus minimus*) was encountered in a large scalebroom (*Lepidospartum squamatum*) shrub near the center of the site (north side of Big Tujunga Wash; Fig. 2). Birds appeared to be bringing food to nestlings. At least one pair of California towhee (*Pipilo crissalis*) was likely nesting in dense California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*) along the northern edge of the site, as

indicated by tame-seeming, paired birds. Wildlife – particularly “non-urban species” – were relatively abundant here compared to the other sites, with California quail (*Callipepla californica*) and desert cottontail (*Sylvilagus audubonii*) both present. As noted above, this site supported Alluvial Fan Scrub, a rare habitat type. For this reason, and because we found the site to be nearly trash-free, we recommended that FOLAR remove this portion of Tujunga Wash from its list of cleanup sites.

### **Sepulveda Basin**

Two sites here were surveyed, Haskell Creek and the L.A. River just east of Balboa Ave. An occupied nest of a lesser goldfinch (*Carduelis psaltria*) was located about 4 meters up in a black poplar (*Populus nigra*) planted along the lowermost portion of Haskell Creek, just north of where it enters Sepulveda Basin Wildlife Area. At least two singing red-winged blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) were singing from tall radish (*Raphanus sativa*) to the east of Haskell Creek where possibly nesting (marked with pink flagging), in an area several meters from the footpath and not likely to be impacted by volunteers (no trash observed). Other singing birds that appeared to be on territory on Haskell Creek included a Bullock’s oriole (*Icterus bullockii*) and song sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*; 2 singing). A Cooper’s Hawk was observed in a display flight over tall trees planted along the 405 Freeway well to the east, where a nest may have been located.

At the Los Angeles River site east of Balboa, we found two singing/territorial yellow warblers in tall willows (*Salix* spp.) and sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*). If nesting, it is unlikely their nests would be located low enough to be threatened by people. Other singing/territorial birds at this site included Bewick’s wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*; 3 singing), California towhee (family group), and Bullock’s oriole (3 singing/pairs). A pair of Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*) present along the river may have been nesting nearby.

### **Bette Davis Park**

Two pairs of black-necked stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*) appeared to be working on nests and/or incubating on small, algae-covered sandbars in the middle of the river channel (Fig. 3). Two broods of Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) were observed with ducklings, indicating successful breeding at the site had occurred. Three red-winged blackbirds and a yellow warbler were singing/on territory, with the blackbirds apparently utilizing an isolated (by rushing water) reed-covered island in the middle of the river channel.

### **Glendale Narrows**

A pair of common yellowthroat was observed in reeds (*Scirpus* sp.) along the east bank of the channel, well upstream of the Los Feliz Ave. bridge, south of the second powerline tower (Fig. 4). The female was observed emerging from reeds as a male sang from a small willow nearby, so a nest was probably present. These reeds held little trash and are unlikely to be disturbed by volunteers, but the area was marked with pink flagging (on a willow) as a precaution. A pair of black-necked stilts appeared to have a nest on a small sandbar just north of the Los Feliz Ave. bridge, near the center of the channel. A family group of bushtit was observed (fledglings being fed) on the island-like strip of vegetation near the center of the channel. Both the Los Feliz Ave. area and the Sunnynook footbridge area supported a diversity of singing/territorial birds, and more nests were probably located on inaccessible islands near the center of the channel (which were unsurveyed), including yellow warbler (8 singing males), song sparrow (5+ singing), and others. Neither these nor the nesting birds described above are likely to be impacted by volunteers on the cleanup.

### **Elysian Valley**

Between Marsh St. and Knox St., we found no nests, but observed an adult killdeer (*Charadrius vociferans*) with three half-grown young running along the eastern bank of the channel. One brood of

Mallards were observed (adults with ducklings), near Knox, and south of Knox, a family group of black phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*), incl. two fledglings being fed by adults, were active along the western bank of the channel, and an adult black phoebe was observed bringing food to a presumed nest site to the west of the channel near Oros St./Steelhead Park. Singing/territorial species in this area were similar to those mentioned above for Glendale Narrows, including at least 10 singing yellow warblers between Marsh Park and Steelhead Park, with only about half the habitat walked. [As a note, the Taylor Yard site was also included in this survey, as the habitat adjacent to Taylor Yard was easily observed from walking along the base of the western levee.]

### **Long Beach/Compton/South Gate**

An active Killdeer nest (recently-hatched young) was observed at Compton Creek (being precocial, the young should be mobile by the time of the cleanup). At Willow St., we observed a dense area of reeds, willows and other vegetation along the western side of the main channel where several pairs of red-winged blackbirds and perhaps some waterfowl are likely nesting. However, this area is difficult to reach from the Willow St. entrance to the bike path, and is unlikely to be disturbed during the cleanup. As a precaution, all volunteers should be advised to not enter this area (as well as other isolated islands along the river channel likely to support nesting bird species trying to avoid predation).

A more complete report, including species lists and photographs, will be provided in May 2011.

### **Photographs (all by DSC)**



Figure 1. Wildflower display along Big Tujunga Wash just east of 210 Fwy., 25 Apr. 2011. Visible flowers include sun-cups (*Camissonia bistorta*) and caterpillar phacelia (*Phacelia cicutaria* var. *hispidula*).



Figure 2. Bushtit nest, Big Tujunga Wash, 25 Apr. 2011.



Figure 3. Black-necked stilt on nest (background; one of two present), Los Angeles River adjacent to Bette Davis Park, Burbank, 27 Apr. 2011.



Figure 4. Area of reeds along eastern bank with presumed nesting common yellowthroat, north of Los Feliz Ave. bridge, 28 Apr. 2011.