Appendix D16
Coastal California Gnatcatcher Survey (WLB 2002)

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WHITE AND LEATHERMAN BIOSERVICES

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11 June 2002

Ms. Christine Moen
Regional Permit Coordinator
U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
2730 Loker Avenue West
Carlsbad, CA 92660

Subject: Results of Focused Presence/Absence Surveys for the Coastal California Gnatcatcher on the Martin Ranch Access Road Project, Devore, San Bernardino County

Dear Ms. Moen:

This letter report presents the negative results of a focused survey to evaluate the presence or absence of the coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) along an alternative access route to the Martin Ranch development project in the City of Devore, San Bernardino County, California. Surveys were conducted according to the 1997 guidelines established by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS 1997).

Project Location and Description

The project site is located northeast of Interstate 215 near the City of Devore, San Bernardino County, California. The alternative access route for the project, which is the focus of this survey effort, is along a partially paved road originating at Frontage Road (along the I-215) and proceeding northeast until it intersects with Meyers Road approximately three-quarters of a mile away. From there the alternative access route follows Meyers Road (paved) southeast until it intersects with Martin Ranch Road approximately one-half mile away (see enclosed figure).

The project site is shown on the Devore and San Bernardino North U.S. Geological Survey 7.5 minute series quadrangle. The topography of the site is variable with much of the terrain dominated by an alluvial floodplain, a relatively steep upslope, and an upland plateau or alluvial bench. Elevations on the project site range from approximately 1,850 to 2,150 feet above mean sea level.

Vegetation

Below is a brief description of the vegetation and habitats along the alternative access roads. Plant taxonomy follows Hickman (1993) for scientific and common names.

The proposed access route consists of existing paved and unpaved roads. Adjacent habitat is generally coastal sage scrub vegetation growing on the alluvial fans and benches below Cable Canyon and Myers Canyon of the western San Bernardino Mountain foothills, and extending downslope to the Cajon Wash alluvial plain. The alluvial fan is no longer subject to scouring

floods from Cajon Wash due to flood control improvements, raised railroad lines, and the Interstate 215 Freeway. Thus, vegetation on the site was likely typical of "alluvial fan sage scrub" historically, but now is its structure and composition are more typical of upland coastal sage scrub of the inland valleys. For example, scalebroom (*Lepidospartum squamatum*), the most characteristic shrub of alluvial fan sage scrub, occurs only occasionally along the route. Instead, shrubland vegetation is dominated by upland coastal sage scrub species including California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*), deerweed (*Lotus scoparius*), California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*). Scattered chaparral shrubs, including chamise (*Adenostoma fasciculatum*) and sugarbush (*Rhus ovata*) also occur. A few California black walnut trees (*Juglans californica*) and Mexican elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*) emerge above the shrubland canopy.

Cable Creek, where it crosses the proposed route, supports scattered cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*), California sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*), willow (*Salix lasiolepis*), and mulefat (*Baccharis salicifolia*) with poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*) growing beneath them. No surface water was seen in at the channel crossing, but the stream runs year around about 1.5 miles upstream, where it is diverted into a pipeline.

The northernmost portion of the dirt road is on a plateau or alluvial bench above the level of the more recently scoured southern portion of the road. Vegetation is slightly different on this northern portion, where white sage (*Salvia apiana*), yerba santa (*Eriodictyon trichocalyx*), Douglas wallflower (*Erysimum capitatum*), and deerweed are common. Vegetation along both the northern and southern parts of the unpaved road is best characterized as coastal sage scrub. Vegetation adjacent to the portion of the route along Meyers Road, which is paved, includes some coastal sage scrub, as described above, and windrows of eucalyptus trees.

Background

The coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) was listed by the USFWS as a threatened species in 1993 (USFWS 1993). Habitat loss and fragmentation from expanding development and agriculture has been a major factor in the decline of this species in southern California (Atwood 1993). The USFWS has not developed a recovery plan for the California gnatcatcher as yet, but critical habitat has been proposed throughout the species range (USFWS 2001).

The coastal California gnatcatcher is restricted to arid, lowland areas from southwestern California to northwestern Baja California. The two other subspecies occur within central and southern Baja California, Mexico. Within the United States, the current range of the California gnatcatcher is generally within San Diego, Orange, Los Angeles, and western Riverside counties. Formerly, this species was common from the San Fernando Valley east along the base of the San Gabriel Mountains to Claremont (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Recently, the gnatcatcher has been rediscovered in the northern portion of its historic range near Simi Valley in southern Ventura County. Habitat for this non-migratory species is generally limited to coastal and inland sage scrub plant communities. This species is typically found at elevations below 820 feet above mean sea level along the coast and below 1,800 feet above mean sea level inland. The current estimate of the number of California gnatcatcher pairs in southern California is about 3,000 pairs (Atwood 2001).

California gnatcatchers occurred in the project region historically. The nearest records are from Devil's Canyon and the City of San Bernardino, approximately 5 to 8 miles to the east-southeast (Atwood 1993). The most recent records for the California gnatcatcher in the region are from the Lytle Creek/Cajon Creek confluence in 1990, and the Santa Ana River floodplain in East Highland in 1995 (Davis et al. 1995), the nearest being approximately 10 miles south. Both of the recent records are from Riversidian alluvial fan sage scrub habitat.

Gnatcatcher Survey Methodology

All surveys for the California gnatcatcher were conducted by Brian Leatherman (permit # TE 827493-3), a wildlife biologist with over ten years of field experience in southern California. Survey methods followed the mandatory protocol developed by USFWS (1997) for surveys conducted between March 15 and June 30 outside an existing NCCP area. Six surveys were conducted between 26 March and 28 May and separated by at least one week. All suitable coastal sage scrub and alluvial scrub habitats were surveyed during each visit, covering not more than 80 acres of habitat per day.

Surveys were generally conducted between dawn and 1100 hours under suitable weather conditions. Weather during the survey on 7 May was overcast with a light mist for much of the morning. However, visibility remained adequate for conducting surveys, bird activity levels were high, and the survey was completed. Weather during the survey on 20 May was overcast with one brief period of drizzle, during which the surveys were suspended (between roughly 1000 and 1030). Survey dates, times and weather data for the focused surveys are shown in Table 1.

Surveys were conducted by slowly walking through all appropriate habitat while listening and watching for gnatcatcher activity. Taped recordings of gnatcatcher vocalizations were played in an attempt to elicit responses from any gnatcatchers present. The frequency of vocalization playback varied, depending on site conditions such as habitat patch size, topography, and ambient noise levels.

Table 1 Summary of Survey Data and Conditions for California Gnatcatcher Surveys

Date	Times	Air Temperature	Wind	Cloud Cover
26-March	0630 – 1030	50 – 77 °F	2 – 6 mph	Hazy early then clear
10-April	0630 – 1100	49 – 72 °F	0 – 4 mph	75 % cirrus cover with some fog, then clear
30-April	0630 – 1030	50 – 62 °F	2 – 6 mph	95% cumulus cover down to 60% with sun through
7-May	0630 – 1000	53 – 55 °F	0 – 2 mph	100% cover with light mist on and off
20-May	0630 – 1100	55 – 57 °F	2 – 6 mph	100% overcast for duration of survey, drizzle
28-May	0600 – 1100	52 – 80 °F	0 – 7 mph	Clear

Survey Results

No California gnatcatchers were detected along the alternative access road or approximately 500 feet on either side of it during the focused survey effort. Although California gnatcatchers almost certainly occurred here historically, there are no records for this site in particular, and the nearest known historical locations are approximately 5 miles east.. The most recent sighting in the area was from 1995 along the Santa Ana River in East Highland. Based on the negative survey results reported here and the lack of sightings in the area, we conclude that the California gnatcatcher is likely absent from the alternative access road area.

Please contact Brian Leatherman by phone at (714) 701-0863 or by email at bleathermanwlb@aol.com if you have questions or comments. A figure showing the location of the access road and a list of the references used in the letter report are included. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

WHITE AND LEATHERMAN BIOSERVICES

Brian Leatherman
Wildlife Biologist

Enclosures

References

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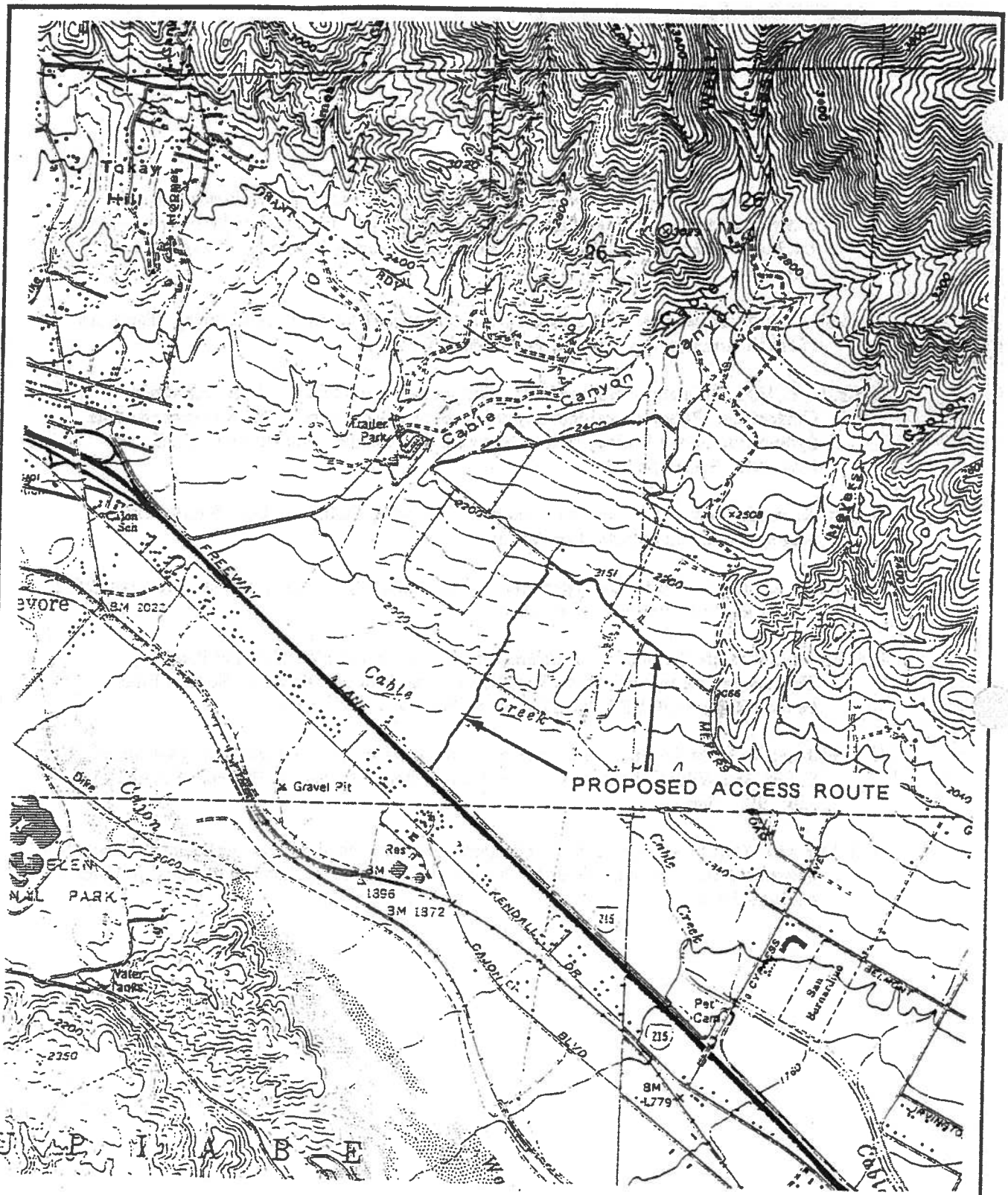

PROPOSED MARTIN RANCH SECONDARY ACCESS ROUTE

NORTH

Map source: USGS 7½ minute (1:24000) Devore and San Bernardino North topographic maps
SDW: 24 April 2002