

**PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT**

**OCCURRENCE OF LISTED WILDLIFE SPECIES**  
**IN THE VENTURA RIVER**  
**HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN STUDY AREA**

*Prepared for:*

CASITAS MUNICIPAL WATER DISTRICT  
CITY OF SAN BUENAVENTURA  
COUNTY OF VENTURA  
VENTURA COUNTY FLOOD CONTROL DISTRICT  
OJAI VALLEY SANITARY DISTRICT  
MEINERS OAKS COUNTY WATER AGENCY  
VENTURA COUNTY WATER AGENCY  
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WATER COMPANY  
OJAI BASIN GMA

*Prepared by:*

**URS Corporation**  
Santa Barbara, CA

**December 2000**

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HCP Sponsoring Agencies:

City of Ventura, Casitas Municipal Water District, County of Ventura (Flood Control District, Transportation, and Solid Waste), Ojai Valley Sanitary District, Southern California Water Company, Ojai Basin GMA, City of Ojai, and Ventura River County Water District

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

1.0 Introduction.....	1
2.0 Scope of Preliminary Investigations .....	2
3.0 Summary of Results .....	3
4.0 Results – Detailed Species Accounts .....	4
4.1 California Red-legged Frog.....	4
4.2 Least Bell’s Vireo.....	5
4.3 Southwestern Willow Flycatcher .....	6
4.4 Western Snowy Plover .....	6
4.5 Brown Pelican .....	7
4.6 California Least Tern.....	7
5.0 Bibliography and References .....	8

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

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A number of public agencies have joined together in a cooperative effort to develop a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for the Ventura River. These agencies include the City of Ventura, Casitas Municipal Water District, County of Ventura (Flood Control District, Transportation, and Solid Waste), Ojai Valley Sanitary District, Southern California Water Company, Ojai Basin GMA, City of Ojai, and Ventura River County Water District. These agencies operate and maintain facilities along portions of the river that could affect species designated threatened or endangered by the federal government. To ensure compliance with the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA), these agencies are proactively seeking an incidental take permit under Section 10(a) of the ESA, which allows take of listed species and their habitat incidental to other lawful activities, provided the take is minimized and other measures are implemented to mitigate the impact, as described in an HCP.

The sponsoring agencies initiated development of the HCP in 2000. The primary focus of the HCP is the southern steelhead trout, a species designated as endangered by the National Marine Fisheries Services (NMFS). A population of steelhead resides in the Ventura River watershed. Critical habitat for the steelhead has been designated along the lower Ventura River. The HCP will also address another fish species, the tidewater goby, which resides at the mouth of the river.

In addition to the steelhead and tidewater goby, the HCP will address other threatened or endangered wildlife species in the watershed that could be affected by the activities of the HCP sponsors. The original list of wildlife species to be addressed in the HCP included the following:

- Southwestern arroyo toad - endangered
- Red-legged frog - threatened
- Least Bell's vireo - endangered
- Southwestern willow flycatcher - endangered
- Western snowy plover - threatened
- Brown pelican - endangered
- California least tern - endangered

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has responsibility for listing and protecting the above wildlife species under the ESA, as well as the tidewater goby.

The geographic scope of the HCP has been determined by agreement amongst the sponsoring agencies to be as follows:

- Mainstem of the Ventura River to Matilija Dam and the confluence with the North Fork of the Matilija Dam, including Coyote Creek
- San Antonio Creek and primary tributaries to the boundary of the National Forest

A larger geographic study area was not included because the sponsoring agencies have little or no activities outside the above geographic area.

## 2.0 SCOPE OF PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

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A preliminary investigation was conducted in 2000 of the potential wildlife species to be included in the HCP pursuant to the HCP work plan approved by the sponsoring agencies, NMFS, and USFWS. The investigation included the following tasks:

- Coordinate with USFWS to determine which species may be present in the watershed
- Review available literature and previous studies on the wildlife species
- Conduct reconnaissance survey of the watershed to identify suitable habitat
- Provide recommendation on which species to include in the HCP

A three-day reconnaissance survey was conducted of the riparian corridor in the HCP study area in July 2000 by Vince Semonsen and Autumn McKee to identify suitable habitat for the red-legged frog. Jim Greaves conducted periodic surveys of the riparian corridor in the HCP study area to identify suitable vireo and flycatcher habitat, and to make incidental sightings, from April through July 2000. Finally, an assessment and mapping of all riparian habitat was conducted in the HCP study area by Chris Dilith in August 2000.

### 3.0 SUMMARY OF RESULTS

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Based on our investigations, we determined that the arroyo toad is not likely to occur in the watershed. The red-legged frog occurs upstream of Matilija Dam, but there are no recent records of its occurrence in the HCP study area downstream of the dam. However, suitable habitat occurs along the lower Ventura River and along portions of San Antonio Creek. The willow flycatcher occurs infrequently along the lower river below the Shell Road Bridge as a seasonal transient. A small and irregular number of least Bell's vireos breed along the lower river between the Main Street and Shell Road bridges. The plover, pelican, and tern only occur along the coastal strand and beaches at the mouth of the river.

The primary criterion for inclusion of an endangered species in the HCP is the existence of a current or future conflict with the HCP sponsors' activities in the watershed that would necessitate a Section 10(a) permit. Based on this criterion, we have concluded that activities by the HCP sponsors would not likely involve a need for a take permit for the coastal strand species (plover, pelican, and tern), and as such, these species need not be included in the HCP. In addition, inclusion of the arroyo toad in the HCP would not be appropriate since there is no evidence of this species in the watershed, nor is critical habitat proposed for this species in the watershed.

Hence, the HCP would only include the following wildlife species: the red-legged frog, least Bell's vireo, and willow flycatcher. We met with the USFWS staff in November 2000 to discuss these results and requested a formal confirmation that the HCP. A summary of our findings is presented in Table 1.

**TABLE 1  
SUMMARY OF PRELIMINARY WILDLIFE INVESTIGATIONS**

<b>Species</b>	<b>Known Habitat in HCP Study Area</b>	<b>Possible Future Habitat in HCP Study Area</b>	<b>Potential Conflicts with HCP Sponsors?</b>
Southwestern arroyo toad	None	Not likely	No
Red-legged frog	None (upstream of study area)	Main St bridge to confluence with San Antonio Ck; San Antonio Ck	Yes
Least Bell's vireo	Yes	--	Possible, but not expected
Southwestern willow flycatcher	None	Not likely	No
Western snowy plover	Yes	--	No
Brown pelican	Yes	--	No
California least tern	Yes	--	No

## 4.0 RESULTS – DETAILED SPECIES ACCOUNTS

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Detailed accounts of the endangered wildlife species considered for inclusion in the HCP are provided below, including information on their occurrence in the watershed.

### 4.1 CALIFORNIA RED-LEGGED FROG

*Habitat Requirements.* Frogs breed during the winter and early spring from late November through April. Breeding sites include coastal lagoons, marshes, springs, permanent and semi-permanent natural ponds, ponds and backwater portions of streams, and small artificial impoundments. Eggs are laid in ponds or backwater pools in creeks attached to emergent vegetation and hatch within 6 to 14 days. The young frogs inhabit slow moving, shallow riffle habitats in creeks or margins of ponds. The older frogs can be found close to ponds or deep pools in creeks where there is emergent vegetation, undercut banks, or rootwads that offer shelter from predators. These older frogs may also be found in a variety of upland areas near ephemeral water bodies or many meters from the water taking refuge in small mammal or other animal burrows.

*Likely Habitat in the Watershed.* Several red-legged frogs have been sighted in 2000 in the riparian habitat in the Matilija Dam reservoir area by Dr. Sam Sweet of UCSB and USFWS biologists. There have been no sightings in the HCP study area since 1990. No frogs were observed during our reconnaissance surveys in 2000. Non-native predators are present throughout the watershed, including crayfish and bullfrogs.

Suitable habitat is present from the Main Street bridge to the confluence with San Antonio Creek where there are shaded pools and well developed riparian woodland. Potential sites include immediately upstream of the Main Street Bridge; downstream of Shell Road in a large stand of willows on the right side of the river; and several sites between the treatment plant and Foster Park where there are larger established trees providing shade, rootwads, and undercut banks.

Much of San Antonio Creek provides suitable habitat due to the presence of a well-established riparian canopy providing shelter and shade, and scattered deep pools downstream of several private wet crossings. A possible sighting of a large adult red-legged frog occurred during the reconnaissance surveys along Matilija Creek downstream of the dam to Kennedy Canyon.

#### *Records in the Watershed*

- Several sightings in Matilija Dam reservoir area by USFWS and Sam Sweet in 2000
- Two frogs were observed in the stream channel approximately 200 yards north of the Ojai Sewage Treatment Plant in November 1990
- Reported in the Matilija Creek at the hot springs (UCSB)
- Reported 0.5 mi. south of the Matilija Dam (LACM No. 13499)
- Several records exist for San Antonio Creek (mid-1970's)

*Conclusion.* This species appears to be extirpated from the mainstem downstream of Matilija Dam. It is present on upper Matilija Creek. Its occurrence on the North Fork of Matilija Creek in the National

Forest is unknown. Suitable habitat is present in the lower watershed, and as such there is a potential for this species to recolonize portions of the HCP study area.

## 4.2 LEAST BELL'S VIREO

*Habitat Requirements.* The least Bell's vireo is a summer resident of riparian woodlands (willow, cottonwood and oak) in major drainages of southern California. It typically nests along southern California streams from mid-March through mid-April. In Ventura County, several very small populations breed along the upper and middle portions of the Santa Clara River between Saticoy and the Los Angeles county line. The vireo, although considered a riparian species, may breed in upland riparian areas dominated by coastal sage scrub, or live oak, or location not considered "native" habitat, including hedgerows between crops and along the edge of orchards, even using orange trees and other ornamentals for nest hosts.

*Likely Habitat in the Watershed.* The Ventura River from the ocean north to Main Street does not have sufficient vegetation that normally provides cover for the vireo at this time. However, the segment of the river from Main Street north to Shell Road has suitable vireo habitat. It contains broad willow thickets and mixes of vegetation that are favored by the species. From Shell Road to Foster Park, suitable willow habitat is relatively narrow due to the presence of Highway 33 along the east edge of the river and the steep slope of the west side. However, there are many large trees lining the banks and dominating some of the linear thickets. From Foster Park to Matilija Dam, there are scattered linear thickets of mulefat, willows and sweetclover, which are suited to the vireo. The habitats in the tributaries in and above Ojai are not suitable for the vireo. Habitats along San Antonio and Coyote creeks are also not suitable for the vireo.

### *Records in the Watershed*

- Breeding pairs found by Jim Greaves between Emma Wood State Beach Park and 2 miles north of Main Street in 1993-95. A single breeding pair was found each year, but only one nest was found that had been partially parasitized by a brown-headed cowbird. The breeding birds were on the west side of the river in 1993-94 in willow and mulefat scrub 1.5 miles upstream of Highway 101. In 1995, they were on the east side of the river about 1,000 feet upstream of Main Street. No birds were observed in 1996 and 1997, nor in our 2000 surveys. However, none of these surveys were sufficient to conclude their absence.
- Vireos are suspected of using Matilija Creek drainage as a migration corridor to and from the Mono Basin on the upper Santa Ynez River where there is a large and stable population.

*Conclusion.* Suitable habitat for the least Bell's vireo occurs along the mainstem from the Main Street bridge to the confluence with San Antonio Creek. Suitable habitat is absent from the remainder of the HCP study area. A small vireo population may or may not be established on the lower river; additional surveys are needed to determine if it is regularly occurring population. There is sufficient habitat to support a larger population.



#### 4.3 SOUTHWESTERN WILLOW FLYCATCHER

*Habitat Requirements.* The southwestern willow flycatcher breeds in dense riparian habitats along rivers, streams or other wetlands. The vegetation can be dominated by dense growths of willows, seep willow, or other shrubs and small trees. There may be an overstory of cottonwood, tamarisk, or other large trees, but this is not always the case. In some areas, the flycatcher will nest in habitats dominated by tamarisk and Russian olive. One of the most important characteristics of the habitat appears to be the presence of dense vegetation, usually throughout all vegetation layers present.

*Likely Habitat in the Watershed.* The willow flycatcher is suspected to use the Matilija Creek drainage as a migration corridor and could potentially use the riparian habitats below Shell Road as temporary stop over during the migration period. The Ventura River does not provide ideal habitat for this bird. The river channel is relatively narrow with a scoured bottom, lacking vegetated upland edges for feeding. The willow flycatcher prefers shade and slow moving water, whereas the majority of the Ventura River has faster flowing water and steep sides with very few dense riparian corridors.

*Records in the Watershed.* None

*Conclusion.* This species has not been observed in the watershed and suitable habitat is generally lacking. However, portions of the riparian habitat in the watershed, including within the HCP study area, may be used for migration to and from the northern Santa Barbara County population.

#### 4.4 WESTERN SNOWY PLOVER

*Habitat Requirements.* The Pacific coast population of the western snowy plover breeds in loose colonies primarily on coastal beaches from southern Washington to southern Baja California, Mexico. On the Pacific coast, larger concentrations of breeding birds occur in the south than in the north, suggesting that the center of the plovers coastal distribution lies closer to the southern boundary of California. Other less common nesting habitat includes saltpans, coastal dredged spoil disposal sites, dry salt ponds, and salt pond levees and islands. Sand spits, dune-backed beaches, unvegetated beach strands, open areas around estuaries, and beaches at river mouths are the preferred coastal habitats for nesting. These birds winter in areas similar to their nesting sites.

*Known Occurrence in the Watershed.* Snowy plovers are not known to breed at the mouth of the Ventura River. However, what are assumed to be post-breeding birds from McGrath State Beach are seen at the Ventura River Estuary in late summer and fall. The number of birds ranges from several to over 100 individuals. The birds frequent the upper section of the sandy beach near the estuary mouth and the drier mud flats in the estuary itself. The exposure of cobble beds along the beaches and the estuary during the winter months yields poor habitat for plovers at that season.

#### 4.5 BROWN PELICAN

*Habitat Requirements.* The California brown pelican is mainly a coastal bird, rarely seen inland or far out at sea. It feeds mostly in shallow estuarine waters, less often up to 40 miles from shore. It makes extensive use of sand spits, offshore sandbars, and islets for nocturnal roosting and daily loafing, especially by nonbreeders and during the non-nesting season. Dry roosting sites are essential. Some roosting sites eventually may become nesting areas. This bird normally nests on coastal islands, on the ground or in small bushes and trees. Their nests are found on middle or upper parts of steep rocky slopes of small islands in California and Baja California. It may shift between different breeding sites, apparently in response to changing food supply, distribution and/or to erosion/flooding of nesting sites.

*Known Occurrence in the Watershed.* Small numbers are often present at the river mouth in the summer, foraging offshore and using the lagoon for resting. The nearest known breeding location of this species is on the Channel Islands. Human and non-human disturbances of post-breeding roosts along the coast are a threat. Locally, such disturbance often results in birds being forced to move elsewhere, such as to the nearby Ventura Harbor and Santa Clara River estuary, where large number congregate.

#### 4.6 CALIFORNIA LEAST TERN

*Habitat Requirements.* The California least tern's habitat ranges from seacoasts, beaches, bays, estuaries, and lagoons to lakes, and rivers. It rests and loafs on sandy beaches, mudflats, and salt-pond dikes. In California, it may roost at night on sandy beaches away from nesting areas for several weeks before nesting. They nest in shallow depressions on level ground on sandy or gravelly beaches, or banks of rivers or lakes. Typically, the nests are found in areas with sparse or no vegetation (usually less than 20% vegetation cover, often 10% or less. They also nest on dredge spoils; on mainland or on barrier island beaches; and on flat gravel-covered rooftops of buildings (especially in the southeastern U.S.) or other similarly barren artificial sites.

*Known Occurrence in the Watershed.* The California least tern is dispersed widely from breeding sites to feed at lagoons and river mouths, including the mouth of the Ventura River. Least terns have been observed at the river mouth and nearby beaches in July and August of most years when this species visits the lagoon during the post-breeding season. The nearest breeding location is at the mouth of the Santa Clara River. During the summer of 1990 and 1991, 10 to 20 birds were present daily on sand bars and beaches of the estuary, including fledglings. There are no records of breeding at the Ventura River mouth.

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