

RECON

August 25, 2005

Mr. Michel Remington
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Environmental Compliance
P.O. Box 937
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Reference: Draft Final—Results of the Habitat Assessment for Sixteen Target Bird Species for the All-American Canal Lining Project, Imperial County, California (RECON Number 4140B)

Dear Mr. Remington:

The purpose of this letter is to report the results of a habitat assessment for 16 sensitive bird species conducted by RECON within the project boundary of the preferred alignment of the All-American Canal Lining Project (U.S. Bureau of Reclamation [USBR] and Imperial Irrigation District [IID] 1994). The project area is east of El Centro in Imperial County, California (Figure 1). The All-American Canal Lining Project involves the lining of a 23-mile stretch of the All-American Canal (AAC), from approximately 1.6 miles southwest of Pilot Knob in the east, to Drop 3 in the west (Figures 2-1 through 2-4). In most cases, a parallel canal would be constructed alongside the existing canal. Once water is diverted to the proposed lined canal, portions of the existing canal would be fenced and restored with native species through seed distribution and natural succession. For additional information on the AAC Lining Project, reference the Final Environmental Impact Statement/Final Environmental Impact Report for the AAC Lining Project, Imperial County, California (USBR and IID 1994).

The segment of the AAC for which lining is proposed is located in Imperial County, California, beginning approximately 1.6 miles southwest of Pilot Knob and terminating at Hydroelectric Drop 3. The project area has been divided into four reaches. Reach 1A spans from the eastern project boundary near Pilot Knob to the eastern intersection of the AAC and Interstate 8 (I-8). Reach 1B consists of all portions of the project area from the eastern intersection of the AAC and I-8 to Drop 1. Reach 2 extends from the western intersection of the AAC and I-8 (south of Drop 1) to Drop 2. Reach 3 consists of the section of the project area between Drop 2 to Drop 3. The survey area included all portions of the proposed impact area, from the toe of the berm opposite the canal to the edge of the impact area.

Methods

RECON biologists Amy Clark and Cheri Kim conducted a habitat assessment for 16 target bird species along the AAC Lining Project area on June 2, 2005. The list of target species was compiled by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG). The habitat assessment consisted of inspecting the vegetation communities, topography, and substrate present within the proposed impact area for the project. Vegetation communities were mapped on one inch equals 500 feet aerial photographs of the project area. Relative vegetation cover percentages and dominant species were noted. Any sensitive plant or wildlife species observed during the habitat assessment were also recorded.

The potential for each of the target bird species to occur within the project area was analyzed based on the habitat present, recent occurrence records in the vicinity from the California Natural Diversity Data Base (State of California 2005a), and the currently known species' ranges.

Floral nomenclature for common plants follows Hickman (1993) and vegetation communities follows Holland (1986) and Oberbauer (1996). Zoological nomenclature for birds is in accordance with the American Ornithologists' Union Checklist (1998) and Unitt (1984). Assessments of the sensitivity of species and habitats are based on State of California (2005a and 2005b).

Vegetation Communities

Each of the target bird species depends upon a particular type of habitat for foraging and nesting. Habitats are predominantly defined by the vegetation community present, along with other factors such as soil types, topography, and climate. The primary factor in assessing suitable habitat for the target species is the vegetation present. The vegetation communities mapped within the survey area are shown on Figures 3-1 through 3-8 and described below.

Sonoran Creosote Bush Scrub

Sonoran creosote bush scrub is a desert vegetation community consisting of widely spaced shrubs of one to six feet in height. Creosote bush (*Larrea tridentata*) is the dominant shrub species, with occasional bursage (*Ambrosia dumosa*), desert eriogonum (*Eriogonum deserticola*), and saltbush (*Atriplex* spp.) shrubs. Canopy cover in Sonoran creosote bush scrub areas ranges between 15 percent in sparse areas and 40 percent in the more dense areas. The understory in this community is generally limited to a carpet of Mediterranean grass (*Schismus barbatus*) with approximately 100 percent coverage of grasses at the time of the habitat assessment.

Sonoran Creosote Bush/Desert Saltbush Scrub

This composite vegetation community consists mainly of widely spaced, low, grayish small-leaved shrubs that average six feet in height. Two species, saltbush and creosote, dominate this area with a canopy cover ranging from approximately 5 to 50 percent. The area of 5 percent cover was formerly under agriculture. The understory is a carpet of Mediterranean grass.

Active Desert Dunes

Active desert dunes is a community that is composed of essentially barren expanses of actively moving sand. The size and shape of the dunes are determined by abiotic site factors rather than by stabilizing vegetation. Surface temperatures become extremely high in the summer. Typically, active desert dunes are located in areas of sand accumulation in the desert (Holland 1986). The active dunes in the survey area have extremely sparse and randomly occurring vegetation.

Sonoran Mixed Scrub

Areas classified as Sonoran mixed scrub are dominated by velvet mesquite (*Prosopis velutina*), blue paloverde (*Parkinsonia florida*), tamarisk (*Tamarix* sp.), and arrow weed (*Pluchea sericea*). The canopy cover in Sonoran mixed scrub areas ranges from less than 25 percent to 100 percent. Mediterranean grass is the understory in the 25 percent cover areas. The 100 percent cover area appears to be somewhat alluvial fan-like and transitions to creosote scrub on the edges.

All-American Canal

The vegetation along the AAC consists primarily of common reed (*Phragmites australis*) with the occasional tamarisk and grass patches along the edges. Some creosote shrubs are scattered along the upper banks of the canal's berm.

Target Bird Species

Habitat within the survey area was assessed for its ability to support any of 16 target bird species. These species are listed in Table 1 and described below.

Arizona Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii arizonae*). The Arizona Bell's vireo is listed as endangered by the State of California (State of California 2005b). Its historical breeding range in California once extended along the lower Colorado River from the Nevada border south to the Mexico border. Its current distribution is now restricted to an area along the Colorado River south of Needles, San Bernardino County, California (Small 1994). The Arizona Bell's vireo winters in Mexico and arrives at its summer breeding grounds beginning in mid-March (Ehrlich et al. 1988). This species is found in dense riparian habitat, mesquite thickets, and dense arrow weed (Small 1994). Their diet consists primarily of insects gleaned from foliage and branches (Zeiner et al. 1990). Populations of Arizona Bell's vireo in California have declined drastically due to extensive loss of riparian habitat to agricultural and urban development; channelization, water diversion, and mining of streams; lowered water tables; and nest parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) (Small 1994).

**TABLE 1
 TARGET BIRD SPECIES**

Common Name	Scientific Name	Potential to Occur
Arizona Bell's vireo	<i>Vireo bellii arizonae</i>	No
Least Bell's vireo	<i>Vireo bellii pusillus</i>	No
Gila woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes uropygialis</i>	No
Southwestern willow flycatcher	<i>Empidonax traillii extimus</i>	No
Brown-crested flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus tyrannulus</i>	No
Western yellow-billed cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus americanus occidentalis</i>	No
Common flicker	<i>Colaptes chrysoides</i>	No
Vermilion flycatcher	<i>Pyrocephalus rubinus</i>	No
Western burrowing owl	<i>Athene cunicularia hypugaea</i>	Potential
Elf owl	<i>Micrathene whitneyi</i>	No
Loggerhead shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>	Present
LeConte's thrasher	<i>Toxostoma lecontei</i>	No
Crissal thrasher	<i>Toxostoma crissale</i>	No
Yellow-breasted chat	<i>Icteria virens</i>	No
Yellow warbler	<i>Dendroica petechia</i>	No
Summer tanager	<i>Piranga rubra</i>	No

The Arizona Bell's vireo is not expected to occur within the project area due to lack of suitable riparian habitat. The common reed vegetation along the AAC is not suitable for this species. Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Least Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*). The least Bell's vireo is federally and state listed as endangered (State of California 2005b). Its historical breeding range once extended from northwestern Baja California, Mexico, to interior northern California, as far north as Red Bluff in Tehama County, California (Franzreb 1989). Its current distribution is now restricted to eight southern counties, the majority occurring in San Diego County (USFWS 1998). Least Bell's vireo winters in Mexico and breeds in southern California and northern Baja California, Mexico. The species is exclusively found in riparian habitats, including cottonwood-willow woodlands and forests, oak woodlands, and mule fat scrub, and requires dense cover for nesting (USFWS 1998). Least Bell's vireo arrives at the breeding grounds in mid-March and remains until September or October. Their diet consists primarily of insects and spiders and some fruit (Brown 1993). Populations of least Bell's vireo have declined drastically due to extensive loss of riparian habitat to agricultural and urban development, including channelization and mining of streams, and nest parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds. The population has increased as a result of extensive brown-headed cowbird trapping programs.

The least Bell's vireo is not expected to occur within the project area due to lack of suitable riparian habitat. The common reed vegetation along the AAC is not suitable for this species. Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Gila woodpecker (*Melanerpes uropygialis*). The Gila woodpecker is listed as endangered by the State of California (State of California 2005b). In the Imperial Valley, this woodpecker inhabits areas of remnant riverine forest that harbor large cottonwoods, date palm groves, and shade trees around ranch houses. The Gila woodpecker is a rare to uncommon resident in the Colorado Desert along the lower Colorado River Valley from Needles, California to Yuma, Arizona. A few individuals are scattered throughout the Imperial Valley among date palm groves and ranch houses in and around Brawley. The diet of the Gila woodpecker consists of ants, beetles, grasshoppers, and mistletoe berries (Peterson 1990). The main threat to this species in the Imperial Valley is habitat loss.

The Gila woodpecker is not expected to occur within the project area due to lack of suitable large tree habitat. Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*). The southwestern willow flycatcher is federally and state listed as endangered (State of California 2005b). This migratory bird breeds in southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, extreme southern portions of Nevada and Utah, western Texas, and extreme northwestern Baja California, Mexico (USFWS 1995). The southwestern willow flycatcher breeding season is from late mid-May to mid-July. This species requires mature willow thickets in riparian woodland habitat for breeding and nesting activities. Nests are built in tall trees with a high percentage of canopy cover and dense foliage. Their diet consists mainly of insects and the occasional fruit (Sedgwick 2000). Southwestern willow flycatchers are extremely sensitive to human activity in riparian areas. Threats to the southwestern willow flycatcher include loss of riparian habitat due to water diversion, flood control, urbanization, grazing, and invasion of non-native species. Parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds has been a significant factor in the decline of this species in California, Arizona, and elsewhere (Sedgwick 2000).

The southwestern willow flycatcher is not expected to occur within the project area due to the lack of riparian habitat. The common reed vegetation along the AAC is not suitable for this species. Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Brown-crested flycatcher (*Myiarchus tyrannulus*). The brown-crested flycatcher is a CDFG species of special concern (State of California 2005b). For breeding, this species favors riparian

woodlands, particularly with cottonwoods and large willows. This flycatcher is also associated with mesquite and ranch plantings of tamarisk and other large trees (Small 1994). The brown-crested flycatcher is a rare and local summer visitor that breeds along the length of the lower Colorado River from Needles, California to Yuma, Arizona (Small 1994). This bird winters in Mexico (Zeiner et al. 1990). The diet of the brown-crested flycatcher consists of flying insects, particularly beetles, and occasionally small fruits (Zeiner et al. 1990). This species requires cavities excavated by woodpecker species for nesting; therefore, it is dependent on resources such as snags, utility poles, and fence posts (Zeiner et al. 1990). The main threats to this flycatcher include habitat loss.

The brown-crested flycatcher is not expected to occur within the project area due to the lack of suitable large trees. Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Western yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus occidentalis*). The western yellow-billed cuckoo is a candidate for federal listing and is state listed as endangered (State of California 2005b). This subspecies of the yellow-billed cuckoo is believed to have been once widespread and locally common in California and Arizona. Western yellow-billed cuckoos prefer desert riparian woodlands comprised of cottonwoods and dense mesquite. Upland oak, pinyon, and juniper woodlands may be used prior to moving into riparian woodlands to breed (Hughes 1999). The western yellow-billed cuckoo arrives in May and breeds throughout June and July. Nesting occurs in willow or mesquite thickets. Its diet consists primarily of hairy caterpillars, bird eggs, frogs, lizards, ants, beetles, wasps, flies, berries, and fruits (Hughes 1999). The primary threat to this species is the continued loss, degradation, and fragmentation of mature cottonwood-willow riparian habitats.

The western yellow-billed cuckoo is not expected to occur within the project area due to the lack of dense desert riparian woodlands. Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Gilded flicker (*Colaptes chrysoides*). The gilded flicker is listed as endangered by the State of California (State of California 2005b). This species is very rare in the riparian woodland along the Colorado River. The summer diet of the gilded flicker consists of ants, beetles, grasshoppers, crickets, moths, caterpillars, and other various larvae. The winter diet consists of berries and other fruits (Zeiner et al. 1990). Habitat loss and deterioration are the main threats to this species.

The gilded flicker is not expected to occur within the project area due to its rarity and the lack of suitable riparian woodland habitat. Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Vermilion flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*). The vermilion flycatcher is a CDFG species of special concern (State of California 2005b). For breeding habitat, this species requires lowland desert scrub, preferably mesquite, that is close to a water source. Foraging and roosting habitat consists of riparian scrub or woodlands along a water course and occasionally local parks (Small 1994). The current known range of the vermilion flycatcher along the Colorado River is near Blythe, Riverside County and very locally south of Blythe (Small 1994). This local resident is very rare in the Imperial Valley (Zeiner et al. 1990). The vermilion flycatcher forages on the wing for bees and other insects, and picks insects from the ground (Zeiner et al. 1990). Loss of habitat is the primary threat to this species (Zeiner et al. 1990).

The vermilion flycatcher is not expected to occur within the project area due to its limited range in California in the vicinity of Blythe and Morongo Park in Riverside County. Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Western burrowing owl (*Speotyto cunicularia hypugaea*). The western burrowing owl is a CDFG species of special concern (State of California 2005b). Western burrowing owl is primarily restricted to the western United States and Mexico. Habitat for the western burrowing owl includes dry, open, short-grass areas often associated with burrowing mammals (Haug et al. 1993). In Imperial County, the western burrowing owl can be found in desert scrub, grassland, and agricultural areas, where it digs its own or occupies existing burrows. The western burrowing owl is nocturnal and perches during daylight at the entrance to its burrow or on low posts. Nesting occurs from March through August. Western burrowing owls form a pair-bond for more than one year and exhibit high site fidelity, reusing the same burrow year after year (Haug et al. 1993). The female remains inside the burrow during most of the egg laying and incubation period and is fed by the male throughout brooding. Western burrowing owls are opportunistic feeders, consuming a diet that includes arthropods, small mammals, and birds, and occasionally amphibians and reptiles (Haug et al. 1993). Urbanization has greatly reduced the amount of suitable habitat for this species. Other contributions to the decline of this species include the poisoning of squirrels and prairie dogs, loss of burrows, and collisions with automobiles.

Neither western burrowing owls nor their burrows were observed during the habitat assessment or rare plant species surveys that covered 100 percent of the survey area. However, there is a low potential that western burrowing owls could move onto the survey area prior to project initiation.

Elf owl (*Micrathene whitneyi*). The elf owl is listed as endangered by the State of California (State of California 2005b). This owl is an extremely rare and local summer visitor from mid-March through mid-August (Small 1994) that is thought to be extirpated from Imperial County (Small 1994; Zeiner et al. 1990). Elf owls nest in desert riparian habitat with cottonwoods, sycamores, mesquite, and willows; but is absent from desert riparian dominated by salt cedar (Zeiner et al. 1990). The diet of the elf owl consists mainly of insects with the occasional reptile (Zeiner et al. 1990). Habitat loss is the primary threat to this species (Small 1994; Zeiner et al. 1990).

The elf owl is not expected to nest within the project area due to the lack of suitable riparian woodland habitat and the fact that it is thought to have been extirpated from Imperial County. Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*). The loggerhead shrike is a CDFG species of special concern (State of California 2005b). This species inhabits most of the continental United States and Mexico and is a year-round resident of southern California. The loggerhead shrike prefers open habitat with perches for hunting and fairly dense shrubs for nesting (Yosef 1996). In southern California, loggerhead shrikes inhabit grasslands, agricultural fields, chaparral, and desert scrub (Unitt 1984). Their breeding season is from March to August. Loggerhead shrikes are highly territorial (Yosef 1996). In California, pairs share a territory during the breeding season, and maintain separate territories the rest of the year (Yosef 1996). The average territory size of the non-breeding loggerhead shrike is 8.5 hectares. Loggerhead shrikes feed on small reptiles, mammals, amphibians, and insects that they often impale on sticks or thorns before eating. Loggerhead shrike populations are declining, likely due to urbanization and loss of habitat and, to a lesser degree, pesticide use (Yosef 1996).

Several loggerhead shrikes were observed foraging in Sonoran creosote bush scrub and dunes during the bird habitat assessment and rare plant surveys. This species has the potential to nest within the project area. Based on the amount of suitable habitat available (approximately 405 hectares of desert scrub), it is estimated that up to 20 pairs of loggerhead shrikes could potentially nest within the survey area. However, this number may vary significantly due to available food resources and perching sites.

LeConte's thrasher (*Toxostoma lecontei*). LeConte's thrasher is a CDFG species of special concern (State of California 2005b). This bird is a resident from Anza-Borrego Desert in San Diego County and the eastern base of the Peninsular Ranges south to the Mexican border and east to the Colorado River (Small 1994). LeConte's thrasher is absent from the cultivated areas of Imperial County (Small 1994). This thrasher prefers creosote bush-dominated desert scrub, particularly with cholla patches for breeding. It also uses alkali desert scrub and open desert washes (Zeiner et al. 1990). This shy bird inhabits some of the hottest and driest portions of California (Small 1994). The diet of the LeConte's thrasher includes insects and terrestrial arthropods, and occasionally seeds, small lizards, and other small vertebrates. This thrasher forages on the ground by probing and digging in soil and litter with its bill (Zeiner et al. 1990). Because this species is exceptionally wary of humans, it is vulnerable to off-road activity, other disturbance, and removal of habitat for agriculture or other development (Zeiner et al. 1990).

The LeConte's thrasher is not likely to breed in creosote scrub areas due to the lack of cholla patches and the level of human and vehicle activity in the area (e.g. Border Patrol). Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Crissal thrasher (*Toxostoma crissale*). The crissal thrasher is a CDFG species of special concern (State of California 2005b). It is an uncommon resident in Imperial Valley that mainly ranges from the Coachella Valley as far west as Palm Springs and along the Colorado River from the Nevada border to Yuma, Arizona (Small 1994). This thrasher requires large contiguous stands of dense desert scrub with intermittent small trees and larger shrubs, and is partial to dense stands of mesquite and other large shrubs (Small 1994). The crissal thrasher forages on ground using its bill to dig in friable soil and probe in litter. Its diet consists of insects, berries and other small fruits, seeds and occasionally small lizards (Zeiner et al. 1990). The crissal thrasher is also extremely sensitive to human disturbance and encroachment, habitat fragmentation and the introduction of salt cedar into its habitat.

The crissal thrasher is not expected to occur within the project area due to the lack of large contiguous stands of dense desert scrub. Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Yellow-breasted chat (*Icteria virens*). Nesting yellow-breasted chats are a CDFG species of special concern (State of California 2005b). Yellow-breasted chat breeding range extends locally from southern California south to central Mexico, and their range includes most of the United States (Eckerle and Thompson 2001). Yellow-breasted chats arrive in California to breed during April or May. Breeding occurs in dense brush or scrub, usually along streams or marshy areas with dense riparian woodlands. Their diet consists mainly of insects and berries (Eckerle and Thompson 2001). Destruction of riparian woodlands by development and other human activities has caused population declines and it is possible that brown-headed cowbird parasitism may also have contributed to the decline of the species.

The yellow-breasted chat is not expected to occur within the project area due to lack of suitable riparian habitat. The common reed vegetation along the AAC is not suitable for this species. Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Yellow warbler (*Dendroica petechia*). Yellow warblers are a CDFG species of special concern (State of California 2005b). Yellow warblers breed from Alaska south to Peru, including most of the continental United States and Canada, and winter in Central and South America. In California, yellow warblers are an obligate riparian species, nesting and foraging almost exclusively in riparian habitats (Harmsworth Associates 1999). Nesting occurs from late May through early August and nests are typically three to five feet from the ground (Lowther et al. 1999). Yellow

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warblers primarily consume insects and other arthropods and occasional wild fruits. This species is declining due to the loss of riparian habitat and as a result of nest parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds.

The yellow warbler is not expected to occur within the project area due to lack of suitable riparian habitat. The common reed vegetation along the AAC is not suitable for this species. Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Summer tanager (*Piranga rubra*). The summer tanager is a CDFG species of special concern (State of California 2005b). This species is an uncommon summer resident and breeder known in Imperial County from Brock Ranch and along the Colorado River (Small 1994; Zeiner et al. 1990). The summer tanager winters from Mexico to Brazil (Peterson 1990). Breeding habitat includes riparian woodlands in river or stream bottoms with extensive dense stands of tall cottonwoods and a fairly dense willow understory (Small 1994). This species gleans insects and spiders from foliage and bark, catches flying insects and forages for small fruits. The summer tanager is particularly fond of bees and wasps, and often takes larvae from hives and nests (Zeiner et al. 1990). Deforestation (Small 1994) and fragmentation of the mature cottonwood/willow stands (Zeiner et al. 1990) along the Colorado River are the main threats to this species.

The summer tanager is not expected to occur within the project area due to lack of suitable dense riparian habitat. Therefore, focused surveys for this species are not recommended.

Conclusions

The majority of the target bird species are not expected to occur within the study area. Focused surveys are not recommended for these species.

Several loggerhead shrikes were observed during surveys. Based on the amount of suitable habitat available, an estimation of up to 20 pairs of loggerhead shrikes would potentially nest within the survey area.

There is a low potential for western burrowing owl to move into the survey area prior to the start of the proposed project. Pre-construction surveys may be required by the resource agencies.

If you have any questions about the results of this habitat assessment, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Amy E. Clark
Biologist

AEC:ash

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