**16. Rio Hondo College Wildlife Sanctuary SEA**

***Location***

*General*

The Rio Hondo College Wildlife Sanctuary Significant Ecological Area (SEA) is located on the western edge of the Puente Hills near the San Gabriel River, within the City of Whittier, and south of the Interstate-605. The SEA is the designated a Wildlife Sanctuary of the Rio Hondo College in the northern and eastern part of the campus, and is currently used as a study area by the students and faculty of Rio Hondo College. The SEA includes natural areas bordering two ridgelines—one impacted by transmission line installation and the maintenance roads, and the other with substantially natural areas. Between the two ridgelines is an intermittent drainage with riparian elements. The area includes good examples of riparian woodland, chaparral, oak woodland, coastal sage scrub, and chaparral communities. The entire unpaved campus area is designated critical habitat for the federally-threatened coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica).*

The SEA is located within the El Monte United States Geological Survey (USGS) 7.5' California Quadrangle.

*General Boundary and Resources Description*

The SEA boundaries have a roughly triangular shape. The northern boundary begins in an arroyo with walnut woodland toward the west end of the North Entry Road, and goes southeastward along the border of natural habitat, passing the justice buildings near the bottom of the transmission line ridge. The boundary continues along the base of the ridge to the border with the Rose Hills Memorial Park. On the east side, the boundary tracks the edge of the Rose Hills Memorial Park peripheral road towards the southeast, including a slope of probable restored white-sage scrub. Where the peripheral road meets the crest of the southern ridge, the boundary turns northwest and goes along the southern ridge top, countinues down off the ridge northwestward around the Rio Hondo College campus parking lots and buildings to connect with the small walnut woodland.

The northern ridge primarily contains non-native grassland, with a strong component of introduced mustards, but also a strong component of scattered native chaparral shrubs, such as elderberry (*Sambucus* spp.), sumacs (*Rhus* spp.); and in the ravines, dense growths of large chaparral shrubs, including coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*). Some of the slopes on the north ridge have prickly-pear shrub. The watercourse between the ridges is riparian with plants, such as mulefat (*Senecio douglasii*) and coyote bush (*Baccharis* spp.). The ravines on the north face of the southern ridge that border the watercourse have fine oak woodland, cherry woodland, and walnut woodland at the upper ends. The SEA provides examples of many of the common and cherished natural habitats of the County for study. Sign of coyote (*Canis latrans*), fox (probably *Urocyon cinereoargenteus*) and bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) can be noted while walking the transmission line northern ridge. The biotic communities within the SEA contain a variety of plant life and an abundant fauna.

Due to location near the extreme northwestern end of the Peninsular Ranges, the SEA is an excellent place to observe the geographical range variability of a number of species that are characteristic of the mountains to the south, and have their northernmost occurrences in the Puente Hills, such as the red diamond rattlesnake (co-occurring with the Pacific rattlesnake).

***Vegetation***

There are three native plant communities in the SEA: coastal sage chaparral scrub, chaparral and oak woodland. The remainder of the SEA has areas classified as ornamental landscaping, developed and disturbed. Plant communities identified in the *Significant Ecological Area Update Study* by PCR in 2000 used the standard methodology and terminology of the time. Eight major plant communities found within the SEA were listed in 2000, including oak woodland, oak riparian forest, walnut woodland, southern willow scrub, chaparral, coastal sage chaparral scrub, freshwater marsh, and non-native grassland. The variety of topography, soil types, slope aspects and water availability within this SEA create a range of physical habitats that support numerous plant species.

Plant species observed or recorded in previous documentation within the SEA are indicated in the *Comprehensive Floral & Faunal Compendium of the Los Angeles County SEAs.* Sensitive plant species occurring or potentially occurring within the SEA are discussed in the Sensitive Biological Resources section.

Descriptions and general locations of the each plant community present within the SEA are given below.

Oak Woodland: A plant community dominated by species of the oak genus (*Quercus*). Within this SEA this species is the coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia* var. *agrifolia*), which typically grows to heights of 20 to 40 feet and forms either closed or open tree canopies. Understory vegetation varies from grassland in areas subject to grazing to shrubs where topography is steeper and/or grazing has been relaxed. It may also intergrade with shrub communities, in this case coastal sage chaparral scrub. Within this SEA oak woodland occur along the northern boundary.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Quercus agrifolia* (coast live oak woodland) Woodland Alliance

Walnut Woodland: Often intergrades with oak dominated woodlands or develops as a distinct community. This community is dominated by the Southern California black walnut (*Juglans californica*), which grows 10 to 30 feet high. More often than not, the Southern California black walnut grows in open stands; however, closed tree canopies are not uncommon. In similar fashion to oak woodlands, its understory varies from grasses to shrubs. It forms stands ranging from savannahs to forests throughout the nearby Puente Hills SEA.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Juglans californica* (Southern California black walnut groves) Woodland Alliance

Coastal Sage Scrub: A shrubland community found in this SEA is coastal sage chaparral scrub, which has a high percentage of non-native species. This plant community is dominated by California sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), California brittle bush (*Encelia californica*), white sage (*Salvia apiana*), black sage (*Salvia mellifera*), and California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*). Coastal sage chaparral scrub also forms dense stands, which grow three to four feet in height. Where the coastal sage chaparral scrub community is now found had been cleared and disturbed by past disturbances, such as grading and transition line construction.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Artemisia californica* (California sagebrush scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Artemisia californica-Salvia mellifera* (California sagebrush-black sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Artemisia californica-Eriogonum fasciculatum* (California sagebrush-California scrub) Shrubland

Alliance
- *Encelia californica* (California brittle bush scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Salvia leucophylla* (purple sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Salvia mellifera* (black sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Eriogonum fasciculatum* (California buckwheat scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Lotus scoparius* [*Acmispon glaber*] (deer weed scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Opuntia littoralis* (coast prickly pear scrub) Shrubland Alliance

Chaparral: A shrub community composed of robust, woody species. Within this SEA these species include laurel sumac (*Malosma laurina*), toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), lemonadeberry (*Rhus integrifolia*) and prickly-pear cactus. These and other shrub species form dense vegetation covers growing 5 to 10 feet in height. The development of chaparral is most pronounced on north facing slopes within the SEA.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Adenostoma fasciculatum* (chamise chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Ceanothus oliganthus* (hairy leaf ceanothus chaparral) Shrubland Alliance
- *Rhus ovata* (sugarbush chaparral) Shrubland Alliance

Developed and ornamental landscaping areas include agricultural use areas, ornamental landscaping, and structures, and occupy the majority of the project area. All perimeter areas, sections adjacent to roads, and space not occupied by parking lots or buildings have been landscaped. Some mulefat (*Baccharis salicifolia*) and sage species have been used for landscaping purposes. Species in this vegetation type included pine, acacia, ash, cotoneaster, eucalyptus and California privet. These species have grown large, with extensive canopies, and have developed an understory in some areas.

Disturbed or Barren Areas: Areas that either completely lack vegetation or are dominated by ruderal species. Ruderal vegetation found within the SEA includes a high proportion of weedy species, including black mustard, fennel, tree tobacco, and castor bean. The disturbed areas are a result of previous use for staging maintenance activities or easements.

Corresponding MCV communities:

No corresponding communities at this time

***Wildlife***

Wildlife within any ecosystem is largely determined by the available plant communities and in the SEA, the relatively small area only allows for limited local foraging and wildlife habitat.

Analysis of the presence of invertebrates is limited by a lack of specific data; however, the size of the SEA and diversity of habitats present is considered sufficient to encompass healthy populations of a large number of invertebrate species.

The potential presence of amphibians varies greatly between habitats within the project site. Terrestrial species may or may not require standing water for reproduction. Terrestrial species avoid desiccation by burrowing underground; within crevices in trees, rocks, and logs; and under stones and surface litter during the day and dry seasons. Due to their secretive nature, terrestrial amphibians are rarely observed, but may be quite abundant if conditions are favorable. Aquatic amphibians are dependent on standing or flowing water for reproduction. Such habitats include fresh water marshes and open water (reservoirs, permanent and temporary pools and ponds, and

perennial streams).

Reptilian diversity and abundance varies with habitat type and character. Although some species prefer only one or two plant communities, most will forage in a variety of communities. A number of reptile species prefer open habitats that allow free movement and high visibility. The only reptiles recorded are the western side-blotched lizard (*Uta stansburiana elegans*) and the Great Basin fence lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis longipes*).

For birds, some of the reestablishing vegetation in the disturbed areas and some areas of the ornamental landscaping provide limited foraging and cover habitat for year-round residents, seasonal residents, and migrating song birds. In addition, there is seasonally available water onsite within the drainage channels. The overall condition of the plant communities is mainly ornamental landscape. For raptors, some of the habitat within the project site could have the potential to provide foraging opportunities and breeding areas for raptors. Trees found along the perimeter of the project site and throughout the campus have the potential to provide suitable perches for foraging over the open areas and scrub communities. These areas provide habitat for small birds and mammals, which results in a potentially large prey population on the project site. There is remnant coastal sage scrub in the SEA, and this may form a stepping stone for the coastal California gnatcatcher. Both the Puente Hills SEA and the critical habitat of the gnatcatcher are disjunct across Interstate-605. To have connectivity between the gnatcatcher's large population in the Montebello Hills, the SEA extends as a welcoming arm on the east side of Interstate-605. This would be equally important for other aerial fauna and windblown seeds of plants on the west side of Interstate-605.

For mammals, the reestablishing vegetation in the disturbed areas and the landscaped areas on the project site have the potential to support a limited number of mammal species. During field surveys, mammal species were either directly observed or their presence was deduced by diagnostic signs (tracks, scat, burrows, etc.).

All wildlife species previously recorded, as well as those expected to occur, within the SEA are indicated in the *Comprehensive Floral & Faunal Compendium* of the *Los Angeles County SEA Update Study 2000 Background Report*. Sensitive wildlife species occurring or potentially occurring within the SEA are discussed in the Sensitive Biological Resources section of this document.

*Wildlife Movement*

The SEA is located in an area of potentially low to moderate value with regards to regional and local terrestrial wildlife movement. The Interstate-605 and industrial development that borders the freeway serves as a barrier for wildlife movement. The SEA is a gateway area for connectivity between the Peninsular Ranges of Southern California and the Transverse Ranges to the north. Naturally, they are connected by use of wildlife, particularly birds, insects, and plant propagules that are found along the San Gabriel River and Rio Hondo, which are only a 0.5 mile to the west of the Rio Hondo College. The San Gabriel River is designated by California Audubon as a State Important Bird Area (IBA), and extended arms of Semi-Natural habitat are important to connectivity for wildlife of the area and the region. Wildlife species could potentially use the SEA and possibly the ornamentally landscaped areas to facilitate movement and provide access to natural resources located in the Puente Hills. A wide variety of wildlife use linkages throughout the SEA from the extreme southeast up to the Rio Hondo College Wildlife Sanctuary, including mountain lion (*Puma concolor*) and a number of medium-sized mammals.

***Sensitive Biological Resources***

Sensitive biological resources are habitats or individual species that have special recognition by federal, state, or local conservation agencies and organizations as endangered, threatened, and/or rare. This is due to the species' declining or limited population sizes, which usually results from

habitat loss. Watch lists of such resources are maintained by the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG), the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and special groups, such as the California Native Plant Society (CNPS). The following sections indicate the habitats as well as plant and animal species present, or potentially present within the SEA, which have been accorded special recognition. When species are federally-listed as endangered or threatened, they often have federally-designated, geographically-specific "critical habitat areas." Critical habitat areas, after extensive study by experts, are judged to be essential to conservation and maintenance of the species. The Rio Hondo College Wildlife Sanctuary is critical habitat for the coastal California gnatcatcher.

*Sensitive Plan Communities and Habitats*

The SEA supports one habitat type considered sensitive by resource agencies. This is inventoried by California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) in the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDB) [2011]. The CNDDB includes state and federally-listed endangered, threatened, and rare vascular plants, as well as several sensitive vertebrate species. This community is coastal sage chaparral scrub and it occupies a part of the SEA. These communities, or closely related designations, are considered high priority communities by the CDFG, which indicates that they are experiencing a decline throughout their range. The array and composition of these communities has been discussed in the Vegetation section.

*Sensitive Plant Species*

The statuses of rare plants are hierarchically categorized by the CNPS using a rank and decimal system. The initial category level of Rare Plant Rank is indicated by the ranks 1A (presumed extinct in California), 1B (rare or endangered in California and elsewhere), 2 (rare or endangered in California but more common elsewhere), 3 (more information needed, a review list), and 4 (limited distribution). In cases where the CNPS has further identified the specific threat to the species, a decimal or Threat Code is added: .1 (seriously endangered in California), .2 (fairly endangered in California), or .3 (not very endangered in California).

The following special-status plant taxa have been reported or have the potential to occur within the SEA, based on known habitat requirements and geographic range information:

- Southern tarplant (*Centromadia parryi* ssp. *australis*) RPR 1B.1
- Slender mariposa lily (*Calochortus clavatus* var. *gracilis*) RPR 1B.2
- Plummer's mariposa lily (*Calochortus plummerae*) RPR 1B.2
- Intermediate mariposa lily (*Calochortus weedii* var. *intermedius*) RPR 1B.2
- Southern California black walnut (*Juglans californica*) RPR 4.2

*Sensitive Animal Species*

The following special-status animal species are reported or are likely to be present within the SEA based on habitat requirements and known range attributes:

- Coastal whiptail (*Aspidoscelis tigris stejnegeri*) CDFG Special Animals List
- Rosy boa (*Charina trivirgata*) BLMS, FSS
- Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) CDFG Watch List
- Burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*) BCC, BLMS, SSC
- Coastal cactus wren (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus sandiegensis*) BCC, FSS, SSC
- Yellow-breasted chat (*Icteria virens*) SSC
- Coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) FT, SSC, USBC, AWL, ABC
- Pallid bat (*Antrozous pallidus*) FSS, BLMS, SSC, WBWG High

- Western mastiff bat (*Eumops perotis californicus*) BLMS, SSC, WBWG High
- Silver-haired bat (*Lasionycteris noctivagans*) WBWG Medium
- Hoary bat (*Lasiurus cinereus*) WBWG Medium
- Pocketed free-tailed bat (*Nyctinomops femorosaccus*) SSC, WBWG Medium
- Big free-tailed bat (*Nyctinomops macrotis*) SSC, WBWG Medium-High
- American badger (*Taxidea taxus*) SSC

***Ecological Transition Areas (ETAs)***

There are no ETAs designated within this SEA.

***Regional Biological Value***

The SEA meets several SEA designation criteria and supports many regional biological values. Each criterion and how it is met described below.

**CRITERIA ANALYSIS OF THE RIO HONDO WILDLIFE SANCTUARY SEA**

| Criterion | | Status | Justification |
|---|---|---|---|
| A) | The habitat of core populations of endangered or threatened plant or animal species. | Met | The SEA is critical habitat for the coastal California gnatcatcher. |
| B) | On a regional basis, biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant or animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution. | Not Met | The SEA does not contain unique habitat restricted in distribution in the region of Southern California. |
| C) | Within the County, biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant or animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution | Not Met | The SEA does not contain unique habitat for the region of the County. |
| D) | Habitat that at some point in the life cycle of a species or group of species, serves as concentrated breeding, feeding, resting, or migrating grounds and is limited in availability either regionally or in the County. | Met | This SEA is located on the eastern upland area of the San Gabriel River and is considered critical habitat for connectivity of the coastal California gnatcatcher. The largest population of the gnatcatcher in the County is on the west side of the San Gabriel River and the Interstate-605. Critical habitat in the SEA is on the east side of the San Gabriel River and the Interstate-605. The SEA is an arm extending to the rest of the gnatcatcher critical habitat and connecting to the rest of the Puente Hills SEA. The SEA is an important connecting and migration area for plants and wildlife of the Puente-Chino Hills of the Peninsular Ranges. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| E) | Biotic resources that are of scientific interest because they are either an extreme in physical/geographical limitations, or represent unusual variation in a population or community. | Met | The SEA is part of the education network of the public community colleges of the Los Angeles area. The area is used by the college for scientific study and research on native wildlife and plants. The college maintains field records on the biotic resources of the area. The SEA is relatively undisturbed. As a "choke point" for the wildlife corridor, it is an important area of research and study of connectivity. |
| F) | Areas that would provide for the preservation of relatively undisturbed examples of the original natural biotic communities in the County. | Not Met | The SEA has little disturbed areas, as well as recovering natural habitat. |

In conclusion, the area described is an SEA because it contains: A) core habitat for a threatened species; D) is an important choke point in a significant migration and connective corridor of the County and the region of Southern California; and E) is an important resource to the education community of the County because of its connective status and its natural and recovering habitats

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