

26. Valley Oaks Savannah SEA

Location

General

The Valley Oaks Savannah Significant Ecological Area (SEA) is located north of the Santa Susana Mountains, approximately one mile south of the Santa Clara River and one mile north of Pico Canyon. The SEA is bordered on the east by Interstate-5 and is situated between Valencia Boulevard and Stevenson Ranch Parkway. To the west, the SEA is bordered by the foothills of the Santa Susana Mountains. The habitat within the SEA was once the emblem of Spanish California, with rolling hills, grasslands and spaced giant valley oaks. This was a chief habitat in the San Fernando Valley when it was filled with wildlife, such as herds of pronghorn. Under the influence of European settlers, these areas were at first cattle range, and then gradually developed into residential neighborhoods.

The SEA is located in the Newhall United States Geological Survey (USGS) 7.5' California Quadrangle.

General Boundary and Resources Description

The SEA is bordered to the east by Interstate-5 and is situated between Valencia Boulevard on the north and Stevenson Ranch Parkway on the south of the SEA. To the west, the SEA is bordered by the West Ridge residential area of Valencia to the north, and the foothills of the Santa Susana Mountains to the south. The SEA boundary outlines an irregular area of undisturbed grassland savannah with hundreds of valley oaks (*Quercus lobata*). In the north, the SEA includes a small part of the TPC of Valencia (a private golf club) that has retained a number of its valley oaks on the ridges between sections of the golf course. The topography is rolling ridges that trend northeast-southwest along the edge of development. The West Ridge development is on graded areas of those rolling ridges.

The SEA is almost completely undisturbed, except for a few dirt roads. This area contains one of the last remaining stands of valley oak (*Quercus lobata*) in the Santa Clarita Valley. The site consists of specimen trees scattered over the SEA. The adjoining natural hills to the southwest of the SEA have a mixture of plants from the coastal sage chaparral scrub and chaparral communities, which are typical of those found in the Santa Clarita Valley. Other vegetation on the SEA in the southwest area includes coastal sage chaparral scrub and non-native grasses.

The majority of the SEA consists of undisturbed open space bordered by a few high density residential developments. Open space that adjoins the SEA to the southwest is mostly vegetated with dense stands of chaparral. Other types of vegetation, such as woodlands and grasslands, occur in smaller portions that are scattered throughout the adjacent land on moist or north-facing slopes and canyon bottoms. Lesser amounts of coastal sage chaparral scrub are also present, chiefly as an early successional community in areas that have been previously disturbed.

Vegetation

All plant species observed or recorded in previous documentation within the SEA are indicated in the *Comprehensive Floral & Faunal Compendium of the Los Angeles County SEA Update Study 2000 Background Report*. More recent survey findings have also been reviewed here in order to reflect the current status of the area. Findings from the Santa Clarita Valley Area Plan, Los Angeles

Department of Regional Planning, 2010 have been reviewed and included. Sensitive plant species and plant communities 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.

Valley Oak Savannah: An open-canopy woodland found on deep, well-drained alluvial soils below 2,000 feet. This community is almost exclusively dominated by valley oak with scattered coast live oaks (*Quercus agrifolia* var. *agrifolia*) in some areas and a grassy understory of California buckwheat, forming a savannah-like community throughout much of the SEA.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Quercus lobata* (valley oak woodland) Woodland Alliance

Coastal Sage Chaparral Scrub Communities: Consist of drought-deciduous, low, soft-leaved shrubs and herbs on gentle to steep slopes under 3,000 feet in elevation. Several dominant species may occur within scrub communities, with some areas overwhelmingly dominated by one or two species. Dominant species include California sagebrush, California buckwheat, California brittle bush (*Encelia californica*), purple sage (*Salvia leucophylla*), bush mallow (*Malacothamnus fasciculatus*), Menzie's goldenbush (*Isocoma menziesii*), and deer weed (*Acmispon glaber*).

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 buckwheat scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Encelia californica* (California brittle bush scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Dendromecon rigida* (bush poppy scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Isocoma menziesii* (Menzie's golden bush scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Salvia apiana* (white sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Salvia leucophylla* (purple sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Salvia mellifera* (black sage scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Eriogonum fasciculatum* (California buckwheat scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Ericameria linearifolia* (narrowleaf goldenbush scrub) Provisional Shrubland Alliance
- *Lotus scoparius* [*Acmispon glaber*] (deer weed scrub) Shrubland Alliance
- *Malacothamnus fasciculatus* (bush mallow scrub) Shrubland Alliance

Grassland Communities: Consist of low, herbaceous vegetation dominated by grasses, but generally also harbor native forbs and bulbs, as well as naturalized annual forbs. Non-native grassland consists of dominant invasive annual grasses that are primarily of Mediterranean origin. Dominant species found within this community include wild oat, slender wild oat, foxtail chess, ripgut brome, along with scattered coastal sage chaparral scrub species. Non-native grasslands occur along the western portion of the north boundary of the SEA.

Corresponding MCV communities:

- *Avena (barbata, fatua)* Semi-Natural Herbaceous Stands
- *Brassica (nigra)* and Other Mustards Semi-Natural Herbaceous Stands
- *Bromus (diandrus, hordeaceus)-Brachypodium distachyon* Semi-Natural Herbaceous Stands

- *Bromus rubens-Schismus (arabicus, barbatus)* [*Bromus madritensis* ssp. *rubens*] Semi-Natural Herbaceous Stands
- *Lolium perenne* [*Festuca perennis*] (perennial rye grass fields) Semi-Natural Herbaceous Stands

Disturbed or Barren Areas: Areas that either completely lack vegetation or are dominated by ruderal species. Ruderal vegetation typically found within the SEA include non-native grasses and a high proportion of weedy species, including black mustard and thistle species. The primary disturbed areas within the SEA are dirt roadways.

Corresponding MCV communities:

None at this time.

Wildlife

Wildlife populations within the SEA are limited in diversity due to the area's physiographic size and its nearly complete surrounding by development. While a few wildlife species are entirely dependent on a single vegetative community, the entire mosaic of all the vegetation communities within the SEA and adjoining areas constitutes a functional ecosystem for a variety of wildlife species, both within the SEA and as part of the regional ecosystem.

The analysis of invertebrates is severely limited due to the lack of specific data; however, the SEA is likely to support small healthy populations of invertebrate species based on its undisturbed nature and type of habitat. Acorns within the Valley Oak Savannah provide a valuable food source for a variety of wildlife. Also, the mature trees are an important source of nesting and roosting habitat for birds and other arboreal vertebrates. The scrubland, woodland, and grassland habitats in and adjacent to the SEA provide foraging and cover habitat for year-round residents, seasonal residents, and migrating song birds. In addition, the SEA contains abundant raptor foraging, perching, and nesting habitat. Mammal populations within the SEA respond favorably to these habitats. Although mammal populations within the SEA are expected to be limited due to the size of the SEA, they are still likely to utilize the area based on the habitats present. Amphibians may not be abundant due to the lack of water in the SEA; however, shaded areas within the woodland may be moist enough to allow for a few species to occupy the site. Reptilian diversity within the SEA is highest within patches of coastal sage chaparral scrub and may be abundant due the presence of alluvial wash habitat on adjacent property.

Wildlife Movement

Wildlife movement within the SEA is limited to local movement of foraging animals. Although the SEA does not support regional corridors itself, adjacent lands to the west and northwest may be important linkages for wildlife movement to and from the Santa Susana Mountains and the Santa Clara River. The location of the SEA, therefore, may be important as a corridor buffer and/or adjacent foraging grounds.

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.

Sensitive Plant Communities and Habitats

The SEA supports four plant community types considered sensitive by resource agencies. These are inventoried by California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) in the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDDB) [2011]. The CNDDDB includes state and federally-listed endangered, threatened, and rare vascular plants, as well as several sensitive vertebrate species. These communities include valley oak woodland, California brittle bush scrub, white sage scrub, and narrowleaf goldenbush scrub. The valley oak woodland occupies the majority of the SEA, and the remaining alliances occur in the southwestern 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:

- Peirson's morning-glory (*Calystegia peirsonii*) RPR 4.2
- San Fernando Valley spineflower (*Chorizanthe parryi* var. *fernandina*) RPR 1B.1, SE, federal candidate (FC)
- Short-joint beavertail (*Opuntia basilaris* var. *brachyclada*) RPR 1B.2
- White rabbit-tobacco (*Pseudognaphalium leucocephalum*) RPR 2.2
- Slender mariposa lily (*Calochortus clavatus* var. *gracilis*) RPR 1B.2
- Plummer's mariposa lily (*Calochortus plummerae*) RPR 1B.2

Sensitive Animal Species

The following special-status animal species are reported or have the potential to occur within the SEA, based on known habitat requirements and known range attributes:

- Western spadefoot (*Spea hammondi*) BLMS, SSC
- Silvery legless lizard (*Anniella pulchra pulchra*) FSS, SSC
- Coastal whiptail (*Aspidoscelis tigris stejnegeri*) CDFG Special Animals List
- Rosy boa (*Charina trivirgata*) BLMS, FSS
- Coast horned lizard (*Phrynosoma blainvillii*) BLMS, FSS, SSC
- Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) CDFG Watch List
- Southern California rufous-crowned sparrow (*Aimophila ruficeps canescens*) CDFG Watch List
- Grasshopper sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*) CDFG Special Animals List
- Bell's sage sparrow (*Amphispiza belli belli*) BCC, CDFG Watch List
- Burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*) BCC, BLMS, SSC
- White-tailed kite (*Elanus leucurus*) CDFG Fully Protected
- California horned lark (*Eremophila alpestris actia*) CDFG Watch List, LAA
- Loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) BCC, SSC, LAA

- Coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) FT, SSC, USBC, AWL, ABC
- Pallid bat (*Antrozous pallidus*) FSS, BLMS, SSC, WBWG High
- Spotted bat (*Euderma maculatum*) BLMS, SSC, WBWG High
- Western mastiff bat (*Eumops perotis californicus*) BLMS, SSC, WBWG High
- Hoary bat (*Lasiurus cinereus*) WBWG Medium
- San Diego black-tailed jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus bennettii*) SSC
- California leaf-nosed bat (*Macrotus californicus*) FSS, SSC, WBWG High
- San Diego desert woodrat (*Neotoma lepida intermedia*) SSC

Ecological Transition Areas (ETAs)

There are no ETAs designated within this SEA.

Regional Biological Value

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

CRITERIA ANALYSIS OF THE VALLEY OAKS SAVANNAH SEA

	Criterion	Status	Justification
A)	The habitat of core populations of endangered or threatened plant or animal species.	Met	The County considers oaks as indicators of the presence of important biological communities for preservation, and the uncommon valley oaks of the western areas of the County are especially valued.
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.	Met	The County has the southern boundary of occurrence for the valley oak, which has its core population in the California Central Valley. This makes the valley oak areas important for Southern California—they are very uncommon for the region as a whole.
C)	Within the County, biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant or animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution.	Met	The valley oak is uncommon in the County, and the western areas with this species are scattered.
D)	Habitat that at some point in the life cycle of a species or group of species, serves as concentrated breeding, feeding, resting, or	Met	Oaks are the basic structure for complex communities of organisms. They form shelter and provide many ecosystem functions that facilitate breeding, feeding, resting, and migration. As the basis of the community, it is important to conserve this habitat.

	Criterion	Status	Justification
	migrating grounds and is limited in availability either regionally or in the County.		
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 valley oaks of the County are on the southern edge of the species' range. This makes them important as the extreme in physical and geographical limits for the scientific study of the species.
F)	Areas that would provide for the preservation of relatively undisturbed examples of the original natural biotic communities in the County.	Met	Although the SEA area is small, this savannah is natural and representative of a natural biotic community that has chiefly been lost in the County.

In conclusion, the area is an SEA because it contains: A) the habitat of core populations of endangered and threatened plant and animal species; B-C) biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant and animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution in the County and regionally; D) concentrated breeding, feeding, resting, or migrating grounds, which are limited in availability in the County; 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; and F) a natural savannah of valley oaks, once a common habitat on the west side of the County.

26. Valley Oaks Savannah SEA Sources

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