

Jim
Talk presented to the Conference: Re-Envisioning the San Gabriel River, December 6, 1999,
Baldwin Park

**RE-ENVISIONING THE SAN GABRIEL RIVER - DECEMBER 6, 1999
RIPARIAN HABITAT RESTORATION AT WHITTIER NARROWS**

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The Whittier Narrows Recreation Area includes approx. 1500 acres of Army Corps of Engineers land under lease to County of Los Angeles, Dept. of Parks and Recreation

About 419 acres are currently designated as Natural Area - Whittier Narrows Nature Center, along the east side of Durfee Ave., west side of the San Gabriel River, So. El Monte. The Nature Center and wildlife sanctuary provide an environmental education site for schools and the general public with an active volunteer program to supplement the several County staff. Self-guided nature trails provide visitor access through the main wildlife sanctuary.

Birds: The Whittier Narrows Recreation Area, with year-round surface water in the form of wildlife lakes, recreational lakes and the San Gabriel and Rio Hondo rivers, supports a remarkable diversity of bird life especially when viewed in its setting of a heavily urbanized area. Currently 291 species and 5 additional subspecies of birds have been recorded within the Recreation Area. Thus we are close to recording 300 kinds of birds in the area. Bird diversity at Whittier Narrows is remarkable with records up to 102 species seen in a full day of birding.

Wildlife Area Historical Timeline:

1939 - The San Gabriel River Wildlife Sanctuary established by the National Audubon Society on 326 acres along the southwest side of the river.

1948 - the Society established the Audubon Center of Southern California at the site

1970 - County Parks and Recreation assumed management of the area and renamed the Whittier Narrows Nature Center, Wildlife Sanctuary

Whittier Narrows became the site of the first large-scale riparian restoration project in Los Angeles County

In mid-1970s - County Parks began plans to develop North Legg Lake (created years before as a borrow pit during 60 Fwy. construction) into a fishing lake. Since North Lake had been fenced and had developed riparian edge and waterfowl habitat, this led to legal challenge and out of court settlement to create 150 acres of mitigation habitat adjacent to the existing Natural Area east of Durfee Ave.

In summer 1975 work began on the "New Lakes Area" or "Mitigation Lakes"

- 3 lakes, totaling 25 acres of water were constructed; sev. islands built; dirt perimeter berms placed for screening; fencing and signage installed.
- 9000 native trees, shrubs and annuals/aquatic food plants planted, many grown from cuttings or seed from Natural Area site.

TABLE 1 Birds of Whittier Narrows Recreation Area by Seasonal Occurrence

<u>Status</u>	<u>Number of species and ssp.</u>	<u>Percent of total</u>
Permanent Resident	46	15.5
Winter Visitor	117	39.5*
Summer Visitor	13	4.4
Migrant (+ "Visitor")	76	25.7
Vagrants	44	14.9
	296	100

* The abundance of species as "Winter Visitors" reflects the importance of water in the basin and its effect on attracting and retaining wintering waterbirds (loons, grebes, herons, ducks and geese) and shorebirds.

TABLE 2 State and Federal Rare and Endangered Bird Species recorded from Whittier Narrows Recreation Area (through 1999)

E = Endangered T = Threatened SSC = Species of Special Concern

	<u>State</u>	<u>Federal</u>	<u>Status at Whittier Narrows</u>
California brown pelican	E	E	One record
Western least bittern		SSC	Rare summer visitor; nest records
White-faced ibis		SSC	Fifteen records
Bald eagle	E	T	Two records
Sharp-shinned hawk		SSC	Fairly common winter visitor
Swainson's hawk	T	SSC	Ten records
Ferruginous hawk		SSC	Eight records
American peregrine falcon	E	E	Over twenty records
Light-footed clapper rail	E	E	One record
Western snowy plover		T	Four records
Black tern		SSC	Six records
Western yellow-billed cuckoo	E		Extirpated; formerly nested
Southwestern willow flycatcher	E	E	Five records; formerly nested
Bank swallow	T		Eight records
California coastal gnatcatcher		T	Approx. six records
Loggerhead shrike		SSC	Fairly common resident; nests
Least Bell's vireo	E	E	Rare summ. visitor; Two nest records
So. California rufous-crowned sparrow		SSC	One record
Tricolored blackbird		SSC	Uncommon visitor; nest record

- Dominant species planted: cottonwoods (Fremont and black), Calif. sycamore, willows, mulefat, coffeeberry, elderberry, wild grape.

The lead agency was Army Corps of Engineers in conjunction with Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation. Total cost: approx. \$500,000

The Project was highly successful, providing to this day high quality riparian habitat and public wildlife study area, especially for birding.

Critically Rare or Endangered Species:

Recreation Area has recorded over 40 agency-listed (sensitive) bird species, including at least 19 species Federally or State Rare or Endangered
There are additional mammal, reptile, amphibian and plant species.

Yellow-billed Cuckoo nested in 1940s and 50s; last nest June 1952

Least Bell's Vireo - nesting in the late 1980s and singing males (3) present last spring (1999)

Peregrine Falcon uses the area each winter and an immature Bald Eagle seen the week of the conference, in the Rio Hondo basin.

Whittier Narrows is the last known location for Parish's Gooseberry (*Ribes divaricatum parishii*) in 1981, now thought to be extinct but possibly persisting.

References:

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