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CALIFORNIA GNATCATCHER TO BE PROPOSED FOR ENDANGERED STATUS

The coastal California gnatcatcher, a small thrush-like songbird native to the coastal sage scrub of southern California and Mexico, will be proposed for endangered status throughout its range, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today.

The proposal begins a lengthy process in which public review and comment is taken before a final decision is made by the Interior Department agency. The Service will solicit information on the gnatcatcher and its habitat during a 90-day public comment period following publication of the proposal in the Federal Register. In addition, public hearings will be held in southern California during the comment period. Under the Endangered Species Act, final action will be completed by the Fish and Wildlife Service within a year from the date of proposal.

With this proposal, Federal agencies are required to conference with the Service when considering actions that are likely to jeopardize the gnatcatcher. The State of California has initiated the Natural Community Conservation Planning Program to develop guidelines to save coastal sage scrub habitat on which the gnatcatcher and other sensitive species depend. The Service will continue to work with state and private entities to manage lands considered prime gnatcatcher habitat.

This proposal is based on an extensive review of scientific data on the species' status. Major threats to the species are habitat loss, fragmentation from decades of land development in southern California, and the absence of effective protection under other laws.

The California gnatcatcher is a small, long-tailed bird, about 4 to 5 inches in length, with dark, blue-gray plumage above and gray-white plumage below. As late as the mid-1940's, the gnatcatcher was considered locally common; by the 1960's, biologists noted drastic population declines. According to one 1990 estimate, between 1,819 and 2,262 pairs of coastal California gnatcatchers are believed to exist in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties.

Between 85 and 90 percent of the coastal sage scrub vegetation on which the bird depends for a home--low-growing drought-tolerant plants like coastal sagebrush, California buckwheat, prickly pear, and cholla--is estimated to have been lost to urban and agricultural development. Of the 2.5 million acres of sage scrub believed to have once existed, between 250,000 and 375,000 acres remain. Riverside County has lost an estimated 81 percent of its coastal sage scrub since 1930, from 410,000 to 79,000 acres; San Diego County now has 125,000 acres, more than a 70 percent loss.

The California gnatcatcher once ranged from Ventura and San Bernardino counties into Mexico, but is now limited to increasingly smaller pockets of habitat. It is no longer found in Ventura and San Bernardino counties and its once extensive range in Los Angeles County has been reduced to a small portion of the Palos Verdes peninsula. In Orange County, gnatcatchers appear to be concentrated in only two areas--the coastal foothills between Corona Del Mar and Laguna Beach and northwest of the Ortega Highway. Isolated populations occur in scattered locations in western Riverside and San Diego counties as well as Mexico.

The proposal to list the coastal California gnatcatcher as an endangered species is based on a status review for the species that the Fish and Wildlife Service began in 1988 and completed in March 1991 after a renewed appeal for biological information about the species. In 1990, the Service was petitioned by the San Diego Biodiversity Project and the Palomar Audubon Society to list the species as endangered; a third petition from the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Manomet Bird Observatory was also received requesting emergency listing of the gnatcatcher as endangered. In January 1991 the Service determined the petitions were substantive and that listing may be warranted.

The Service believes habitat protection is the key to survival for many of the species found in this portion of California. As a result, the agency is working with the Natural Community Conservation Planning Program, along with municipalities and landowners to develop a comprehensive set of guidelines for habitat protection planning efforts at the local level.

"We're all better off if we can remove threats to species before a final listing action becomes necessary," said Marvin L. Plenert, Pacific regional director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "We are committed to working with California's 'natural community' conservation planning approach to protect habitats that contain numerous sensitive species. This innovative approach involves private landowners, development interests, and local officials as partners to develop conservation plans aimed

at protecting the gnatcatcher as well as 38 other species considered candidates for listing and dependent on coastal sage scrub habitat."

The Irvine Company is funding The Nature Conservancy to prepare an open space plan for 16,000 acres of its land in Orange County which includes large tracts of coastal sage scrub vegetation and an unknown number of gnatcatchers. Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base in northern San Diego County intends to prepare a management plan for the coastal California gnatcatcher.

The proposal and a complete description of the Fish and Wildlife Service's review will be published soon in the Federal Register. A 90-day public comment period will follow. Written comments should be submitted to the Field Supervisor, Southern California Field Station, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 24000 Avila Road, Laguna Niguel, California 92656.

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