

NEWS RELEASE

U. S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE - REGION 1

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE CITES SCIENTIFIC DISAGREEMENT
OVER GNATCATCHER CLASSIFICATION; EXTENDS LISTING DECISION UP TO 6 MONTHS

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, citing numerous concerns over the scientific classification of the coastal California gnatcatcher, will extend for up to 6 months its decision whether to list the southern California bird as an endangered species under the Federal Endangered Species Act.

The extension will allow the Interior Department agency to resolve questions regarding whether the coastal California gnatcatcher, a bird in the thrush family, is a distinct subspecies that merits Federal protection as an endangered species.

The bird was first described as a distinct species in 1881. Since 1926, however, some experts believed that the California gnatcatcher, found primarily along the coast of southern California and Baja Mexico, was actually a subspecies of the black-tailed gnatcatcher, a more widespread variety found chiefly in the desert. In 1988, the California gnatcatcher was again recognized as a distinct species based on new taxonomic research. This finding was subsequently accepted by the American Ornithologists Union, a scientific organization that defines the taxonomy of North American birds.

Currently three subspecies of California gnatcatcher generally are recognized. The American Ornithologists Union now is reviewing the subspecies taxonomy of all North American birds, including the gnatcatcher, for possible revision. In August 1992, the Fish and Wildlife Service requested this organization to review the subspecies classification of the gnatcatcher to help resolve this matter.

Comments received by the Fish and Wildlife Service regarding the validity of the gnatcatcher's classification during the review of the proposed listing prompted today's decision to seek the 6-month extension.

A Federal Register notice regarding the 6-month extension will announce a new 30-day period for public comments. Those comments should be sent to the Field Supervisor, Carlsbad Field Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2730 Loker Avenue West, Carlsbad, California 92008.

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