

June 11, 2024

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Stacey Love
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
2177 Salk Ave., Suite 250
Carlsbad , CA 92008

Subject: 2024 Coastal California Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) Survey Report for the Willow Road Property

Dear Stacey Love:

This letter presents the results of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) protocol presence/absence survey for the federally listed as threatened coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*; CAGN) conducted by HELIX Environmental Planning, Inc. (HELIX) for the Willow Road Property (property). This report describes the methods used to perform the survey and the results. It is being submitted to the USFWS as a condition of HELIX's Threatened and Endangered Species Permit ES-778195-15.

PROJECT LOCATION

The approximately 232.7-acre Willow Road Property, which also represents the study area for the survey effort, is located in the unincorporated community of Lakeside in San Diego County, California (Figure 1, *Regional Location*). It is situated within unsectioned portions of Township 15 South, Range 1 East on the U.S. Geological Survey 7.5-minute San Vicente Reservoir and El Cajon quadrangle map (Figure 2, *USGS Topography*). The property occurs north of Willow Road, south of Wildcat Canyon Road, west of El Capitan Preserve, and east of Louis A. Stelzer County Park (Figure 3, *Aerial Photograph*).

The property occurs almost entirely within USFWS-designated critical habitat for coastal California gnatcatcher, with only the western edge occurring outside critical habitat (Figure 3).

METHODS

The survey consisted of six visits that were performed by HELIX permitted biologists Alexander Walsh, Mandy Mathews, Erica Harris (ES-778195-15), and Miki Kern (TE56726A-2) between March 20 and

May 3, 2024 (Table 1, *Survey Results*), in accordance with the current USFWS protocol¹. The visits were conducted at least seven days apart, between 6 a.m. and 12 p.m., pursuant to survey protocol. The project proponent, Helix Water District, is not a participating entity in the Natural Communities Conservation Plan program. For non-participating agencies, the USFWS requires that a minimum of six surveys be conducted, at least one week apart, during the breeding season (March 15 to June 30) or a minimum of nine surveys be conducted, at least two weeks apart, during the non-breeding season (July 1 to March 14). The survey area encompassed approximately 168 acres of potential CAGN habitat within the property. Due to the size of the property, the survey area was divided into three separate subareas, A, B, and C, which were surveyed by separate permitted HELIX biologists (Figure 4, 2024 *Coastal California Gnatcatcher Survey Results*). An approximately 12-acre area within the central-northern portion of the property, in subarea B, was excluded from the survey effort due to unsuitable habitat. This area, which is depicted on Figure 4 as “Exclusion Area”, features dense chaparral vegetation, large boulders, and steep slopes not characteristic of suitable CAGN habitat.

The surveys were conducted by walking within and along the perimeter of suitable CAGN habitat present within the survey area. The survey route was arranged to ensure complete survey coverage of habitat with potential for occupancy by CAGN. Surveys were conducted with binoculars to aid in bird detection. Recorded CAGN vocalizations were played sparingly and only if other means of detection had failed. If a CAGN was detected before playing recorded vocalizations, the recordings were not played. Once CAGNs were initially detected in an area, the use of playback was discontinued. The approximate survey route is depicted on Figure 4. Table 1 details the survey dates, times, and conditions.

Table 1
SURVEY INFORMATION

Site Visit	Survey Date	Biologist(s)	Start/Stop Time	Approx. Acres Surveyed/ Acres per Hour ⁴	Start/Stop Weather Conditions
1A	3/21/24	Mandy Mathews ¹	0700/1130	61.5 ac/ 11.2 ac/hr	53°F, wind, 1-4 mph, 0% cloud cover 65°F, wind, 1-4 mph, 0% cloud cover
1B	3/21/24	Erica Harris ¹	0700/1100	46.2 ac/ 9.2 ac/hr	53°F, wind, 0-1 mph, 5% cloud cover 66°F, wind, 1-3 mph, 0% cloud cover
1C	3/20/24	Alexander Walsh ¹ Angelica Grunloh ³	0700/1200	60.1 ac/ 12.0 ac/hr	46°F, wind, 3-5 mph, 0% cloud cover 67°F, wind, 5-8 mph, 0% cloud cover
2A	4/4/24	Mandy Mathews ¹	0700/1030	61.5 ac/ 17.6 ac/hr	52°F, wind, 0-1 mph, 100% cloud cover 57°F, wind, 2-5 mph, 70% cloud cover
2B	4/4/24	Miki Kern ²	0700/1030	46.2 ac/ 13.2 ac/hr	53°F, wind, 1-3 mph, 100% cloud cover 60°F, wind, 1-4 mph, 40% cloud cover
2C	3/28/24	Alexander Walsh ¹ Shawn Carroll ³	0640/1200	60.1 ac/ 11.3 ac/hr	48°F, wind, 3-9 mph, 100% cloud cover 60°F, wind, 2-8 mph, 75% cloud cover
3A	4/11/24	Mandy Mathews ¹	0650/1015	61.5 ac/ 18.0 ac/hr	50°F, wind, 2-4 mph, 0% cloud cover 70°F, wind, 1-3 mph, 0% cloud cover
3B	4/11/24	Alexander Walsh ¹	0645/1030	46.2 ac/ 12.3 ac/hr	53°F, wind, 2-5 mph, 0% cloud cover 68°F, wind, 3-8mph, 0% cloud cover

¹ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). 1997. Coastal California Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) Presence/Absence Survey Protocol. 5pp.

Site Visit	Survey Date	Biologist(s)	Start/Stop Time	Approx. Acres Surveyed/ Acres per Hour ⁴	Start/Stop Weather Conditions
3C	4/4/24	Alexander Walsh ¹ Angelica Grunloh ³	0645/1100	60.1 ac/ 14.1 ac/hr	54°F, wind, 1-3 mph, 100% cloud cover 62°F, wind, 1-3 mph, 30% cloud cover
4A	4/18/24	Mandy Mathews	0700/1000	61.5 ac/ 20.5 ac/hr	54°F, wind, 1-3 mph, 100% cloud cover 61°F, wind, 3-5 mph, 90% cloud cover
4B	4/18/24	Alexander Walsh ¹	0700/1000	46.2 ac/ 15.4 ac/hr	54°F, wind, 2-6 mph, 100% cloud cover 59°F, wind, 3-10 mph, 75% cloud cover
4C	4/11/24	Miki Kern ² Shawn Carroll ³	0635/1135	60.1 ac/ 12.0 ac/hr	49°F, wind, 1-3 mph, 0% cloud cover 77°F, wind, 1-5 mph, 0% cloud cover
5A	4/25/24	Alexander Walsh ¹	0645/0945	61.5 ac/ 20.5 ac/hr	52°F, wind, 2-4 mph, 100% cloud cover 55°F, wind, 2-7 mph, 90% cloud cover
5B	4/25/24	Miki Kern ²	0630/0920	46.2 ac/ 16.3 ac/hr	55°F, wind, 1-2 mph, 100% cloud cover 58°F, wind, 1-4 mph, 90% cloud cover
5C	4/25/24	Mandy Mathews ¹ Angelica Grunloh ³	0650/0950	60.1 ac/ 20.0 ac/hr	57°F, wind, 0-1 mph, 100% cloud cover 58°F, wind, 0-3 mph, 100% cloud cover
6A	5/3/24	Mandy Mathews ¹	0830/1030	61.5 ac/ 30.8 ac/hr	59°F, wind, 1-3 mph, 100% cloud cover 66°F, wind, 1-3 mph, 100% cloud cover
6B	5/2/24	Alexander Walsh ¹	0630/0930	46.2 ac/ 15.4 ac/hr	55°F, wind, 1-3 mph, 100% cloud cover 57°F, wind, 1-4 mph, 100% cloud cover
6C	5/2/24	Miki Kern ² Shawn Carroll ³	0630/0930	60.1 ac/ 20.0 ac/hr	57°F, wind, 1-3 mph, 100% cloud cover 59°F, wind, 2-4 mph, 100% cloud cover

¹ USFWS Permit ES-778195-15

² USFWS Permit TE56726A-2

³ Supervised Individual

⁴ ac – acre; hr – hour

COASTAL CALIFORNIA GNATCATCHER HABITAT

Diegan coastal sage scrub is the only vegetation community within the survey area determined to be suitable for CAGN (Figure 4).

Diegan Coastal Sage Scrub

Coastal sage scrub is one of the two major shrub types that occur in southern California, occupying xeric sites characterized by shallow soils; the other is chaparral. Four distinct coastal sage scrub geographical associations (northern, central, Venturan, and Diegan) are recognized along the California coast. Diegan coastal sage scrub may be dominated by a variety of species depending on soil type, slope, and aspect. Typical species found within Diegan coastal sage scrub include California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*), California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*), laurel sumac (*Malosma laurina*), and black sage (*Salvia mellifera*). Disturbed coastal sage scrub contains many of the same shrub species as undisturbed Diegan coastal sage scrub but is sparser and has a higher proportion of non-native annual species. Baccharis dominated Diegan coastal sage scrub is a subtype of coastal sage scrub that is dominated by broom baccharis (*Baccharis sarothroides*) or coyote brush (*B. pilularis*). It often occurs on disturbed sites and areas with nutrient-poor soils, and on upper terraces of streams and in detention basins, where it may include goldenbush (*Isocoma menziesii*). Diegan coastal sage scrub within the

survey area is dominated primarily by California sagebrush, California buckwheat, and chuparosa (*Justicia californica*).

RESULTS

One pair of CAGN was detected within the survey area during the survey effort, although both individuals were not detected during each survey or together at the same time while the surveys were conducted (Figure 4). The CAGN pair (Pair No. 1) was detected in the southern portion of the site, in subarea C. An unidentified CAGN was detected off-site during the fourth survey, approximately 200 feet to the west of the survey area but is not included on Figure 4. A detailed description of the CAGN observations and locations from each weekly survey is summarized below.

The male of the CAGN pair (Pair No. 1) responded to a call-back during the first survey, flying out of DCSS vegetation approximately 200 feet north of Willow Road. The male of Pair No. 1 was detected individually, without the female, only during the first and fifth surveys. Both the male and female of the pair were detected during surveys 2, 3, and 6. All detections occurred within the same approximately 2-acre area within subarea C. During the third survey, the male of the pair was detected on two separate occasions, first foraging with the female near the western edge of the survey area and later patrolling individually approximately 160 feet to the southeast of the prior detection. The male was detected patrolling individually again during the fifth survey within the same 2-acre area. Pair behaviors were observed during the second, third, and sixth surveys, in which the adult male and female CAGN foraged within the same immediate area and issued faint contact calls.

Due to the close proximity of all CAGN detections, all CAGN within the survey area were determined to belong to Pair No. 1.

CERTIFICATION

I certify that the information in this survey report and enclosed exhibit fully and accurately represent my work.

Please contact Shelby Howard or Katie Duffield at (619) 462-1515 if you have any questions.

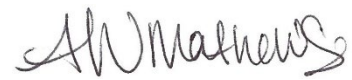
Sincerely,



Erica Harris
Sr. Biologist



Miki Kern
Biologist



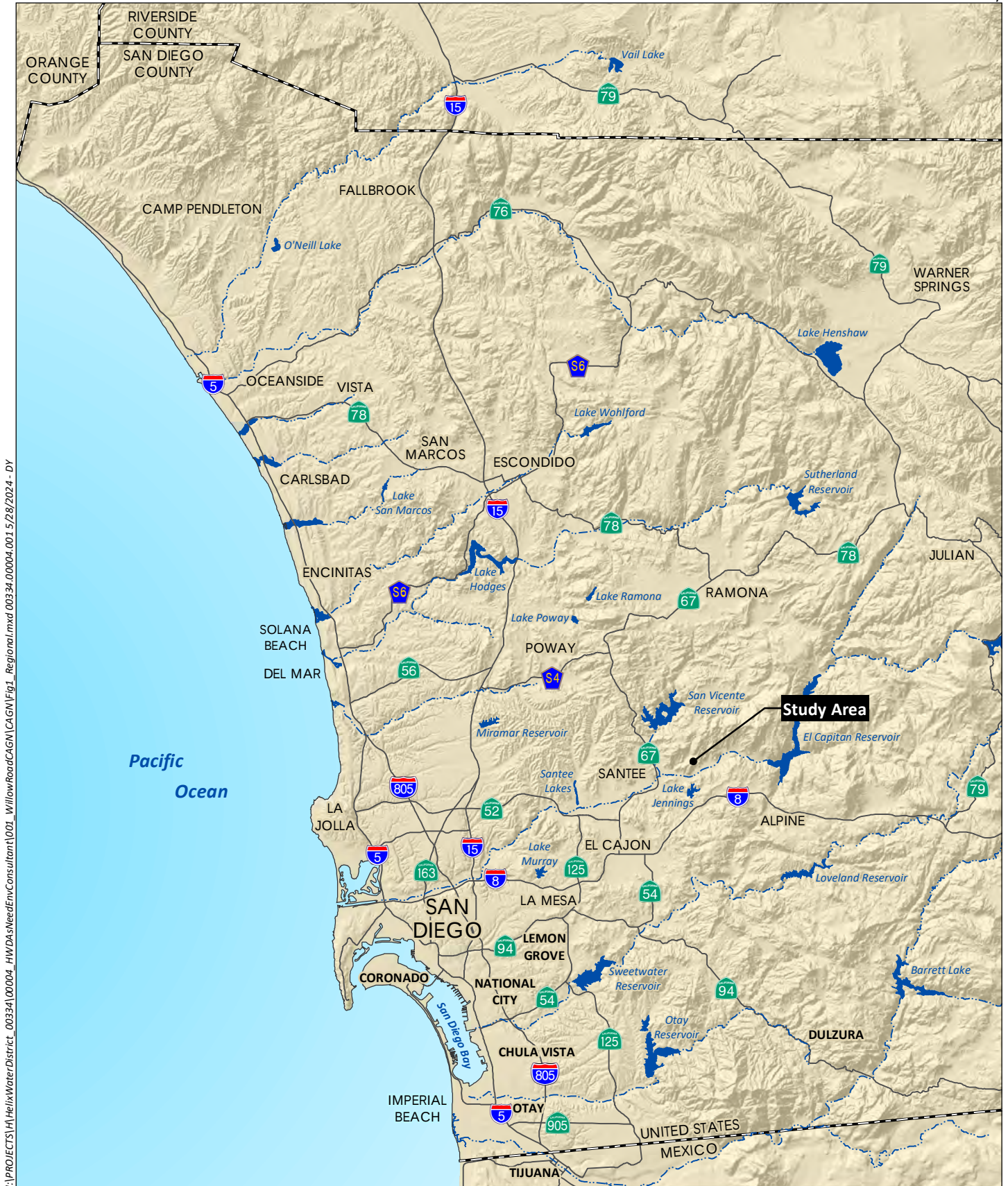
Mandy Mathews
Biologist



Alexander Wash
Biologist

Attachments:

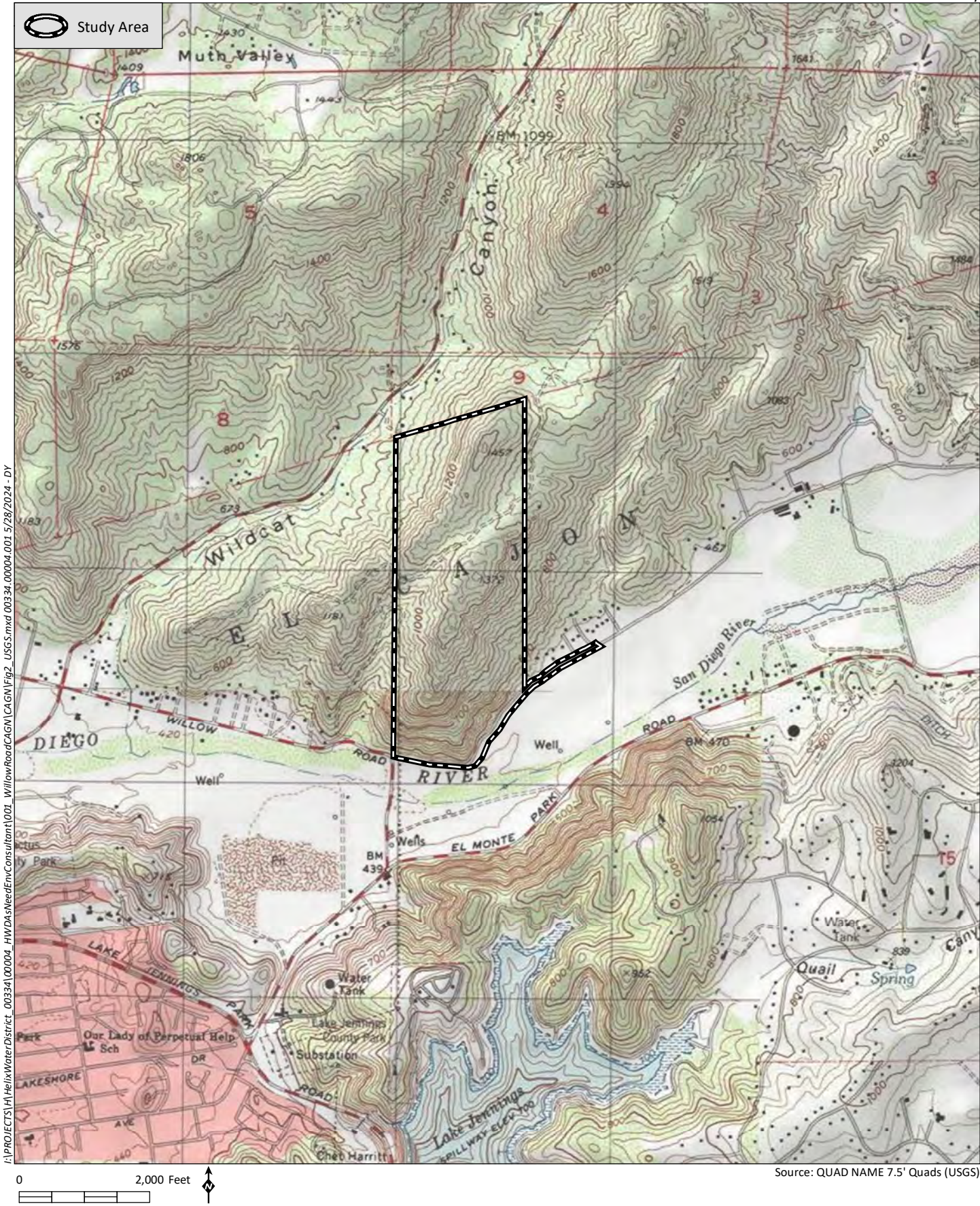
- Figure 1: Regional Location
- Figure 2: USGS Topography
- Figure 3: Aerial Photograph
- Figure 4: 2024 Coastal California Gnatcatcher Survey Results



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Source: Base Map Layers (SanGIS, 2016)



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