



**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM**

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW Time (7:06)

LEAST BELLS VIREO (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH PETER BECK AND GJON HAZARD)

This transcript was produced from audio provided by FWS Endangered Species Program

P R O C E E D I N G S

(Music plays.)

MS. LEON: Hello there, this is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and I'm on the phone today with Gjon Hazard and Peter Beck, two Fish and Wildlife Biologists at the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office in California. Hi, Gjon and Peter, how are you two today?

MR. HAZARD / MR. BECK: We're doing well.

MS. LEON: Would you guys mind talking to us a little about Least Bell's Vireos?

MR. HAZARD: Least Bell's Vireos, yes. An endangered sub-species in Southern California and Northwestern Mexico. There are other sub-species of Bell's Vireos but it's the last Bell's Vireos that are the ones that are listed by the Federal Endangered Species Act.

MR. BECK: You want to know a little bit more about the bird. It's a fairly small bird. It's less than five inches in length. It's mostly gray on the back with some white on the underside. There is some greenish tinge to the gray back and a yellow tinge on the plank, but overall the Least Bell's have less green and yellow tones than the other three sub-species.

This sub-species has face light wing bars and although this species is visually quite cryptic, it's an extremely vocal singer during the breeding season and that makes it generally easy to find and identify.

MR. HAZARD: Yes, it used to be one of the more abundant birds in riparian habitat since Southern California and Central California and in some extent Northern Baja, California and Mexico. But it has suffered with the colonization of California, the mining and ranching of the Great Central Valley in California. Much of the habitat up there was destroyed and likewise down in Southern California and so that habitat loss was a major blow to the species.

But then a bird species of the Brown-Headed cowbird moved into Southern California and the Brown-headed Cow Bird is interesting because it does not raise its own young. And what it does is it lays its eggs in the nest of other birds and has them raise their young. And when the cowbird lays its eggs in the Vireo's nest, the Vireo chicks do not survive competition with the Brown-Headed cowbird chick. And so the combination of the habitat loss and the expansion of Brown-headed cowbirds into California was a real one-two punch for the Least Bell's Vireo.

MS. LEON: All right. And what recovery actions are currently underway?

MR. BECK: What we've pursued since the listing of the species has been habitat preservation and restoration and various measures to control cowbird. Most of the habitat preservation and restoration has been achieved by working with Federal agencies such as the Marine Corps and the Army Corps of Engineers through interagency compilation under Section 7 of the ESA. And we've also worked with local governments through habitat conservation planning process under Section 10 of the ESA.

As an example of how well this has worked, the population has increased about ten-fold from about 300 individuals to about 3,000 individuals between the time the species was listed in 1986 to our most recent assessment in 2006.

In the process of doing this habitat preservation and restoration there's also been significant effort in various regions to control cowbirds and to reduce the effects of cowbirds on the Least Bell's Vireo.

And looking forward, we're looking at Safe Harbor Agreements which encourage private entities to conserve and restore habitat and we believe that that will create large potential to increase the amount of available habitat.

MS. LEON: All right. And I understand that a pair of Least Bell's Vireos returned to the Sacramento area in 2006 which was really big news at the time. Can you tell our listeners a little about this and maybe give us a current status update?

MR. HAZARD: Yes. Actually a pair of Least Bell's Vireos were discovered in the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge which is west of Modesto in the Central Valley of California. They were actually found in 2005 and came back in 2006. Monitoring of that air turned up only the female in 2007 and I'm not aware of any recent sighting. But this is a really neat story because the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge staff, they were

planting something like 400,000 native willows, cottonwoods and oaks on a very large area, 1,700 acres of river flood plain that they have control over. And, you know, they created the largest block of contiguous repair of woodland in the San Joaquin Valley now.

And the Vireo was found. The wreckage staff were actually creating this habitat now for Vireos specifically, but for general purposes and other species of concern. And the fact that Vireos found this patch of habitat a good distance, you know, 100 miles or more from existing large population is a hopeful sign for getting Vireos back into the Central Valley.

MS. LEON: Okay. And it sounds like there is a lot of support backing this species recovery which, of course, is great. But now I'm going to ask that you two take a little time to discuss why the public should care about the recovery of this little bird.

MR. HAZARD: Oh, it's so beautiful. It's one of the prettiest birds out there. Well, okay. So, maybe -- maybe beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It's not a very brightly colored bird. As Pete said early on, it's fairly drab and gray/green color but it's a Bell Weather for the Health Riparian habitat.

The Riparian vegetation is what grows along stream courses and lakes and it is that habitat is important to humans because it helps provide a buffer for our stream courses, our waterways, allowing cleaner water and reduction of flooding.

MR. BECK: And I'd like to add. A lot of people place a high value on conservation of birds in particular. It seems to among the bird species that people really people really focus on. But other than the high value that many people put on conserving birds, this species, I believe, is a clear indicator of both what we've lost in terms of native habitat and wildlife and the potential to recover some of what we've lost.

This species was on the brink of extinction a little bit over 20 years ago. But with concerted effort among a variety of partners, we've been able to bring this species' population back to a much healthier level. And I believe this indicates that not only can the Endangered Species Act work to protect our native wildlife, but that different agencies and organizations with different goals and agendas can work together to achieve a common goal. And that ability to work together for a common good should be very reassuring to the public.

MS. LEON: All right. That's great. Thank you for taking the time today to talk us a little about this species, why we should care and also highlight some of the efforts that are currently underway to help recover it. So, thank you.

MR. BECK: Thank you.

MR. HAZARD: Thank you.

MS. LEON: This is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Thanks for listening.