



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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GNATCATCHER TO BE LISTED AS "THREATENED;" INTERIOR'S BABBITT PROMOTES REGIONAL CONSERVATION EFFORTS

Seeking to break new ground in the protection of endangered species, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt today announced a decision designed to encourage regional habitat conservation planning efforts. In listing the California gnatcatcher as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act, Secretary Babbitt also proposed a special rule that provides recognition of the regional conservation efforts already under way in southern California.

"The bad news is the gnatcatcher's decline is serious enough that we must list it as 'threatened,'" said Secretary Babbitt. "The good news is the listing need not bring development to a halt. State, local, and federal officials have planned ahead for the gnatcatcher's listing. That planning process itself is likely what has kept this species, at least for now, from being listed as endangered."

Secretary Babbitt's announcement reflects his determination to apply the Endangered Species Act on an ecosystem-wide basis, rather than using a species-by-species approach. The special rule proposed by the Interior Secretary, once finalized, will provide for orderly development while providing habitat protection, enhancement, or restoration for the gnatcatcher.

"We are taking a risk here because we simply must break through these environmental and economic stalemates," Secretary Babbitt said. "We have to be able to point to one community and prove they were able to, from start to finish, protect both a species and the local economy. If we don't, we'll run ourselves right off a cliff."

The coastal California gnatcatcher is a small songbird native to coastal sage scrub in southern California and northwestern Baja California, Mexico. "This subspecies is threatened with extinction due to habitat loss and fragmentation from urban and agricultural development," said Marvin Plenert, the Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific regional director.

It is estimated that 70 to 90 percent of the coastal sage scrub upon which this species depends has already been destroyed within its U.S. range. About 2,600 pairs of the coastal California gnatcatcher remain in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego Counties. About 2,800 pairs of this subspecies occur in Mexico.

The Endangered Species Act prohibits anyone from "taking" a gnatcatcher, which includes killing, harming, or harassing the species. By proposing a section 4(d) rule under the Act, Secretary Babbitt has indicated his intention to allow the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to define conditions associated with certain land-use activities under which take of a gnatcatcher would not be a violation of the Act. As part of this special rule, the Service may permit take of the gnatcatcher in conjunction with activities covered by approved plans prepared under the State of California's Natural Community Conservation Planning Act of 1991 (NCCP).

"Proposing a 4(d) rule puts pressure on the State of California to develop planning guidelines for conservation and management of coastal sage scrub," said Secretary Babbitt. "These guidelines will be used in developing NCCP plans. We have every assurance from California officials that they will approach this expeditiously."

A Scientific Review Panel for the State's NCCP program is currently in the process of developing these planning guidelines. The Panel, comprised of five members with expertise in conservation biology or coastal sage scrub plant ecology, is scheduled to release draft conservation planning guidelines in the spring of 1993. The special rule will be finalized once the Panel's guidelines are adopted by the California Department of Fish and Game and the Fish and Wildlife Service.

After it is finalized, the special rule would permit take of the gnatcatcher while the NCCP plans are being developed if the take results from activities conducted in accordance with the Panel's conservation planning guidelines. In addition, the rule would require that:

- o the take occur in an area under local governmental jurisdiction which is enrolled in the NCCP process;
- o loss of sage scrub habitat associated with take does not exceed restrictions outlined in the Panel's conservation planning guidelines.

"The only effective way to protect endangered species is to plan ahead to conserve the ecosystems upon which they depend," Secretary Babbitt said. "I applaud the cooperative effort here to protect the gnatcatcher. This may become an example of what

must be done across the country if we are to avoid the environmental and economic train wrecks we've seen in the last decade."

"I'm now heading to the Pacific Northwest, where one of those train wrecks has taken place," Secretary Babbitt said. "I don't want to see that happen again. We need to find common ground -- to find parallel tracks that show the compatibility of environmental protection and economic development. That's what this approach is all about."

Secretary Babbitt noted that the ecosystem approach to conservation and management of the coastal sage scrub community in southern California is also likely to protect other species currently candidates for federal listing. If the conservation of candidate species is adequately addressed under NCCP plans, it may preclude a listing action or provide a basis for a threatened listing with a special rule similar to that for the gnatcatcher. In addition to the gnatcatcher, the NCCP specifically targets two federal candidates for listing, the coastal population of the cactus wren and the orange-throated whiptail, a lizard. However, other Federal candidate species that use coastal sage scrub also will likely benefit from the development of NCCP plans.

The coastal California gnatcatcher was proposed for "endangered" status in 1991. The change in listing status between the proposal and this final action is based on an assessment of current planning efforts in California to address the conservation of the gnatcatcher and coastal sage scrub.

In addition to regional planning activities under California's NCCP program, the City of San Diego's Multiple Species Conservation Program, and Riverside County's Multi-species Planning program are contributing to the protection of the gnatcatcher to the degree that it is not judged in immediate danger of extinction. The Fish and Wildlife Service was petitioned in 1990 to list the coastal California gnatcatcher as endangered. The Service published the proposal to list this species as endangered on September 17, 1991.

Complete descriptions of the final action listing the gnatcatcher and the proposed special rule will be published in the Federal Register.