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## GNATCATCHERS ENDURE DESPITE DROUGHT

On a quiet spring morning, Land IQ biologist Jenni Snibbe walks slowly through the low native grass at the Upper Chiquita Canyon Conservation Area near Rancho Santa Margarita. She’s on the lookout for a pair of tiny coastal California gnatcatchers that she has seen in the area before. Her search is part of a bi-annual survey measuring how successful the Transportation Corridor Agencies (TCA) have been at restoring and managing this open space, one of 16 places set aside by TCA during construction of The Toll Roads.

Snibbe pauses near the gnatcatchers’ location, hidden under sagebrush, but hears nothing. She breaks the silence by playing a recorded version of a gnatcatcher’s call. It’s a series of three notes that some say reminds them of a kitten’s mew. She pauses.



More silence. Maybe they’ve moved on, she thinks, but then she hears a rustle behind her. A Cooper’s hawk comes out of hiding, and with a flap of its silver-grey and red wings it soars above her and flies away. Snibbe follows protocol, quickly leaving the area so as not to interfere with natural interactions between the predator hawk and the tiny birds it might have been stalking.

A few days later she checks on the location and is happy to see the male and female gnatcatchers foraging in the sagebrush with fledglings, young enough that they’re more fluffy than feathered. The hawk is nowhere to be found.

The hawk’s appearance was an unusual bit of natural drama for Snibbe and her counterparts, who have spent some 20 mornings this winter and spring at Upper Chiquita Canyon surveying approximately 600 acres of coastal sage scrub. Despite the drought and the presence of natural predators, gnatcatchers continue to remain in the restored landscape. All told, the biologists have counted 11 single gnatcatchers and 40 pairs at the site - 16 pairs had young offspring.

The gnatcatcher sightings are great news for the ecosystem’s health. The gnatcatcher is like the proverbial canary in a coalmine—its survival and breeding is a way to measure the success of an environmental restoration project.

“It’s an incredible result, especially given the impact the drought has had on the region,” said Valarie McFall, TCA’s Chief Environmental Planning Officer. “We’re so pleased that Upper Chiquita Canyon is sustaining the gnatcatcher population.”

## STAR APPEARANCES

More than 70 species of birds were found during the most recent survey of the Upper Chiquita Canyon Conservation Area. Here’s a closer look at three species inhabiting the area.



### ***Coastal California gnatcatcher***

This small blue-grey songbird lives in coastal sage scrub habitat. It is a federally threatened species and its preservation has guided much of TCA’s conservation planning.



### ***Coastal cactus wren***

About eight inches long, the coastal cactus wren has a spotted white belly and speckled brown feathers. It makes its home in cacti like prickly pear and cholla, so the spines keep predators away from nests. The California Department of Fish and Wildlife has listed it as a species of special concern.



### ***Cooper’s hawk***

A fairly common raptor, the Cooper’s hawk is known for its stealth in hunting squirrels, chipmunks and small birds. About the size of a crow, it has powerful feet with strong talons to pick up prey.



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