Big T Wash Line

Fall 2024

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In this issue

Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area Overview

"Big T" is a conservation area located in the City of Los Angeles Sunland area (see Page 8).

The Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area (Big T) spans approximately 210 acres of sensitive habitat, including the Big Tujunga Wash and Haines Canyon Creek. Los Angeles County Public Works acquired the site in 1998 to offset habitat loss from other Public Works projects.

Since April 2000, LA County Public Works has been implementing the Master Mitigation Plan for Big T. The area protects one of Southern California's most rapidly diminishing habitat types: willow riparian woodland.

The site is home to several protected species of fish, including the Santa Ana sucker, Santa Ana speckled dace, and arroyo chub. It also contains habitat for sensitive bird species such as the least Bell's vireo and southwestern willow flycatcher.

This newsletter provides updates on ongoing programs and outlines upcoming site enhancement measures. Newsletters are published on a semi-annual basis in the spring and fall.

More information can be found at:
pw.lacounty.gov/wrd/projects/BTWMA


Santa Ana speckled dace

Santa Ana Speckled Dace: Candidate Species for Listing

Three freshwater native fish species inhabit the waterways at Big T: the arroyo chub (*Gilia orcutti*), the Santa Ana sucker (*Catostomus santaanae*), and the Santa Ana speckled dace (*Rhinichthys gabrielino*). All three are California Species of Special Concern, and the Santa Ana sucker is a federally listed threatened species. In August, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced the Santa Ana speckled dace as a candidate species for federally threatened status.

What do the species statuses mean?

Species statuses reflect how vulnerable a species is, taking into account various factors. A threatened species is at risk of becoming endangered in the foreseeable future across much or all of its range. An endangered species faces danger of extinction in the same scope. Once a species becomes extinct no more individuals remain.


Santa Ana speckled dace

What is the Santa Ana speckled dace and why is it a candidate species?

Santa Ana speckled dace is a small, slender, streamlined fish that grows to around 4 inches. The dorsal and lateral regions are dark yellow with speckles and spots. The shape and color of this fish is suited to life in flowing water with sandy and rocky substrates. Santa Ana speckled dace has been described as genetically distinguishable from, but related to, the wider-ranging speckled dace. Speckled dace mainly occupy small, cool streams where they feed and forage for aquatic insects; however, they are very adaptable and can also be found in larger rivers and deep lakes where they may also feed on zooplankton and algae. Speckled dace have a typical lifespan of three years (and can live up to six years), but do not start to reproduce until their second year. They are good indicators of the health of the habitat as they rely on clean, cool, flowing waterways for survival. Poor water quality, severe drought, creek obstructions that limit movement or trap native fish, and predation by larger, non-native fish species, are all adverse conditions that can reduce their population size.

The Santa Ana speckled dace was historically found throughout river systems at the bases of the San Gabriel, San Bernardino, and San Jacinto Mountain ranges in Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Riverside Counties, respectively. It is now only found in four small, isolated (but currently stable) populations in the Los Angeles, San Gabriel, San Jacinto, and Santa Ana rivers. Most Santa Ana speckled dace populations are on federal lands, such as U.S. Forest Service land, so their presence in the lower reaches of Haines Canyon Creek and Big Tujunga Wash is unique.

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Biologists using a seine to remove exotic aquatic species from Haines Canyon Creek.

The USFWS has proposed listing the Santa Ana speckled dace as a threatened species due to various threats. These include habitat loss from urban development and flood control projects, degradation caused by roads, recreation, mining, and water diversions, as well as habitat fragmentation.

Additional challenges stem from increased wildfire frequency, climate change effects such as extreme temperatures, droughts, and floods, competition and predation from invasive aquatic species, and small population issues like inbreeding and reduced genetic diversity.

Biologists using dip-nets to remove exotic aquatic species from Haines Canyon

The conditions and circumstances that the Santa Ana speckled dace have encountered are similar to those that led the USFWS to list the Santa Ana sucker as threatened, as both fish species occupy similar stream habitats. Some of these conditions have been observed at Big T. Severe drought conditions have seasonally dried up portions of Haines Canyon Creek reducing stream habitat, and floods can wash away the vegetation that these fish species use for forage and cover while also depositing fine sediment over the courser substrates these fish species prefer. In addition, these species are preyed upon by non-native species including red swamp crayfish and largemouth bass.

To improve the habitat at Big T for native fish species, onsite biologists conduct restoration activities including exotic wildlife removal from the creek and ponds, removal of dams encountered while walking the creek, and exotic plant removal.

Impacts of Illegal Day-Use at Big T

You're all set to visit Big T for a hike or horseback ride, ready to enjoy the partially shaded, well-maintained trails while listening to the flowing creek and birds singing and calling. Upon arrival, you notice a sign posted at the site entrance with a bilingual list of regulations for the use of the site. These regulations are not only in place to ensure that everyone can enjoy Big T; they are also in place because not following them can cause harm to the mitigation area.

Illegal day-use area with trash and personal items.

Unfortunately, not all of Big T's visitors follow the rules, and occasionally, signs of illegal day-use are observed on the site including trash, personal items, evidence of fishing, and habitat modifications that can disrupt Big T's natural state and harm plants and wildlife. Below are regulations that the onsite restoration crew and biologists have frequently seen violated. All site incidents and issues observed are mapped, recorded, and addressed in coordination with Public Works as soon as feasible.

No fishing in park waters (17.04.560 LACC) and **no abandoning or dumping of any animals/pets** (17.02.250 LACC) – Fishing is a relaxing pastime, but it is not allowed anywhere at Big T. In the past, onsite restoration crew members and biologists have encountered fishing lines hanging from trees – occasionally ensnaring wildlife – and people fishing in the Tujunga Ponds. During public outreach efforts conducted by onsite biologists, any site users who are observed fishing are educated about why fishing is prohibited. Most anglers hope to encounter game fish like largemouth bass, sunfish, and bluegill; however, these game fish species are invasive and are regularly removed from the ponds and Haines Canyon Creek as part of ongoing restoration at Big T. As such, the Tujunga Ponds aren't a great place to fish – even if fishing was permitted – as game fish species are regularly removed from Big T's waterways and no stocking of the ponds occurs. Game fish species, and particularly largemouth bass, have a detrimental effect on the survival of local, isolated populations of Santa Ana sucker, Santa Ana speckled dace, and arroyo chub. Largemouth bass are voracious eaters and will consume anything that fits in their mouth.

Example of a rock dam in Haines Canyon Creek.

No swimming, wading, or standing in park waters (17.04.250 LACC) – It is understandable that people would want to cool down in the creek after a long hike at Big T, but entering the creek can negatively affect protected fish species and their habitat. Walking, wading, and swimming in the stream kicks up sediment and aquatic vegetation that then flows downstream until it becomes deposited again. The fine sediment is likely to cover the algae on rocks and gravel upon which the native fishes feed. In addition, the displacement of aquatic

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Abandoned fishing line that had ensnared a barn owl at the Tujunga Ponds.

vegetation reduces areas where young native fish can hide from predators such as largemouth bass and red swamp crayfish. The churning of the creek also releases nutrients that can lead to a lack of oxygen in the water which decreases the capacity of the stream to support aquatic organisms. While Haines Canyon Creek is a perennial stream, it is shallow over most of its course and is not suitable for swimming or wading. To "fix" this, day-users regularly construct rock dams across the creek to impound water and create deeper pooled areas. Damming the creek prevents the native fish from swimming freely throughout their habitat. Native fish species also prefer fast-flowing, cool water and these dams slow down the flow of the creek and allow pooled areas to absorb warmth from the sun. Invasive predator fish species on the other hand, can generally tolerate higher stream temperatures, and prefer slow-flowing waters where they can ambush their prey. Damming the creek increases the chances that the native fish will be preyed upon. Ponded creek water also harbors parasites and bacteria that are detrimental to the health of native fish. Swimming in the creek contributes additional harmful bacteria to the water. This is why dams are always removed by onsite biologists during exotic wildlife removal efforts along Haines Canyon Creek.

No damaging or removing park property (17.04.340 LACC) – This ordinance doesn't just refer to damaging or removing fencing or trash cans. This ordinance also refers to damaging or removing the plants, trees, rocks, and waterways that make up the habitat at Big T. Since 2000, restoration specialists have been removing non-native vegetation as part of habitat restoration efforts to improve native habitat for protected species like the southwestern willow flycatcher and the least Bell's vireo. All non-native vegetation removal is preceded by biological surveys to help ensure that no wildlife or native plants are negatively impacted. Onsite biologists have noted several areas at Big T where native vegetation has been removed to make space for day-use areas, and portions of the creek where all the rocks – that provide critical habitat for native fish species – have been removed and used for "landscaping." Removing native vegetation can negatively impact wildlife including causing the nests of protected bird species to fail and reducing habitat for protected fish species. In addition, some prohibited day-use areas have been planted with non-native and ornamental plant species, which decreases the biological value of the habitat at Big T and has the potential to introduce new pathogens and pests to the site. Restoration crews are present at Big T throughout the year and can be informed of any new day-use areas, damage to native vegetation, creek alterations including dams and rock removal, or other issues of concern.

No littering or dumping (17.04.500 LACC) – Just like when camping in approved campgrounds or hiking in the wilderness, the mind frame of "pack it in, pack it out" to leave no trace behind should be followed. All the trash and debris left behind or purposely dumped, not only decreases the visual value of the site, but also pollutes Big T's waterways and can negatively affect protected fish species and other wildlife. Chemicals such as motor oil, bleach, and soap have been encountered during site cleanups and maintenance efforts that can pollute the creek and ponds and leach into the groundwater. Plastics become brittle with exposure to the sun and quickly deteriorate into microplastics that are virtually impossible to clean up. Organic material in the trash may decompose more quickly than plastics but can cause algal blooms which decrease the available oxygen in the water.

No camping-campfires or fires (17.04.390 & 17.04.590 LACC) - Big T is a mitigation bank, an area purchased by Public Works for habitat restoration in order to compensate for habitat lost on other Public Works projects throughout the County. Individuals that make campfires on site may believe that they are taking all the proper safeguards to keep their campfire contained, but one wayward ember can cause the entire site to go up in flames, especially in the late summer and fall months when vegetation is the driest. Although the 2017 Creek Fire did not originate at Big T and the cause was undetermined, it is an example of the devastation that can result from an out-of-control campfire. The Creek Fire severely damaged the site's native alluvial scrub, cottonwood-willow riparian, and oak-sycamore woodland plant communities. With little vegetation remaining to stabilize the soils, the subsequent winter rainfall caused ash and soil to freely flow into the creek where it suffocated the algae food source for the native fish, further destabilizing the system. If you see an active fire at Big T, including campfires, please call 911 to report it.

Updates

The 16th Annual Trails Cleanup Day

The 16th Annual Trail Cleanup Day is scheduled for December 7, 2024. Please join us in helping cleanup Big T's trails and Haines Canyon Creek! See the attached flyer for more details and hope to see you there!

Trail Maintenance

In October, local equestrians let maintenance crew members know that the beginning of the trail at the north end of the Cottonwood Avenue bluff was eroding and in poor condition creating unsafe conditions for horses. We are happy to announce that Public Works crew members were able to fill and repair the trail damage. We hope this provides a safe start to many more horse rides to come! Please continue to reach out to maintenance crew members or to Public Works at BTWMA@dpw.lacounty.gov, if any other trail issues or concerns arise!

Before

After

Before

After

Reminder to Trim Your Trees

Fall is the time of year to trim your trees and shrubs! Why? Almost all native North American birds are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, a federal law that was established in 1918 to protect the migratory birds that spend winters in other locations and return to their nesting areas in the spring to raise their young. In the greater Los Angeles area, the migratory bird nesting season generally extends from February through mid-September. This means that most birds are done nesting by the fall, and the risk of damaging or destroying a nest during yard maintenance activities is greatly reduced.

As a requirement of Big T's maintenance and monitoring program we conduct year-round removal of non-native, weedy plant species and trim back trees and shrubs when they start to encroach on the trails. Vegetation removal activities occurring during the nesting bird season are conducted only after work areas have been surveyed by an avian biologist. If the biologist finds a nest, a buffer is established to protect the nesting birds, and no work can occur within the buffer until the nestlings have fledged and the birds are no longer using the nest. The biologist will also conduct nest monitoring to make sure nesting birds are not stressed by the work activities being conducted. If signs of stress are observed, the biologist may stop work and increase the protective buffer, limit work activities to only those that don't require loud power tools, or may have the crew move and work in another portion of the Mitigation Area altogether.

Because it's usually impractical for property owners to hire a biologist, avoiding trimming trees and shrubs until the fall is the best way to help protect nesting birds. Trimming your trees in the fall is the best time for your trees as well, as trees and shrubs are dormant in the cooler months. It's a win-win!

Report Fires

Several large fires have already occurred in southern California this fire season and we aren't out of the woods yet! Dry conditions and periods of high winds will likely continue through the fall season causing increased fire risk. Please report any active fires (including campfires) spotted at Big T or in the surrounding communities by calling 911. Please also email BTWMA@dpw.lacounty.gov so it can be investigated. Biologists and county workers frequently visit Big T and keep an eye out for fires, suspicious activity, trail safety hazards, and other dangers in the area but we also rely on the eyes and ears of site visitors. Remember, fires of any kind are not permitted within Big T. Let's all work together to keep ourselves and our neighbors safe!

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Flash Floods

Please be mindful of the weather and check for any forecasted rain before planning a hike or horse ride at Big T this winter season. It's important to check the forecast for upstream areas as well, as flash flooding can occur locally even if it's not raining at the site. If flooding should occur while you're on site, please move to a higher elevation as quickly and safely as possible and do not recreate at the site until weather conditions have improved and any flood waters have receded.

Fire pit and trash observed along Haines Canyon Creek.

Join us for the 16th annual

Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area

TRAIL CLEANUP DAY

December 7, 2024 | 8 a.m.

Water, snacks, and trash bags will be provided.

PLEASE BRING:

- Comfortable shoes
- Closed-toe shoes
- Gloves
- Hat
- Sun block
- Bug repellent

If there is rain or poor weather, the event will be rescheduled.

For more information email:
btwma@dpw.lacounty.gov

ADA and Title VI Accommodations: Individuals requiring reasonable accommodations, interpretation services, and materials in other languages or in an alternate format may contact the Public Works coordinator at (626) 458-7901. Requests must be made one week in advance of the scheduled meeting date. Individuals with hearing or speech impairment may use California Relay Service 711.

Public Works
LOS ANGELES COUNTY

Kid's Corner

Help Clean Up Big T!

Help us clean up Big T to keep it a safe and enjoyable place for everyone! Can you find the items that don't belong at Big T?

M	C	T	C	U	C	R	A	Y	F	I	S	H	A
G	I	R	I	S	S	N	H	S	A	P	S	A	F
I	W	S	O	C	R	G	A	S	C	R	K	A	I
L	M	A	M	C	S	E	R	I	F	P	M	A	C
N	L	I	D	H	K	G	M	B	R	I	A	G	I
G	B	I	C	I	K	D	G	S	G	C	N	M	P
G	E	H	T	F	N	C	A	N	P	I	S	I	S
H	R	L	P	T	S	G	I	M	M	C	C	S	C
S	H	I	G	U	E	P	K	M	S	A	I	S	A
I	P	I	N	G	M	R	I	S	E	M	I	A	M
F	I	W	G	U	M	W	I	F	R	P	E	B	G
N	S	I	D	W	S	I	S	N	C	I	F	M	S
U	A	Y	S	R	Y	N	I	N	G	N	B	L	P
S	K	G	N	I	H	S	I	F	A	G	A	G	R

WORD BANK

FISHING
CRAYFISH
LITTERING
BASS
ROCKDAMS
SUNFISH
CAMPFIRES
WADING
DUMPING
CAMPING
SWIMMING

See crossword solution below.

Report emergencies and major incidents (like fires) by calling 911

- *To report minor incidents or regulation infractions contact Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, Parks Bureau Trails Team at (323) 845-0070.*

(Please DO NOT use 911.)

- *Do not attempt to enforce regulations yourself; please allow law enforcement to handle the situation or incident.*

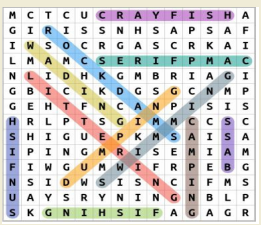
- *For emergency follow up or to report minor incidents, obtain information, or get questions answered (8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Thursday), please contact:*

Los Angeles County Public Works

900 S. Fremont Ave

Alhambra, CA 91803

Email: BTWMA@pw.lacounty.gov



Where is the Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area?

Downstream of Big Tujunga Canyon, in Lake View Terrace and south of the 210 freeway, there is a native riparian (water loving plant) natural area filled with cottonwoods, willows, and pools of water that support many native aquatic species.

Check out the Big T website for more information at:
pw.lacounty.gov/wrd/projects/BTWMA