

Big T Wash Line

September 2015



A Publication of the
County of Los Angeles
Department of Public Works
(LACDPW)



Announcements

• Report Any Emergencies!

If you see something suspicious occurring in the Mitigation Area, call the LA Sheriff's Department dispatch immediately to report it. LACDPW cannot respond to emergencies; however, please notify BTWMA@dpw.lacounty.gov of any incidents reported to law enforcement and we will gladly follow up. LA Sheriff's Department Dispatch: **1 (800) 834-0064**



• **Time to Trim Those Trees!** Late fall is the best time to trim back the trees and shrubs in your yard because the breeding bird season is over! You can safely prune without fear of disturbing birds nesting in your yard. Most birds are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which is a federal law that protects birds, their nests, and their habitat.



Violating the law can lead to fines, or even jail time! So don't forget to trim your trees this fall.

• **Brown-headed what...** Brown-headed cowbirds are a parasitic species of bird that occupy Big T. They are nest parasites, meaning they do not build their own nests to lay their eggs. Instead, they lay eggs in nests of other unsuspecting, native bird species so they don't have to raise their own young. To help our native bird population thrive, we trap and remove

these pesky cowbirds. We have been successfully trapping brown-headed cowbirds at Big T for 13 years! This year we managed to trap over 90 cowbirds.



• **Horse Circles** — Newly created horse circles are becoming a problem at Big T. Please refrain from using or creating horse circles at the site. When they are created, native vegetation can't grow, which takes away from the beauty of Big T! Horse training involving horse circles or any other activity that involves trampling or removing vegetation should be kept to your local equestrian center.

• **Fires at Big T** — Many fires have been reported to LACDPW in 2015. Luckily, only one has occurred in Big T this year. As you know, fire danger is a serious concern. LACDPW is very aware of this safety issue and is working hard to address it. **If you ever see a fire call 911.** Please also email us at BTWMA@dpw.lacounty.gov so it can be investigated. Biologists and other county workers frequently visit Big T to keep an eye out for fires, suspicious activity, graffiti, rock dams, trail safety hazards, and other dangers in the area but we also rely on your eyes and ears at the site. Remember, fires of any kind are not permitted within Big T.

ABOUT THE BIG TUJUNGA WASH MITIGATION AREA

Big T is a parcel of land located in the City of Los Angeles' Sunland area (see Page 4). Big T covers an area of approximately 210 acres of sensitive habitat. The site was purchased by LACDPW in 1998 to compensate for habitat loss for other LACDPW projects.

LACDPW's implementation of the Master Mitigation Plan for the Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area (Big T) has been underway since April 2000.

Big T protects one of the most rapidly diminishing habitat types found in Southern California, willow riparian woodland. Big T is home to several protected species of fish (Santa Ana sucker, Santa Ana speckled dace, arroyo chub) and contains habitat for sensitive bird species (least Bell's vireo, southwestern willow flycatcher).

The purpose of this newsletter is to provide updates on current programs and to explain upcoming enhancement measures that will be implemented on the site. Newsletters are published on a semi-annual basis (spring and fall). 🌀

More information can be found at:

www.dpw.lacounty.gov/wrd/projects/BTWMA

Trail Cleanup Day

A special thank you to everyone for helping to keep Big T trash-free and looking good! As a result of your hard work, the 2015 Trail Cleanup Day has been cancelled. We appreciate everyone's effort and ask that you continue to leave Big T as you found it — or better!



“Look How Far We’ve Come!”

Happy 15-Year Anniversary, Big T! In 2000, the Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area officially began its journey as a mitigation site for LACDPW’s flood maintenance projects. What has happened over the past 15 years? We’re glad you asked!

Imagine, if you will, being back in the year 2000. LACDPW had just purchased Big T and the daunting task of improving the site loomed overhead. Tunnels of giant reed surrounded the trails, hiding homeless encampments from view; large exotic trees prevented native vegetation from sprouting; native bird species were being overrun by brown-headed cowbirds; thousands of exotic fishes filled the ponds and creek; and exotic water hyacinth covered the Tujunga Ponds.

Shortly after purchasing, LACDPW undertook the overwhelming task of cleaning up the site to make it live up to the strict and high standards of becoming a mitigation area! In the beginning, quarterly meetings were held to listen to questions and concerns from Big T’s many neighbors and visitors. Many different types of surveys were also conducted, including mapping the existing vegetation, assessing the trails system, surveying for special status wildlife species including arroyo toad, southwestern willow flycatcher, least Bell’s vireo, and native fishes. Then the enhancements began!



Before giant reed removal



After giant reed removal

A whopping 15 acres of giant reed – that’s enough to fill 15 football fields – were present on the site when LACDPW first purchased Big T. After several large scale removal efforts and years of maintenance, we are proud to report that only small areas of re-growth remain and are visited frequently during exotic plant removal efforts. In fact, the tiny stands are so small that they weren’t even mapped during a vegetation community mapping effort in 2014!

Exotic trees were girdled (a ring was cut around the trunk of each tree and painted with herbicide so that it died) to open up the canopy. This allowed more light and water to reach the ground, allowing native vegetation to grow in the understory. Cottonwood trees were planted in the riparian areas and oaks, sycamores, and native shrubs were planted in the area just west of Gibson Ranch, which was formerly a sand and gravel mine (for more info about Big T’s history before becoming a mitigation area check out the September 2014 newsletter).

In 2000 and 2001, thousands of pounds of water hyacinth were removed from the Tujunga Ponds, mostly by hand. In 2011, another outbreak of an exotic plant was discovered in the ponds, water lettuce. Water lettuce and water hyacinth are both problems because they block oxygen and light from entering the

water, killing fish and plants. A contractor removed enough water lettuce to fill thirty 40-yard dumpsters! The ponds are checked frequently, but no water hyacinth has been seen since 2001 and no water lettuce has been seen since 2013!

Brown-headed cowbird trapping began in 2001 and 70 cowbirds, including 9

juveniles, were removed from Big T that year! Trapping is conducted each year at Big T resulting in a decline in the number of cowbird juveniles (meaning the adults aren’t breeding very successfully). In 2015, over 90 cowbirds were trapped, including 3 juveniles. In 1997, the first year that surveys were conducted at Big T and before the site was purchased by LACDPW, 51 different species of birds were observed at Big T. As of August 2015, 76 species of birds have been observed – and we still have three months to go!

Between 2000 and 2015, a total of 25 different species of exotic invertebrates, fish, amphibians, and reptiles were removed from Big T including bass, tilapia, catfish, bullfrogs, softshell turtles, and snapping turtles. Twelve of those exotic species have not been observed for at least the last 3 years!

To keep up with all of the improvements, each year biologists conduct brown-headed cowbird trapping, exotic plant removal efforts, exotic wildlife removal efforts, trails maintenance and monitoring site visits, water quality monitoring, bilingual public outreach visits, attend a Community Advisory Committee meeting, provide spring and fall newsletters, conduct surveys for special-status wildlife species (which occur every three years), and conduct special assessments when issues occur (such as fires).

Now, look at our beautiful gem! It is an oasis for native plants and wildlife surrounded by a sea of urban development. It provides important stopover habitat for migratory birds traveling to and from their wintering and breeding grounds. It is one of the last places in Southern California where all three of our native fishes coexist (Santa Ana sucker, Santa Ana speckled dace, and arroyo chub). We have documented a total of 124 bird species over the last 17 years of wildlife surveys and the site provides habitat for three federally and state listed birds (least Bell’s Vireo, southwestern willow flycatcher, and western yellow-billed cuckoo), although they haven’t been observed at Big T we are still hoping they will move in!



Before water lettuce removal



After water lettuce removal



What to Expect in an El Niño Year



Be aware of potential heavy rainfall during an El Niño year!

average temperatures over the western and northern United States during the winter season, and has the potential to cause wetter-than-average weather. This phenomenon occurs approximately every 2 to 7 years. Many people assume that an El Niño year means heavy rains, and while some El Niño years have brought higher than average rainfall to California, this is not always the case. El Niños are still not well understood and their effects vary in strength, intensity and location. While many meteorologists (scientists who study the weather) expect a strong El Niño year this coming winter, it is not yet certain that one will occur. Even if an El Niño does occur, that does not necessarily mean that our area will receive higher-than-average rainfall. The opposite could be just as likely.

An El Niño occurs when winds along the equator in the Pacific Ocean weaken, causing surface temperatures of the ocean to warm up slightly. The warmer water can cause warmer-than-

During the 2009/2010 winter, we received a moderately strong El Niño, which brought some heavy rainfall. The heavy rainfall, coupled with lack of vegetation caused by the Station Fire earlier in 2009, resulted in sediment deposits building up within the washes. Watersheds typically take around five years to recover from fires like the Station Fire. Since the fire occurred approximately six years ago, it is likely that rains caused by a strong El Niño this winter will not affect the watershed any more than a typical rain year, and the LACDPW doesn't expect rainfall to cause any damage other than typical nuisance flows. If the site receives unusually high rainfall this winter season, Big T is expected to easily withstand it. The washes may fill as water is channeled through the site and some minor erosion may occur, but no major concerns or damages are expected.

Just as a reminder, recreational trails within Big T are closed to the public during national weather forecasts of rain or high water flows. You may find barricades and signs placed at trail entrances indicating that they are temporarily closed during and after storms. Please respect these closures as they are for your safety. Muddy trails can be unsafe to use and flowing water may be stronger than it looks. For more information about El Niños and what causes them, check out these websites:

http://www.pmel.noaa.gov/tao/el_nino/nino-home.html

http://meteora.ucsd.edu/~pierce/el_nino/whatis.html



Animal Corner: Western Pond Turtle



Southwestern pond turtle. Photo: Ben Smith

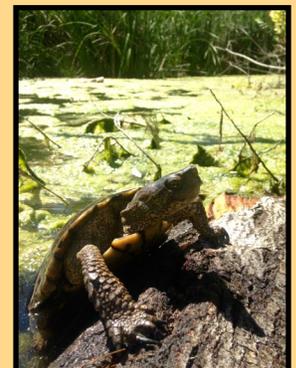
Western pond turtles are freshwater turtles native to California. You may have seen one poking its head up from the ponds, or basking on a log at Big T. They are olive green or dark brown with brown to black markings on their shells. Unlike the non-native red-eared sliders that are also found at Big T, western pond turtles do not have any distinct ear patches of red, orange, or yellow. Western pond turtles prefer calm waters such as the streams and the ponds found at Big T. These turtles may be found in the vegetation adjacent to their water sources when they are nesting. They will lay their eggs by digging a hole and burying them underground, sometimes as much as 1,300 feet away from their water source. Western pond turtles can be timid and secretive, usually diving underwater or hiding behind plants when approached. They are omnivorous, meaning their diet is made up of many types of food. Although they prefer fishes and aquatic invertebrates, they will also eat plants.

with brown to black

The western pond turtle is considered a Species of Special Concern by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and as sensitive by both the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service. In April of 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that the western pond turtle may warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act, and now a one-year status review of the turtle is underway.

In 2014, it was determined that the western pond turtle is two different species, the northwestern pond turtle (*Actinemys marmorata*) and the southwestern pond turtle (*A. pallida*). The northwestern pond turtle occurs from British Columbia to Central California. The southwestern pond turtle tends to be more coastal and occurs from northern Mexico to the San Francisco Peninsula.

The species you may see at Big T is the southwestern pond turtle. It is important to leave these turtles in their natural habitat. You may see a turtle wandering on dry land but do not pick it up. It could be foraging for food or laying eggs. Returning turtles to the water could potentially disrupt their natural behaviors. Consider yourself lucky if you happen to spot one of these cool turtles at Big T, but make sure not to disturb it or pick it up!



Southwestern pond turtle. Photo: Max Murray

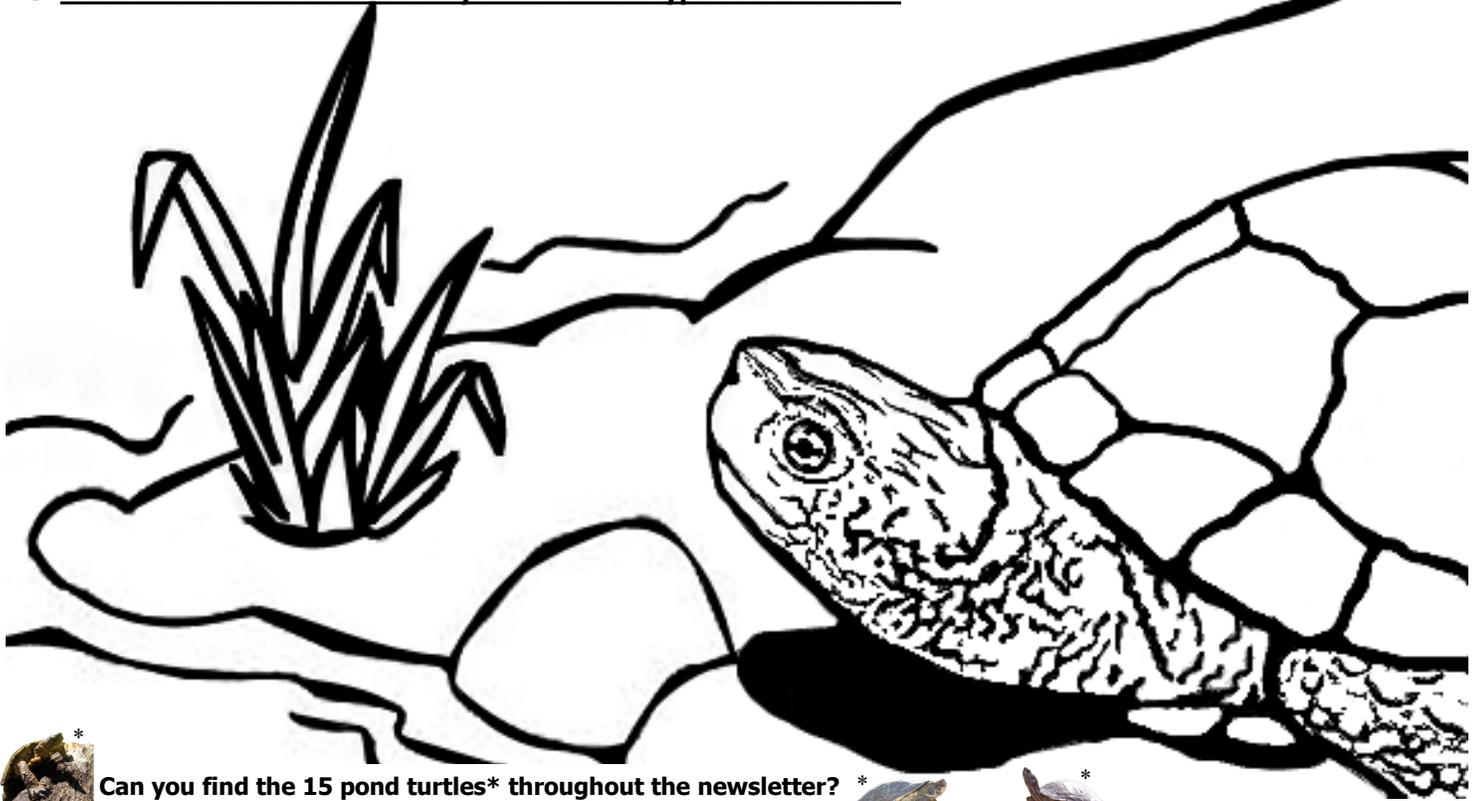


Southwestern Pond Turtle

Red-eared Slider



Color in the turtle below. Can you tell which type of turtle it is?

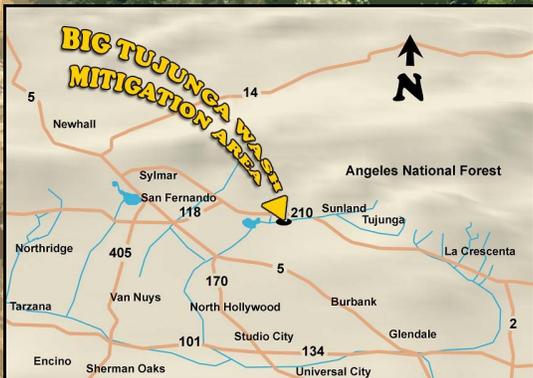


Can you find the 15 pond turtles* throughout the newsletter? *



Where is Big T?

Downstream of Big Tujunga Canyon, right in the heart of Sun Valley, south of the 210 freeway, you'll find 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: www.dpw.lacounty.gov/wrd/projects/BTWMA.



Emergencies? Incidents? Questions?

- **CALL 911 TO REPORT ANY EMERGENCY SUCH AS FIRE OR ACCIDENT**
- To report minor incidents or regulation infractions contact the Sheriff's Department at 1-800-834-0064. (Please **DO NOT** call 911.)
- Do not attempt to enforce regulations yourself; please allow law enforcement to handle the situation/incident.
- To follow up on emergencies, report minor incidents, obtain information, or have questions answered during weekday work hours (8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday), please contact:

Melanie Morita, Water Resources Division
County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works
900 S. Fremont Avenue
Alhambra, CA 91803
Email: BTWMA@dpw.lacounty.gov
Phone: (626) 456-6196

