



# Sensitive Species of the Santa Ana Watershed

## Yellow Warbler (*Dendrocia petechia*)



The Yellow Warbler is easily recognized, as it is the most extensively yellow of all North American wood-warblers. It is a medium sized warbler ranging in size from 10-13 cm, has a wingspan of 16-20 cm, and weighs between 9-11 g. The males face, throat and under parts are bright yellow, whereas the upper parts are a yellow-green to olive. Rusty or chestnut streaks cover the breast. The female is similarly colored but duller, and has reduced or absent streaking on the breast. Both have indistinct yellow wing bars, an indistinct eyering, and a thin pointed bill. Another distinguishing characteristic is the yellow spots on its tail (Tail spots are usually white in other North American warbler species).

Yellow Warblers are neotropical migrants. They breed throughout Alaska, Canada and the United States, and winter in Mexico and South America. Once considered a common, or locally abundant summer resident throughout

California, the Yellow Warbler has since declined due to riparian habitat destruction, fragmentation, and parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird.

### **Habitat**

The Yellow Warbler prefers moist habitats with high insect abundance. These sites include wetlands and mature riparian woodlands that are dominated by cottonwoods, alders, willow, and ash trees. Yellow Warblers also inhabit dryer areas such as thickets, orchards, farmlands, forest edges, and suburban yards and gardens.

### **Status and Distribution**

The Yellow Warbler was listed as a Species of Special Concern by the California Department of Fish and Game in 1978. It is also listed as San Bernardino National Forest Sensitive, and is considered a Priority Bird Species by Partners in Flight. Historically, populations were found in the Colorado River, Sacramento, and San Joaquin valleys, but the species is currently extirpated in those areas. Other areas where numbers are reduced and declining are in San Francisco and Siskiyou Counties, as well as in areas of the Sierra Nevada such as Yosemite. Healthy populations still exist in Santa Cruz, Napa, Mendocino and Lake counties, and along streams above 8,000 ft. in the eastern Sierra Nevada, and in the Sierra Nevada in Tulare County.

Significant breeding populations in Southern California remain in Santa Barbara and San Diego counties, as well as Potrero Creek, the Santa Margarita River, Tocalota Creek, Lake Perris, Lake

Mathews Reserve, Motte Rimrock Reserve, Whitewater Canyon, Mission Creek, Andreas Canyon, the Whitewater River (near the Salton Sea), and at Cottonwood Spring in Joshua Tree National Park.

Within the Santa Ana Watershed, breeding populations remain in Prado Basin, along the Santa Ana River, San Timoteo Creek, Aberhill Creek, the San Jacinto River, and along the western encampment of the San Jacinto Mountains.

## **Threats**

A major threat to the Yellow Warbler is its high susceptibility to parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird (BHCO). One BHCO female can lay an egg in up to thirty different nests in a breeding season. A small bird may respond to parasitism in three ways: abandon the nest, cover the egg with new nest lining, or incubate the BHCO egg along with her own. All result in the partial or complete loss of the hosts' clutch. Nest abandonment and covering the eggs causes an entire clutch to be lost. If the eggs are incubated, the hatching of the BHCO can greatly decrease the survival rate of the host chicks.

Other threats include destruction and degradation of riparian woodland habitat due to flood control, grazing, agriculture, and golf course construction. Agricultural fields and golf courses in turn attract the BHCO, which exacerbates the parasitism problem.

## **Research and Management Needs**

Willow-cottonwood riparian woodland along the Colorado River should be restored and preserved. Habitats throughout California need to be protected and preserved, and invasive plant species such as the exotic giant reed (*Arundo donax*) need to be removed so that riparian vegetation can re-establish along the creeks and rivers. Cowbird trapping should be done throughout the riparian area of the watershed during the songbird's breeding season.

## **SAWA Contact**

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## **References**

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## **Photo Credit**

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