

# Big T Wash Line

Spring 2024

A publication of Los Angeles County Public Works

## In this issue



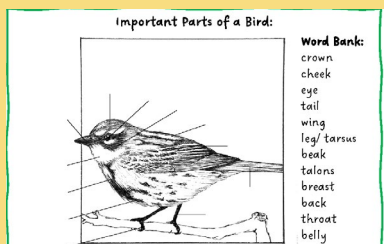
Riparian Songbirds  
• 2 •



Move Over El Niño  
• 4 •



Updates  
• 5 •



Kid's Corner  
• 6 •



## About the Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area

**“Big T” is a conservation area located in the City of Los Angeles Sunland area (see Page 6).**

The Big Tujunga Wash Mitigation Area (Big T) covers an area of approximately 210 acres of sensitive habitat, encompassing the Big Tujunga Wash and Haines Canyon Creek. The site was purchased by Los Angeles County Public Works in 1998 as compensation for habitat loss for other Public Works projects.

Public Works' implementation of the Master Mitigation Plan for 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.

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.

The purpose of this newsletter is to provide updates to ongoing programs and to explain upcoming enhancement measures that will be implemented on the site. 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](http://pw.lacounty.gov/wrd/projects/BTWMA)



## Riparian Songbirds at Big T

Dozens of songbird species live near or visit Big T's waterways. We have gathered some tips to help you identify three of these species: the common yellowthroat, willow flycatcher, and least Bell's vireo by sight, sound, and behavior. Birds are often difficult to identify based on sight alone, whether because they are too far away, hiding in the foliage, move too fast, or just look too similar to other bird species. Every species has a unique voice, and paying attention to the tone, volume, speed, and cadence with which they vocalize can make your birding experience infinitely more successful.

### COMMON YELLOWTHROAT

The common yellowthroat is a small songbird with a round body and long, prominent tail feathers. Adults of this species display bright yellow throats, which are usually easy to spot in the foliage. The brightness of their plumage varies geographically, and around Big T, they are quite noticeable.

This species exhibits sexual dimorphism (i.e., males and females look different). Adult males have a distinct black mask that stretches almost to their shoulders, which is bordered by a white crown (see right). Immature males have faint, irregular masks — picture a teenager growing their first patchy beard. It takes time for all of us to develop those adult characteristics! Adult females have bright yellow throats, light to medium brown heads, and no masks (see below). Immature females are light brown all over, except for a hint of yellow underneath their tails.

Males have a high, unique song that is often described with the mnemonic "*witchety - witchety - witchety.*" They sing frequently, averaging as high as 125 songs per hour in the summer, so it is easy to tell when they are in the area. Males and females have a variety of other calls and sounds, but the males' song is the most distinct and the most common. Their breeding season runs from early April to mid-July, with peak activity in May and June, so these are the best months to listen for their calls.



Male common yellowthroat



Female common yellowthroat

Even behaviors between the sexes vary. Adult males can usually be found in more open areas, like grasslands or marshes, while females prefer to spend their time flitting between covered areas close to the ground, which can make them harder to spot. At Big T, they are usually found near the cattail marshes surrounding the Tujunga Ponds or in the more densely vegetated areas beneath the bluffs and along Haines Canyon Creek.

*Continue on next page...*



Willow flycatcher

### WILLOW FLYCATCHER

The willow flycatcher is a petite, slender songbird with olive-brown coloring that lightens to a faint yellow on the stomach and a brighter white on the throat. The two white wing bars stand out from the darker wing feathers and can be a helpful distinguishing feature in the field. Individuals may have a white eye ring, but it is usually difficult to see. Like many of the species in the family Tyrannidae, their head feathers often sit at an angle, which can give them the appearance of a variety of hairstyles.

Given how indistinct their appearance is, the best way to identify willow flycatchers is by listening. Their call is a soft “*whit*” and their song is a breathy, sudden “*fitz-bew*” (like a very light sneeze). Each song lasts for less than a second, but they repeat it many times. Both males and females sing, although males sing louder and more frequently. They can often be found singing from exposed perches, especially in willows, and like other flycatchers, they perch with excellent posture while singing.

In the southwest, if this species is observed nesting, it is the subspecies of willow flycatchers called southwestern willow flycatcher and is considered a state and federally endangered species.

When they are not singing, you can find them darting between the understory foliage or catching insects with their sharp beaks. They prefer to nest in thicker, more protected vegetation and often near sources of permanent water, like the dense willow thickets that can be found along Haines Canyon Creek and in the Tujunga Wash. We mostly see them at Big T migrating through the area during their breeding season — usually May to August, but some linger through September — after which they migrate south towards Central and South America for the colder months.

### LEAST BELL'S VIREO

The least Bell's vireo is a subspecies of Bell's vireo that is critically endangered in southern California due to habitat loss and human interference. Least Bell's vireos were first observed nesting at Big T in 2020 and have been observed and/or have nested at Big T every year since. This is a great sign that restoration efforts and brown-headed cowbird trapping are making a difference for the least Bell's vireo and other native wildlife, and we want to make sure they continue thriving! Biologists survey for nesting birds, including least Bell's vireo, during the spring and summer months and if a nest is found an avoidance buffer is placed around the nesting area so restoration efforts do not interfere with their hard work.



A least Bell's vireo tending to its nest

This subspecies is the most muted in color of all the Bell's vireo subspecies. They have only faint hints of green or yellow and mostly appear dull gray-brown when observed from a distance. There is a slight gradient from medium gray on their backs to off-white on their bellies. They can be distinguished from similar-looking vireos by the pale white arcs around their eyes that are broken by dark lines extending from each eye corner.

The most common song they sing is a fast-paced “*Cheedle-cheedle-chee? Cheedle-cheedle-chew!*” The intonation is the easiest way to remember this song; the rising tone of the first part sounds like a question and the steady tone of the second sounds like the answer. They also have a variety of calls that range from rapid and harsh, like a wren, to short and abrupt, like a California towhee. A great place to compare the calls (and other characteristics) of these species is on Cornell Lab's All About Birds online guide (<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/>).

Least Bell's vireos tend to prefer hiding in trees and bushes to soaring or perching in the open. At Big T, they spend most of their time in low, dense vegetation along waterways like Haines Canyon Creek. They can be difficult to find because they are shy, but males can get a bit more boisterous, especially in breeding season. The easiest way to spot a least Bell's vireo is to listen for their distinctive song and use binoculars to search through the tops of shrubs for a petite, hyperactive male. Look for tail-flicking; they have a lot of energy and like to twitch their tails around as they move through the vegetation. Be careful if you hear the male's call; there is likely a female nearby, quietly guarding the nest, and we do not want to disturb her as this bird is protected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Their breeding season is from mid-March to September, so you have ample time to hone your least Bell's vireo spotting skills.

### NOW IT'S YOUR TURN!

Now that you have some great identifying tips, grab some binoculars, keep your eyes and ears open, and go test your knowledge!

# Move over El Niño

La Niña is ready to reclaim her rein of the tropical Pacific. As of February 2024, the Pacific Ocean surface temperature was still above the El Niño threshold (0.5 degrees Celsius (°C) or 0.9 degrees Fahrenheit (°F)) but has been steadily declining since peaking at 1.6 °C (2.9 °F) above the threshold in November 2023. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Climate Prediction Center anticipates the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) to neutralize between April and June, and as of March, has calculated a 62 percent chance that we will slip into La Niña territory sometime between June and August. Although spring forecasts can be less reliable than other times of the year, historically La Niña tends to follow strong El Niño events.



Flooded trail crossing on February 5, 2024 after winter storm event



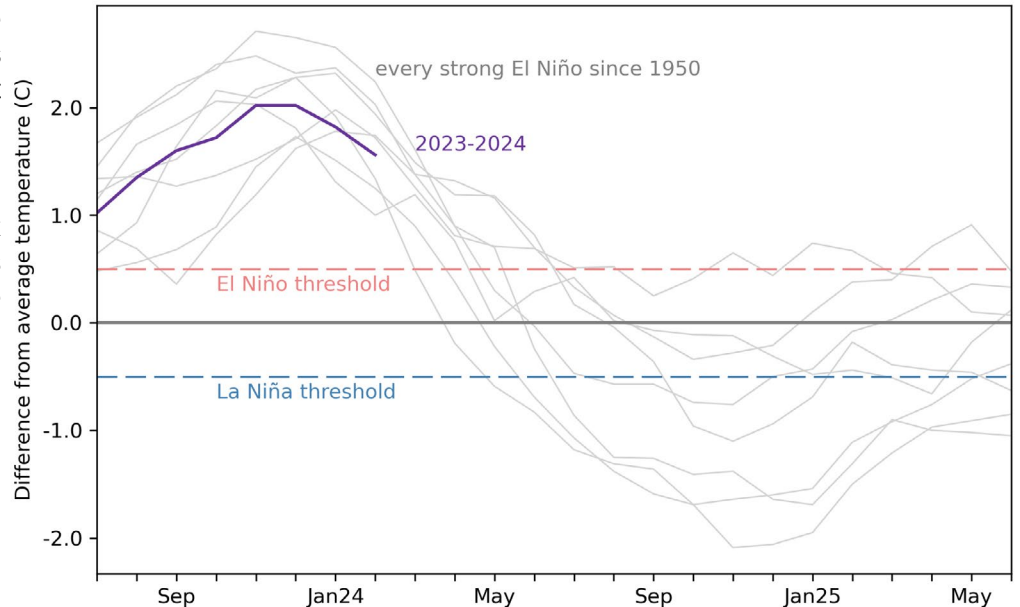
Non-native mustard species (taller with larger yellow flowers) growing amongst dense native annual species (shorter with smaller yellow flowers)

The current El Niño phase has brought substantial precipitation to Southern California over the last few months with approximately 16 inches of rainfall occurring in the Sunland-Tujunga area between September 2023 and March 2024. February was the wettest month in the Sunland-Tujunga area this El Niño season with nearly 10 inches of rain falling locally! This caused flooding throughout Big T and the excess water on the site, while beneficial for native plants and wildlife, is also fueling the growth of non-native plant species. Maintenance crews are working hard to remove non-native plants before they fully develop and set seed and to address any trail issues caused by the winter storms. If you encounter any trail issues or other site damage this spring, please let a maintenance crew member know or reach out to [BTWMA@dpw.lacounty.gov](mailto:BTWMA@dpw.lacounty.gov).

**(Right)** Two-year history of sea surface temperatures in the Niño-3.4 region of the tropical Pacific for all strong El Niño events since 1950 (gray lines) and the current event (purple line).

NOAA Climate.gov image based on a graph by Emily Becker and monthly Niño-3.4 index data from the Climate Prediction Center's Extended Reconstructed Sea Surface Temperature dataset.

Monthly sea surface temperature Niño3.4 Index values



# Updates

**Brown-Headed Cowbird Trapping** is currently being conducted on site. Trapping began on April 1 and will continue through June 30. Brown-headed cowbirds are nest parasites that lay their eggs in the nests of songbird species. Cowbird trapping is conducted every year during the peak breeding season to help protect the nests of native songbirds including special status species such as the federal- and state-endangered least Bell's vireo. Avian biologists will be onsite daily to service the traps, provide food and fresh water, and release any non-target bird species. If you encounter one of the traps, please refrain from approaching or disturbing it as this can cause stress to the birds and can deter cowbirds from entering the trap.



The Community Advisory Committee Meeting, hosted by Public Works and Chambers Group, was held on Thursday May 30, 2024. The meeting included a review of last year's maintenance programs, and the status of this year's maintenance programs. The meeting concluded with a Q&A session where meeting participants were able to ask questions and have them answered by Public Works staff and/or Chambers Group biologists. For those who were unable to attend or would like information on the topics shared, the meeting minutes are available on [Big T's webpage](#). The Community Advisory Committee Meeting occurs annually each spring (typically in May), and we hope you can join us in 2025! If you would like to receive information on future meetings and other Big T site user notifications, please fill out the form here and email it to [BTWMA@dpw.lacounty.gov](mailto:BTWMA@dpw.lacounty.gov).

**The 15th Annual Cleanup Day occurred on December 2, 2023**, and was a great success! Several volunteers from Public Works, Chambers Group, and members of the public came together to clean up the trails and Haines Canyon Creek. Volunteers collected between 50 and 60 large bags of trash and debris items and many large, bulky items including a 60-gallon drum, gas, oil, and paint containers, tires, bed mattresses, and 12 shopping carts! If you would like to participate in our next cleanup effort, please sign up to receive site user notifications (see link above) or visit Big T's webpage for updates.



# Kid'S Corner

**Instructions:** Label the important parts of a bird using the words from the word bank. Then head to your backyard or a local park or trail to see what birds you can find! Fill in "The Basics" section and take notes about your bird discoveries under "My Observations". Congratulations! You are now an official birdwatcher!

### The Basics

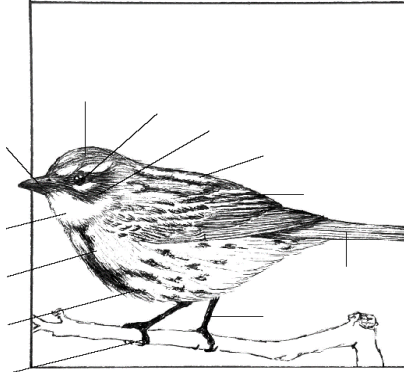
Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Season: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Temperature: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Wind: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_ Cloud cover: \_\_\_\_\_

### Important Parts of a Bird



**Word Bank:**

- |       |      |        |             |
|-------|------|--------|-------------|
| crown | tail | beak   | throat      |
| cheek | wing | breast | belly       |
| eye   | back | talons | leg/ tarsus |

### My Birdwatching Journal

Species Name	Where Did I See it?	What Did it Look Like? What Was it Doing?
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		

## 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](mailto: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](http://pw.lacounty.gov/wrd/projects/BTWMA)

