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Chapter 1:

Introduction of the Conservation Assessment Concept

The goal of this document is to describe the current status, ecology, habitat, and threats of the southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*); to offer guidance for managing and protecting this Neotropical migrant and its habitats; and to identify gaps in our knowledge of the bird and its requirements. Goals, processes, and target species for U.S. Forest Service (USFS) conservation assessments of southwestern organisms were first outlined at a meeting held by the USFS Southwestern Region on May 11-12, 1994. At that time, the Forest Service had identified the southwestern willow flycatcher in a general category called “riparian birds” whose conservation assessments would be drafted in 1999. Yet, by July 23, 1993, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had proposed to list *E. t. extimus* based on findings of a petition submitted in 1992 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1993). When the southwestern willow flycatcher was federally listed as endangered in March 1995 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1995), the need for developing management guidance became a higher priority, and the date for completing the assessment was accelerated. In 1997, the USFS Southwestern Region asked the Rocky Mountain Research Station’s Albuquerque office to prepare an assessment of the flycatcher that would provide guidance for conserving its populations on national forests.

Prior to and since its listing, federal, state, and municipal agencies have been working together and

with private landowners and conservation organizations to survey riparian habitats in California, Arizona, New Mexico, western Texas, southern Utah, southern Nevada, and southern Colorado with the hope of finding and protecting additional flycatchers and their habitats. Because populations of the flycatcher reside on lands under mixed ownerships, I concluded that the most effective conservation strategy for this subspecies of the willow flycatcher (WIFL) would have to be developed by multiple stakeholders. With this in mind, I assembled a team comprised of representatives of several southwestern state and federal agencies, including U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Geological Survey, Bureau of Reclamation, Arizona Game and Fish, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, and California Department of Fish and Game to prepare the conservation assessment. To ensure sufficient technical expertise, additional representatives of two nongovernmental organizations, Kern River Research Center and The Nature Conservancy, were also invited to participate in the development of specific technical review chapters. Biographical sketches and institutional affiliations of authors who contributed chapters to the assessment are given in the Appendix.

Our first meeting of the conservation assessment team was held in Albuquerque on May 6, 1997. At that time, we outlined the chapter topics, content, authors, and schedule needed for completing the conservation assessment. We agreed that most chapters of the

assessment would be prepared by one or more experts on the chapter topic, but that the Management Recommendations and Research Needs chapters would be developed through a group consensus process. The team met on multiple occasions through the remainder of 1997 and part of 1998 to discuss management recommendations and research needs, and to review progress. On March 2, 1998, the team met to evaluate the final product and to initiate the review process. External reviews of the conservation assessment were solicited from a wide variety of stakeholders, and their input was considered in the final document. In addition, arrangements were made with The Ornithological Council to conduct a formal "blind review" of the document. The Council requested reviews of the entire document from three referees and received two thorough but favorable reviews in return which were forwarded to the Editors, Scott Stoleson and myself. We distributed the Council reviews to senior authors of each chapter with requests for revisions, and authors revised their individual papers accordingly. This document is therefore defined as peer-reviewed and should be cited as such.

In the context of WIFL habitat requirements and consistent with the goals of Forest Service Conservation Assessments, our report emphasizes the Chief's national priorities for protecting watersheds and riparian ecosystems, and restoring rangeland and forest health. This document is also consistent with the "Company's Coming" program that the USFS Southwestern Region implemented in 1997. One of three major components of Company's Coming focuses on sustainability of riparian ecosystems; a second component stresses forest and rangeland health. This report also emphasizes interagency collaboration in conserving flycatchers and their habitats, a strategy that dovetails well with the new Southwestern Interagency Initiative referred to as the Southwest Strategy (<http://www.swstrategy.org>) called for by the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior in 1997. This initiative stresses the need for southwestern agencies and associated partners to work cooperatively together to develop strategies for managing natural resources. The Scientific Information Working Group has highlighted the southwestern willow flycatcher as a flagship species for initiating interagency research and conservation under the auspices of the Southwest Strategy.

In 1998, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) initiated the process for developing a comprehensive recovery plan that involves input by numerous technical experts and other stakeholders (<http://ifw2es.fws.gov/swwf>). The conservation assessment presented herein was prepared as an interim document to help guide WIFL habitat management on southwestern national forests and other lands prior to the release of the recovery plan. Several members of

the original Conservation Assessment Team (i.e., Deborah Finch, Rob Marshall, Susam Sferra, Mark Sogge, Sartor Williams III, and Mary Whitfield) were selected by FWS to be on the Recovery Team. Members of the Conservation Team circulated chapters of the Assessment to the Technical Subgroup of the Recovery Team. Information compiled and synthesized in this Assessment report served as a stepping stone and useful reference for drafting the technical portion of the recovery plan. Individual chapters of the Assessment report are cited liberally throughout the recovery plan. The management chapter provided in our Assessment report is viewed as interim guidance and should be promptly replaced by the Recovery Team's stepdown outline once the Recovery Plan is formally released.

For Internet information about the southwestern WIFL, the U.S. Geological Survey's Colorado Plateau Field Station hosts an excellent web site at <http://www.usgs.nau.edu/swwf>. For Internet information about the USFS Rocky Mountain Research Station's program of research on the flycatcher, refer to the Albuquerque Forestry Sciences Laboratory's web page: <http://www.fs.fed.us/rm/albuq>. For status and updates of the recovery plan, check the FWS Southwest Region's web site: <http://ifw2es.fws.gov/swwf>.

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Literature Cited

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