

**SILVERY MINNOW EGG AND LARVAL FISH
MONITORING IN CONSTRUCTED
EMBAYMENTS: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS REPORT**

FINAL REPORT

Prepared for

NEW MEXICO INTERSTATE STREAM COMMISSION

Prepared by

SWCA ENVIRONMENTAL CONSULTANTS

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INTRODUCTION

As part of the effort to monitor use of constructed embayments by the Rio Grande silvery minnow (*Hybognathus amarus*; silvery minnow), New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission (NMISC) contracted with SWCA Environmental Consultants to conduct this NMISC Middle Rio Grande Riverine Habitat Restoration Project (Project) nursery habitat monitoring program. The primary objectives of this study were to determine if embayments constructed as part of the Project attract spawning Rio Grande silvery minnows (*Hybognathus amarus*; silvery minnow), particularly gravid females and/or larvae, as well as determine if these areas retain eggs. A secondary objective was to determine if silvery minnows actively seek areas of emergent or inundated terrestrial vegetation. Because of low spring flows in 2006, such areas did not exist within the study area, so this type of habitat was simulated using dried terrestrial vegetation (hay) in shallow, low-velocity areas within constructed embayments.

The NMISC Project applied several habitat restoration techniques in the Albuquerque Reach of the Middle Rio Grande (MRG) to create or improve habitat for the silvery minnow. The Project constructed egg-retention, larval-rearing, and over-wintering habitat for silvery minnow within three subreaches of the Albuquerque Reach. The Project was designed to facilitate evaluation of selected restoration techniques and was primarily funded by the State of New Mexico, with partial funding by the Middle Rio Grande Endangered Species Act Collaborative Program. The State of New Mexico funded the embayment monitoring effort.

The long-term goal of the Project is to promote egg retention, larval rearing, young-of-year, and over-wintering habitat for silvery minnow in support of Element S of the of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's (USFWS's) Reasonable and Prudent Action in the March 2003 Biological Opinion (BO) (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [USFWS 2003]). The objective of the restoration process is to increase measurable habitat complexity in support of various life stages of silvery minnow by facilitating lateral migration of the river across islands, bars, and riverbanks at a variety of river flows.

The BO was released by the USFWS in 2003, covering the Bureau of Reclamation's (Reclamation's) water and river maintenance operations, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer's flood control operations, and related non-federal actions on the MRG (USFWS 2003). The BO requires habitat restoration projects on the MRG that would improve survival of all life stages of the endangered silvery minnow and other endangered species. The 2003 MRG BO identified the need for increased availability of low-velocity habitat and silt and sand substrates to provide food, shelter, and sites for reproduction for silvery minnow and thereby alleviate jeopardy to the continued existence of the species in the MRG.

Crews worked to enhance an island near Alameda Bridge (river mile [RM] 192.2) to create areas of low-velocity habitat. The upstream half of the island was modified to create terraces of different elevations that could be inundated to help support various life stages of the silvery minnow. The three created terraces can be inundated at approximately 1,500, 2,500, and 3,500 cubic feet per second (cfs) discharge. Spoil from the terraces was used to create an embayment on the east side of the island that is inundated at low flows of less than 500 cfs.

A similar modification was performed on an island downstream of the South Diversion Channel (RM 176.5). Three terraces were also created on the upstream half of the island so that inundation can occur to help support various life stages of silvery minnow. The created terraces will be inundated at approximately 1,500, 2,500, and 3,500 cfs. The embayment created can be inundated at low flows, including less than 500 cfs. Excess vegetation gathered during grubbing was used to support the fill area around the embayment. Much of this vegetation was invasive Russian olive (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*) or immature salt cedar (*Tamarix* spp.). Scattered coyote willows (*Salix exigua*) or immature cottonwoods (*Populus deltoides*) were left throughout the modified area.

BACKGROUND

The silvery minnow is a moderate-sized, stout minnow, reaching 3.5 inches in total length, that spawns in the late spring and early summer, coinciding with high spring snowmelt flows (Sublette et al. 1990). Spawning also may be triggered by other high-flow events such as spring and summer thunderstorms. The species is a pelagic spawner, producing neutrally buoyant eggs that drift downstream with the current (Platania 1995). The eggs hatch in 2 to 3 days, and the larvae may continue to drift or become retained in backwaters or embayments. The species normally lives about 2 to 3 years in the wild. Natural flow regimes, movement within the limited remaining range, and habitat diversity are important to completion of the life cycle.

In 1994, the silvery minnow was classified as endangered by the USFWS (Federal Register [FR] 1994) and has been considered endangered at the state level since 1979. Historically, the silvery minnow was one of the most widespread and abundant fishes in New Mexico. The species has declined as a result of impacts from dewatering, channelization and flow regulation for irrigation, diminished water quality, and competition/predation by non-native species. The species is endemic to New Mexico, where it historically occupied large rivers with shifting sand substrates. The silvery minnow currently occupies less than 10 percent of its historic range and is found only in the Rio Grande from Cochiti Reservoir downstream to Elephant Butte Reservoir (Propst 1999) (Figure 1).

Silvery minnows prefer low-velocity (less than 0.1 m/s) and shallow water (<0.4 m) in areas over sand and silt substrates (Dudley and Platania 1997). Nursery habitat for larval fish would ideally consist of slow-velocity slackwaters found in inlets, floodplain depressions, and inundated arroyos (Porter and Massong 2004a). Early life stages (egg and larvae) are especially dependent on these low-velocity habitats (Porter and Massong 2004a, b). Previous studies using gellan beads to simulate silvery minnow eggs have shown that low-velocity inlets and shelves have retained higher numbers of beads than bankline or other high-velocity areas (Fluder et al. 2006). The presence of emergent vegetation in these shallow-water, low-velocity habitats also serves to retain beads, eggs, and larval fish (Fluder et al. 2006). In addition to this, emergent vegetation often slows flows and provides food for larvae and adults and cover from predators (Massong et al. 2004).

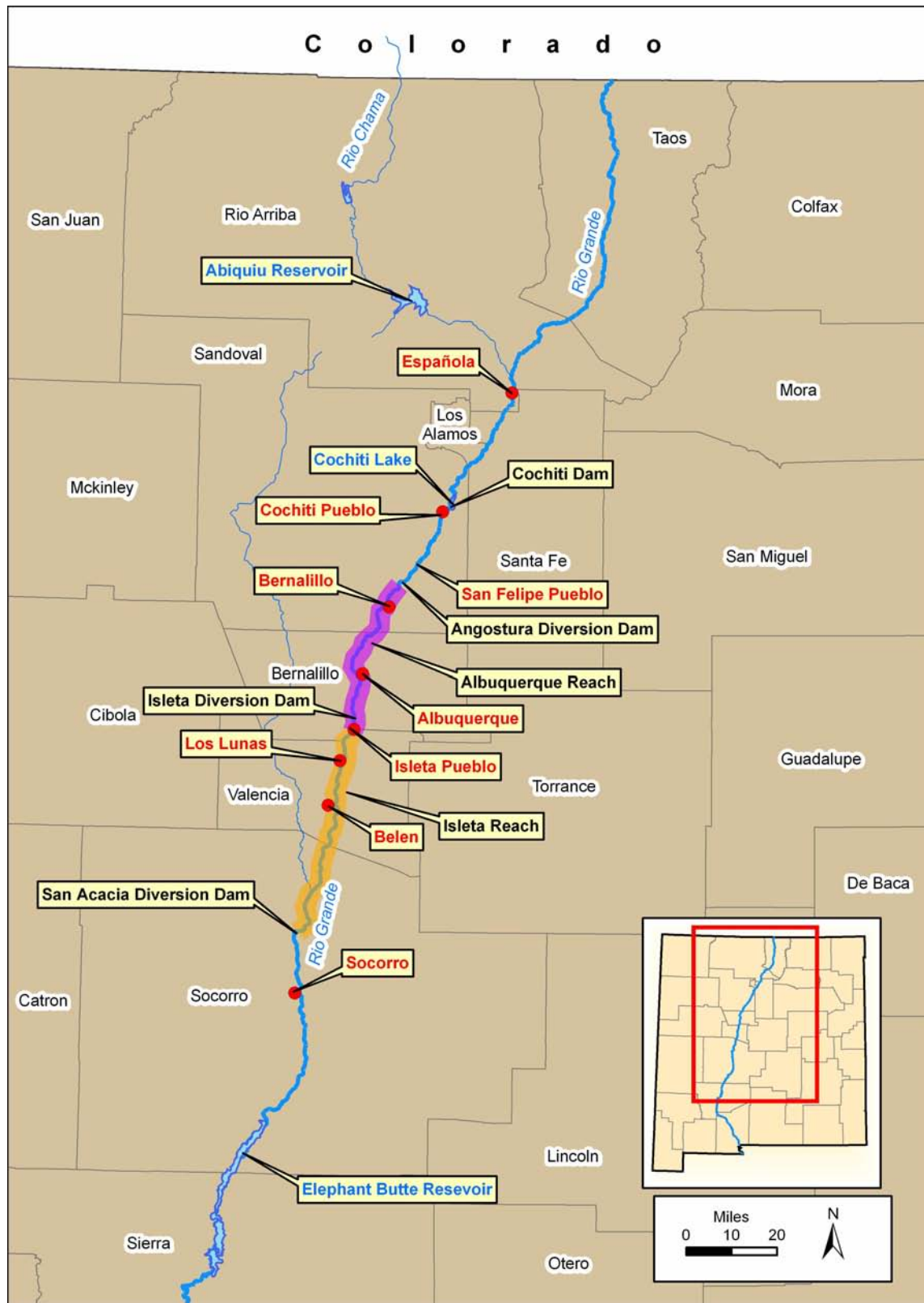


Figure 1. Overview of Middle Rio Grande. The Albuquerque Reach is highlighted in purple, the Isleta Reach in yellow.

Previous restoration efforts in the Middle Rio Grande sought to restore and create such habitats. Constructed inlets and embayments retain silvery minnow eggs and larvae as well as attract free-swimming fish (Massong et al. 2004). A drift zone (inundated area with negligible flow occurring in the back of the inlet) is especially important for egg retention (Massong et al. 2004). It can be assumed that the silvery minnow is using inundated, slow-velocity island and bar habitat similar to the way in which it would use historic floodplain habitat: as a means for the retention of eggs and during early life stages (Fluder et al. 2006). Silvery minnows do not typically occupy stream reaches dominated by straight, narrow, or incised channels with rapid flows (Sublette et al. 1990; Bestgen and Platania 1991). Critical habitat for the silvery minnow was designated by the USFWS and includes the Albuquerque Reach of the Rio Grande. This designation became effective February 19, 2003 (FR 2003).

Emergent or inundated terrestrial vegetation is one possible component of ideal habitat for silvery minnows. First, it is necessary to determine the mechanism by which minnows could seek out emergent vegetation. Although well studied, there are many components of the olfactory system in fish that are not completely understood. It is known that *Brycon cephalus* (a South American ray-finned fish) exhibit alarm reactions when exposed to a conspecific skin extract (Ide et al. 2003). Fathead minnows (Cyprinidae: *Pimephales promelas*) respond to skin extracts of both breeding and nonbreeding females, but only to skin extracts of nonbreeding males (Pollock et al. 2005). Other studies have demonstrated changes in the relative size and morphology of olfactory organs in zebra fish (Cyprinidae: *Danio rerio*) as they mature from larvae to adults (Poling and Brunjes 2000), suggesting that scent cues may play a more important role during periods of rapid development than in adult life. However, there is little research suggesting that Cyprinidae or related fishes respond to scent cues in seeking spawning habitat. Field observations of gravid and ready-to-spawn females in an area of inundated terrestrial vegetation suggest that silvery minnows may actively seek these areas of decreased flow and increased forage to spawn (M. Porter, personal communication 2006). It is possible that emergent or inundated vegetation could provide ideal habitat by way of lower flow, cover, and increased nutrients.

The University of New Mexico and the USFWS have monitored silvery minnow populations within this reach on an ongoing basis. Generally, the data collected indicate that silvery minnow are rare throughout the reach, with many of the individuals collected being adults (Dudley et al. 2003). This data set indicates that the population may benefit by retaining eggs, larvae, and juveniles in upstream areas like the Albuquerque Reach, where they can contribute to population growth and aid in the recovery of the species.

METHODS

Sites were selected at four locations within the Albuquerque Reach (Alameda, Montañño, I-40, and South Diversion Channel) and at one location in the Isleta Reach (Los Lunas) (Figure 2). The sites discussed in this report are Alameda and the South Diversion Channel; both contain embayments constructed by the NMISC (Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5). Methods used were those set forth by Mickey Porter of Reclamation (personal communication 2006). Ideal sites had low or no-current velocity and depths between 0.2 and 0.3 m. Two rectangular hoop nets (0.5 m by 0.5 m, 6.4-mm mesh size) were placed side by side, and a nylon mesh bag of timothy hay was placed in the cod end of one of the two hoop nets (“experimental”), while the other net did not contain hay (“control”). Both were securely attached to the substrate. Two square quadrats (0.5 m by 0.5 m) fitted with 1-mm mesh were placed under the rear section of each hoop net. At each of the sites were two pairs of hoop nets, a total of four experimental and four control.

Sites were visited daily between 9 May 2006 and 27 May 2006. First, water quality data (dissolved oxygen, temperature, conductivity, specific conductance, and salinity) were recorded before water at the site was disturbed. Next, hoop nets were carefully untied and moved aside so that the quadrats underneath could be inspected for Rio Grande silvery minnow eggs. After that, hoop nets were inspected for the presence of fish. If fish were present, they were identified, counted, and released, with the presence of gravid silvery minnow females noted. Hoop nets were reset, and quadrats were replaced underneath. Finally, water depth and current velocity were recorded for each hoop net. Unknown fish, major changes in water level, and anything else of note was logged and photographed if appropriate. Appendix A contains photographs of each site.

RESULTS

Over the 18-day sample period, 77 silvery minnows were collected from the constructed embayments at Alameda and the South Diversion Channel; only one silvery minnow was a gravid female, and no silvery minnow eggs were collected at either site. In all, 259 total larvae (species undetermined) were collected at both sites. A summary table (Table 1) is provided below, and the full data set is available in an attached Excel spreadsheet.

Water quality data are summarized in Table 2. It should be noted that the sites were not visited at the same time each day, and some water quality parameters had large diel fluctuations. For example, during this study, the main channel at Alameda had an all-time low temperature of 14.6°C at 7:30 A.M. on the morning of May 12 and an all-time high of 25.5°C at 4:18 P.M. the afternoon of May 21. The USGS gage at Central Avenue indicated that flows ranged from about 550 cfs to about 750 cfs for the duration of the study (Figure 6). Within the main channel at Alameda, water quality ranges were as follows: temperature, 14.6–25.5°C; dissolved oxygen, 6.38–8.47 mg/L; conductivity, 240.2–333.9 µS/cm; specific conductance, 293.6–331.7 µS/cm; salinity, 0.1–0.2 ppt, water depth, 0.30–0.94 m; and current velocity, 0.57–1.14 m/sec. At the hoop nets, the temperature

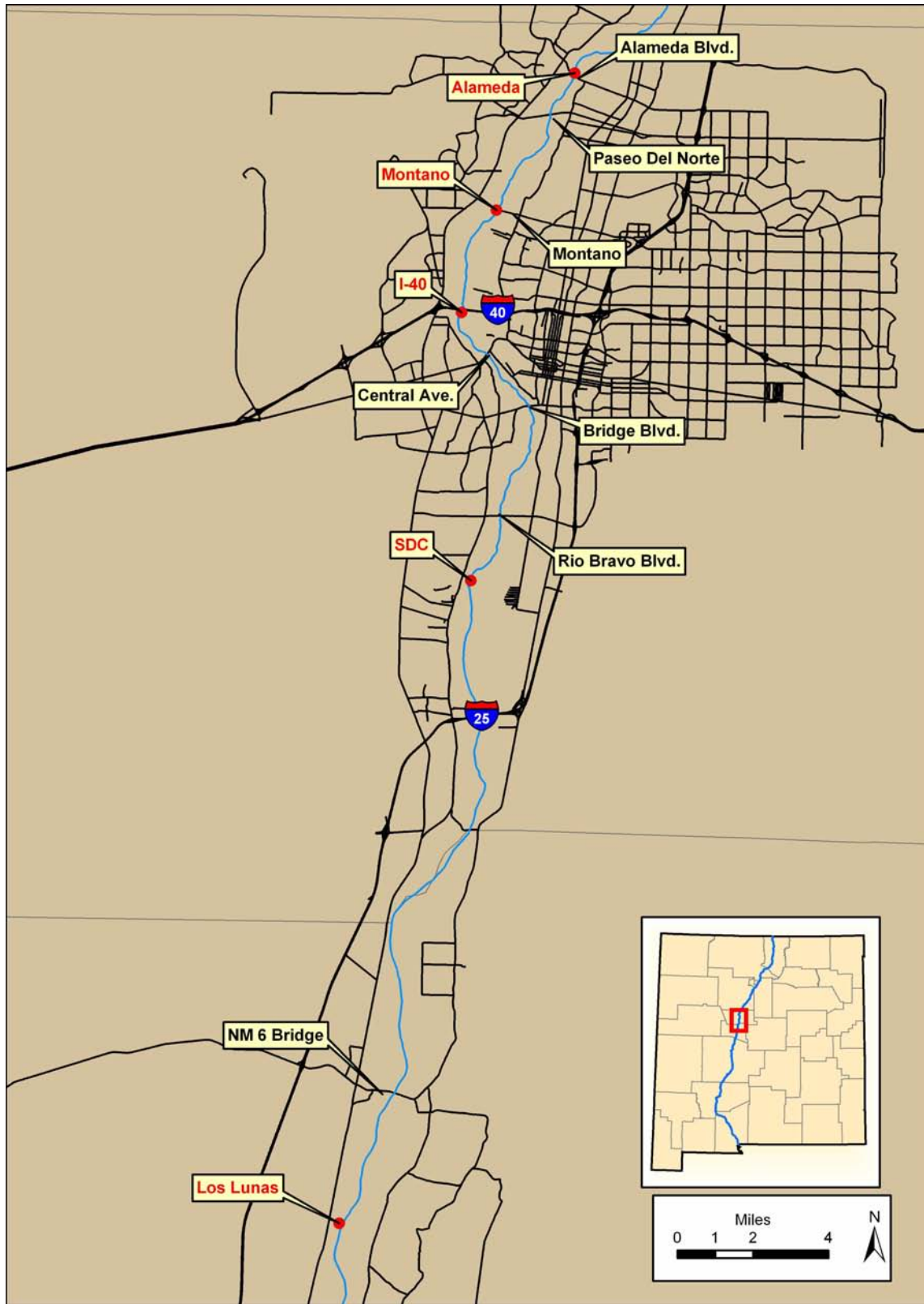


Figure 2. 2006 Middle Rio Grande. Nursery habitat monitoring sites are indicated by red font. NMISC-funded sites are Alameda and SDC.

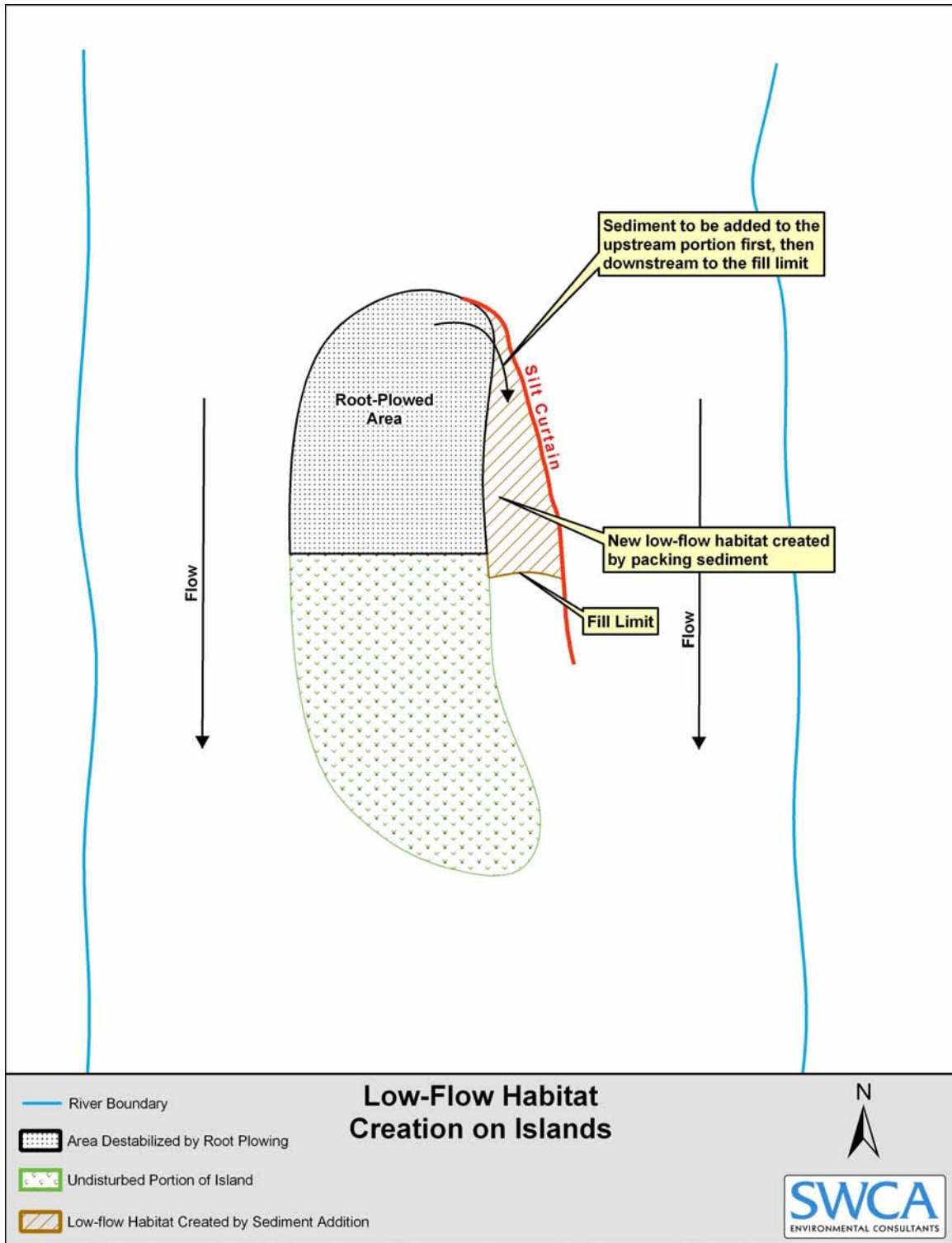


Figure 3. Hypothetical design for island modification and creating embayments within the Rio Grande.

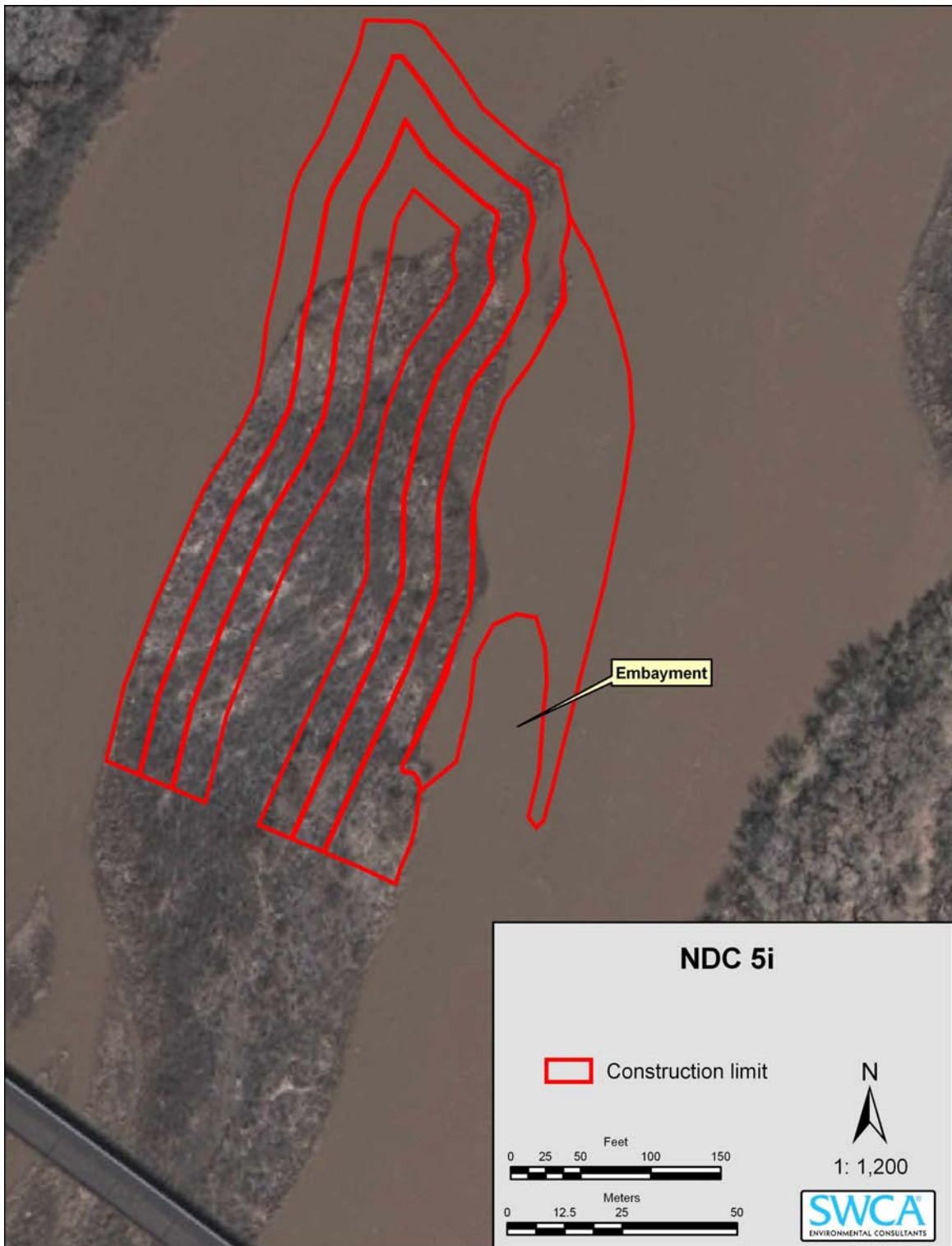


Figure 4. Constructed embayment at Alameda site.

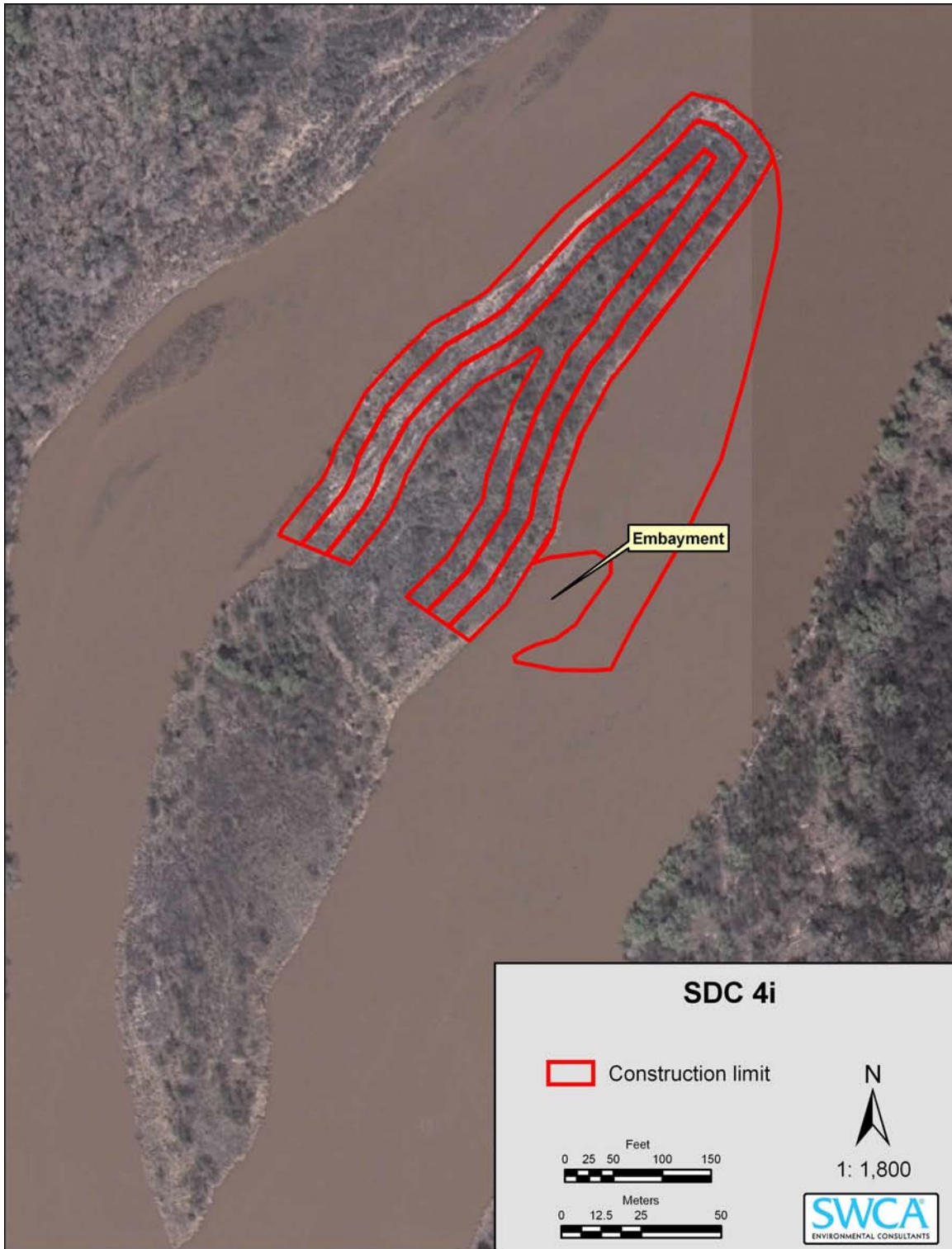


Figure 5. Constructed embayment at South Diversion Channel site.

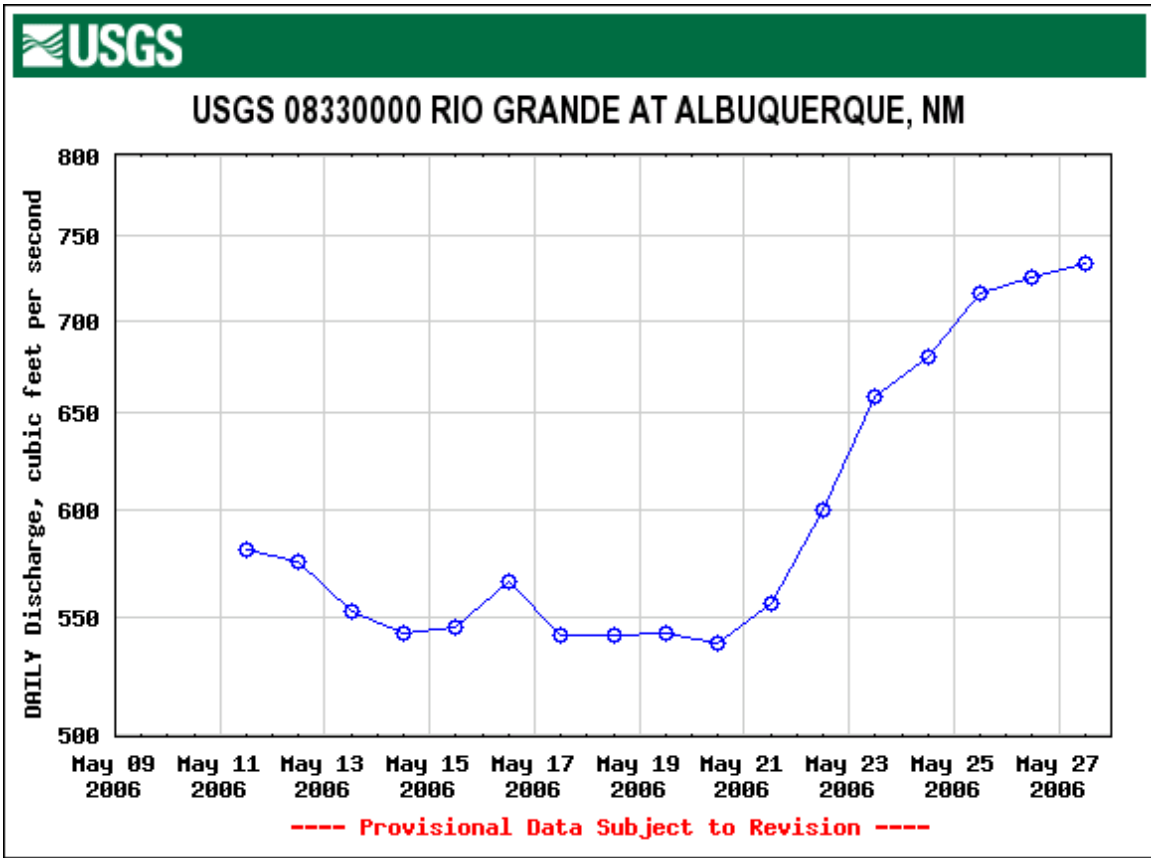


Figure 6. USGS hydrograph for the gage at Central Avenue for the study period.

Table 1. Summary of Fish and Egg Findings in Hoop Nets and Quadrats during 2006 Nursery Habitat Study

Site	Type	Silvery Minnow Adults	Gravid Silvery Minnow	Other Fish	Silvery Minnow Eggs	Larvae
Alameda	Experimental	49	1	177	0	59
	Control	17	0	130	0	118
South Diversion Channel	Experimental	10	0	144	0	21
	Control	1	0	96	0	61

Table 2. Average Water Quality and Flow Conditions for Both Main Channel and Hoop Net Sites during 2006 Nursery Habitat Study

Site	Type	Temp (°C)	Dissolved O ₂ (mg/L)	Conductivity (µS/cm)	Specific Conductance (µS/cm)	Salinity (ppt)	Water Depth (m)	Water Velocity (m/s)
Alameda	Experimental	21.6	7.85	308.4	329.2	0.2	0.36	0.01
	Control	21.6	7.77	308.5	329.4	0.2	0.33	0.01
	Main Channel	21.1	7.55	296.9	319.5	0.2	0.66	0.86
South Diversion Channel	Experimental	20.9	7.21	303.0	333.9	0.2	0.32	0.05
	Control	20.9	7.20	302.9	333.9	0.2	0.29	0.04
	Main Channel	20.5	7.67	308.5	337.2	0.2	0.65	0.69

Range was 14.2–26.9°C; dissolved oxygen, 5.52–9.81 mg/L; conductivity, 257.6–347.7 µS/cm; specific conductance, 317.5–340.4 µS/cm; water depth, 0.21–0.45 m; and current velocity, 0–0.1 m/sec.

At the South Diversion Channel, water quality ranges in the main channel were: temperature, 17.1–23.8°C; dissolved oxygen, 6.00–8.80 mg/L; conductivity, 285.6–359.4 S/cm; 315.7–391.1 µS/cm; water depth, 0.39–0.94 m; and current velocity, 0.28–1.13 m/sec. Salinity was constant at 0.2 ppt throughout the duration of the study. At the hoop nets, temperature ranged from 17.3–24.7°C; dissolved oxygen, 4.95–8.87 mg/L; conductivity, 151.8–341.2 µS/cm; specific conductance, 241.9–348.9 µS/cm; salinity, 0.1–0.2 ppt; water depth, 0.03–0.61 m; and current velocity, 0–0.33 m/sec.

CONCLUSIONS

Future monitoring of constructed embayments should build upon the work completed in this study and would include more rigorous investigations and testing hypotheses. Little is known about how Cyprinidae respond to non-alarm scent cues, and even less is known about such cues and the silvery minnow. In order to explore this issue in the future, a greater number and more densely placed array of hoop nets or another method of capture should be placed within the embayments. A more methodical experimental design would allow investigators to ascertain whether or not silvery minnow are responding to dried terrestrial vegetation. If the dried vegetation aspect is not of concern, then a greater number of hoop nets placed within the embayment should determine whether or not silvery minnows are using these areas. Additionally, as restoration sites mature and support native riparian vegetation the conditions

that support the life histories of silvery minnow could be present, and increased utilization of the restoration sites may occur by the fishery.

Previous studies (Porter and Massong 2004a; Porter and Massong 2005) have used gellan beads to simulate Rio Grande silvery minnow eggs in order to determine egg movement and settling in various mesohabitats. Using these artificial eggs would be an ideal way to determine if constructed embayments at the Alameda and South Diversion Channel sites retain silvery minnow eggs. Artificial eggs could be released upstream from the mouth of the embayment, and quadrats could be placed within the embayment with Moore egg collectors in the main channel. Comparisons could then be made as to the proportion of eggs released that successfully drift into the constructed low-velocity habitat.

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**APPENDIX A
SITE PHOTOS**



Figure A.1. Hoop net set up within the constructed embayment at Alameda. The hoop net on the left contains a nylon bag of hay, while the hoop net on the right does not. The main channel of the Rio Grande is on the right side, and the photograph was taken looking upstream.



Figure A.2. Both set-ups within the constructed embayment at Alameda.



Figure A.3. Both hoop net set-ups within constructed embayment at South Diversion Channel. The main channel of the Rio Grande is in the back half of the photograph, and the river is flowing from left to right.



Figure A.4. Westernmost set-up at South Diversion Channel. A medial sandbar has been deposited across the mouth of the embayment, and the water becomes substantially deeper behind the hoop nets.

APPENDIX B
EMBAYMENT MONITORING DATABASE 2006

The following sheets contain data collected in the 2006 Nursery Habitat Project

Two rectangular hoop nets (0.5 m x 0.5 m, 6.4 mm mesh size) were placed next to each other and within the silt fence embayment, where they were constructed. A nylon mesh bag of timothy hay was placed in the cod end of one of the two hoop nets and both were securely attached to the substrate. Two rectangular quadrats (0.5 m x 0.5 m) fitted with 1 mm mesh were placed under the rear section of each hoop net. At each of the five sites there were two pairs of hoop nets for a total of ten baited and ten unbaited.

Control hoop nets represent those that did contain hay

Experimental hoop nets represent those that did contain hay

