

### American Avocet *Recurvirostra americana*

The American Avocet's primitive habitat is shifting shallow wetlands, which it sweeps for aquatic invertebrates. In spite of the loss of much of this habitat, the avocet remains locally common in San Diego County by taking advantage of salt ponds, sewage ponds, and partially blocked lagoons. Once considered just a migrant in San Diego County, the avocet now occurs year round. Though it nests on the ground, the avocet often enjoys success, with the help of its screaming and strafing of any approaching predator.

**Breeding distribution:** From 1997 to 2001, Batiqitos Lagoon was the center of avocet abundance in San Diego County, with up to 184 adults in the east basin (J7) 3 April 1998 (F. Hall) and 36 nests within one Least Tern colony in 2001 (S. M. Wolf). The species occurred in all the other wetlands of coastal northern San Diego County, however, from Aliso Creek (F4) to Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7), with nesting confirmed at almost all of these. Also, small numbers nest at several sites up to 8 miles inland in the valleys of the Santa Margarita and San Luis Rey rivers. Along the county's south coast known nesting sites are Famosa Slough (R8; nest 25 April–7 May 1997, J. A. and B. J. Peugh), the south San Diego Bay salt works (U10/V10; 40 nests estimated in 1997, M. R. Smith), Camp Surf along the beach just north of Imperial Beach (V10; nest 22 April 2001, T. Stands, S. Yamagata), the Tijuana River estuary (V10/W10; five nests 22 April 1997, B. L. Peterson), and inland in the Tijuana River valley (W11;



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

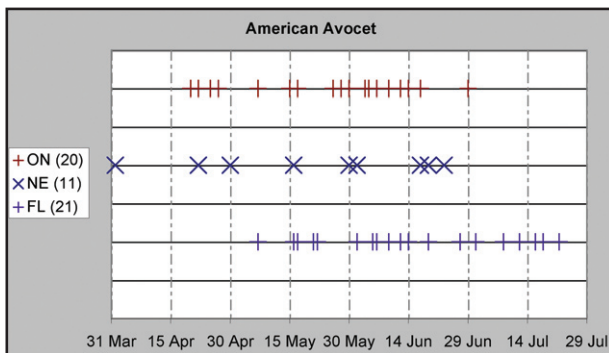
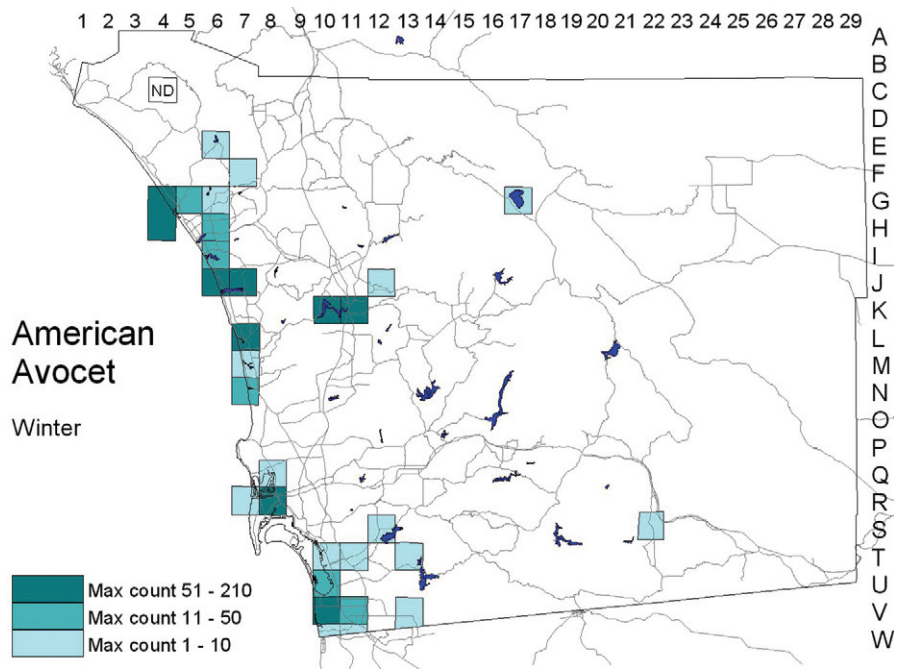
pair in distraction display 19 June 1999, P. Unitt).

We also found avocets nesting at several scattered sites well inland. The largest numbers of birds were at Lake Henshaw (G17; up to 30, some in distraction display, 18 June 2000, P. Unitt), the east end of Lake Hodges (K11; up to 40, including young, 9 June 1997, E. C. Hall), and the pond at Siempre Viva and La Media roads, Otay Mesa (V13; up to 20, including young, 12 June 2001, P. Unitt). Some other sites, such as a sewage pond near the Barona Casino (N14), had just an isolated pair (nest 29 June 1997, P. R. Pryde). All of these sites are on the coastal slope except for one on the Campo Plateau at Tule Lake (T27; six on 21 June 2000, J. K. Wilson).

**Nesting:** Sometimes avocets nest in shallow depressions with no nesting material whatsoever. The birds apparently nesting on extensive flats devoid of vegetation on the north side of Lake Henshaw were in such a situation. Often, however, as in marshes of pickleweed, they build a substantial platform of debris. Our dates for avocet nests ranged from 20 April to 29 June, with one already with four eggs in the salt works 1 April 1997 (M. R. Smith).

**Migration:** The seasonal pattern of avocet abundance in San Diego County varies from site to site with variations in water levels, which may mask the evidence of large-scale migrations. On the basis of monthly counts at San Elijo Lagoon (L7) 1973–83, King et al. (1987) found the avocet's average abundance peaking in March and April, relative-

ly low from August to January. Yet their maximum count was in December. On the basis of weekly counts in the salt works February 1993–February 1994, Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) found avocet abundance peaking in winter, with a maximum count of 467 in January, then falling to an average of about 25 from May to August. In the Anza–Borrego Desert, where the avocet is a rare visitor, records range from 11 September (1982, 12 at Middle Willows, C22) to 12 May (1974, three at Bow Willow Ranger Station, P28, ABDSP database). None was found there during the atlas period. Indeed, from 1997 to 2002, atlas observers saw almost no avocets far from sites of likely breeding.



**Winter:** In winter the avocet is concentrated at the same coastal wetlands where it nests. During the atlas period the primary sites were Batiquitos Lagoon (up to 210 on 2 January 1998, C. C. Gorman), San Elijo Lagoon (up to 600 on 23 February 1997, A. Mauro), and the old sewage ponds and gravel pits now reintegrated into the Tijuana estuary (up to 197 on 18 December 1999, R. B. Riggan). Inland, the major site by far is Lake Hodges, with up to

70 on 9 December 1997 (E. C. Hall). We did not find the avocet in winter at several inland sites where we found it during the breeding season. Our only winter records outside the coastal lowland were from the upper end of Lake Morena (S22; one on 5 December 1999, R. and S. L. Breisch) and Lake Henshaw (noted on 5 of 22 Lake Henshaw Christmas bird counts 1981–2002, with up to six on 19 December 1994 but no more than two 1997–2002). The Anza–Borrego count has recorded the avocet only once, a flock of 19 on 17 December 1995.

**Conservation:** The American Avocet has lost considerable habitat throughout its range, including southern California. But the establishment of the salt works, reservoirs, and sewage ponds created new habitat in San Diego County, probably increasing what was available under primitive conditions. The avocet’s colonizing the county as a breeding species evidently began in the 1950s (Sams and Stott 1959). By the 1970s the birds were not yet nesting regularly in the salt works (Unitt 1984). Their nesting inland in the county was first confirmed in 1982 with five pairs at Lake Hodges 19 June (K. L. Weaver).