

American Robin *Turdus migratorius*

A traditional harbinger of spring in northern North America, the American Robin is a traditional harbinger of winter in San Diego County. At that season it is an irregular visitor, common in some winters, scarce in others, as flocks roam in search of berry-bearing plants like toyon, wild grape, California coffeeberry, and many ornamentals. Since the 1940s, however, the American Robin has spread south as a breeding species, occupying mountain forests, orchards, urban parks, and college campuses year round.

Breeding distribution: The American Robin's patchy distribution in San Diego County is explained by its three habitats: montane forest, orchards, and parks and residential areas with shade trees and lawns. In San Diego County's mountains, the robin is fairly common among conifers (up to 12 at Palomar Mountain, E15, 18 June 1999, E. C. Hall, C. R. Mahrtdt), locally so in higher-



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

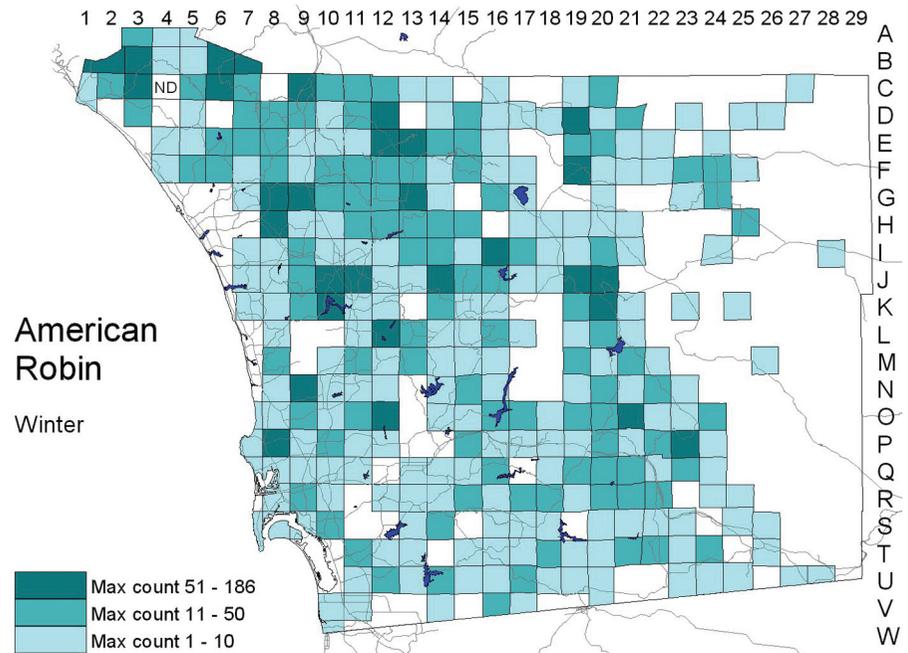
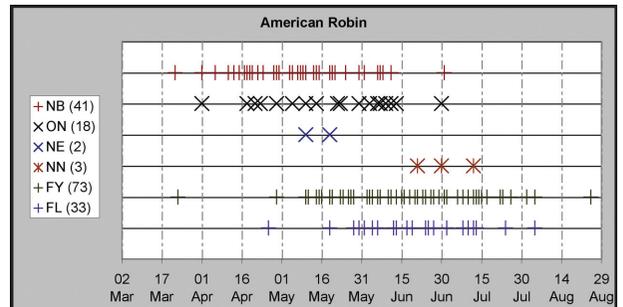
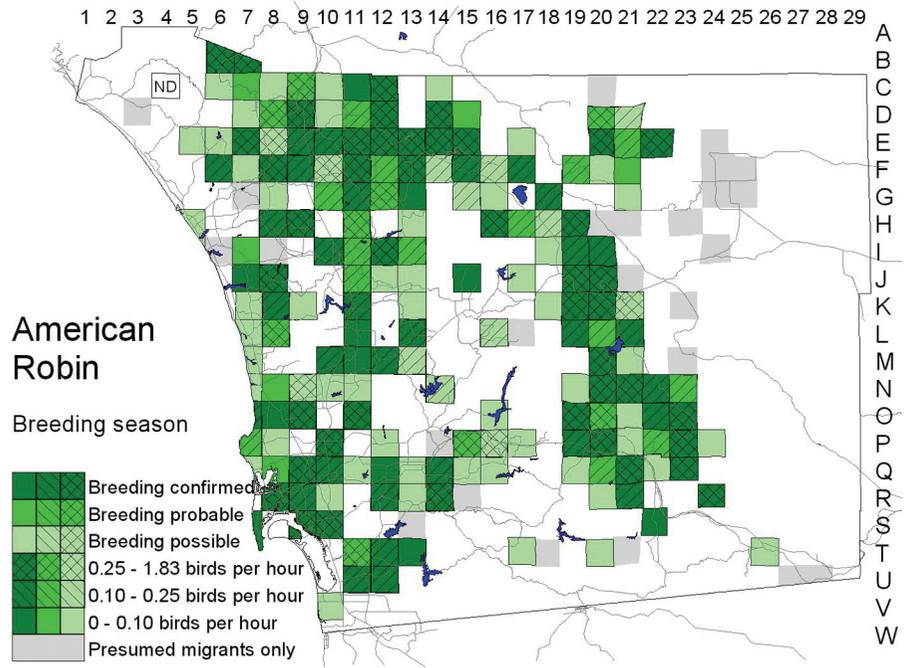
elevation oak woodland with few or no conifers (up to 13 around Hulburd Grove, O19, C. Anderson). It inhabits all the wooded ranges, south to Corte Madera Valley (R20/R21; up to five on 20 June 1998, J. K. Wilson).

The importance of orchards as American Robin habitat in San Diego County became clear only as a result of the atlas field work. The region from De Luz and Bonsall east to Pauma Valley and Valley Center, extensively planted with avocado and citrus groves, emerges as one of the robin's major population centers. Some of our highest counts of breeding robins were around such orchards (up to 20, 1 mile northeast of Heriot Mountain, C12, 1 April 2000, J. Determan; 18 between Fallbrook and Monserate Mountain, D9, 19 May 1999, E. C. Hall).

In urban parks and residential areas breeding robins are still local. They are fairly common in a few places (up to 24 in southern Balboa Park, S9, 28 April 1997, Y. Ikegaya) but lacking from much seemingly suitable habitat. Berry Community Park, Nestor (V10; one on 18 July 1997, C. G. Edwards), and parks in Chula Vista (U11/U12) mark the southern limit of the robin's range along the coast of San Diego County—and thus on the Pacific coast of North America.

Outside these three main habitats, there are scattered records from rural areas with oak groves or lawns, south-east to Boulevard (T26; two including a singing male 6 June 2001, J. K. Wilson).

Nesting: The American Robin may nest high or low, in a wide variety of trees or shrubs. The nest is often well screened by foliage, but we also noted nests in more open trees like eucalyptus and Coulter pine. Because the American Robin is a recent colonist of San Diego County, no eggs have been collected here, and atlas data are the best information yet on the species' breeding schedule. They suggest the species lays mainly from April through June, in agreement with the 6 April–14 July range of 46 egg sets from elsewhere in California (Bent 1949). In the less constrained environment of orchards and lawns, however, a few birds start



earlier, possibly in the second week of March, as shown by one carrying nest material at Point Loma (S7) 1 March 1997 (J. C. Worley), one carrying food to a nest at the Pala Mesa resort (D9) 23 March 1997 (M. San Miguel), and a fledgling along San Marcos Creek at Rancho Santa Fe Road 26 April 1997 (J. O. Zimmer). A robin carrying nest material in Presidio Park (R8) 1 July 1998 (C. L. Mann) and fledglings being fed in Coronado (S9) 4 August 1997 (M. Molloy), and at Granite Spring, Cuyamaca Mountains (N21), 25 August 1999 (P. D. Jorgensen) suggest egg laying as late as July.

Migration: American Robins do not follow a rigid schedule of migration, at least in southern California. Rather, they move nomadically through their nonbreeding season. From 1997 to 2002, dates of birds away from breeding habitat ranged from 10 October (1998, one at Borrego Springs, G24, P. D. Jorgensen) to 24 April (2000, one in San Felipe Valley at the east base of Volcan Mountain, J21, P. K. Nelson). A couple of reports later in April from sites where the species was missed later in the spring were from urban or agricultural areas that it could colonize. Even a single robin in Borrego Springs (G24) 14 May 1998 (P. D. Ache) could have been a prospective colonizer. The species has nested irregularly at Brawley in the Imperial Valley since 1992 (Patten et al. 2003), though Belding (1890) reported a late straggler at Campo 14 May 1884.

Winter: As a winter visitor the American Robin is widespread but very irregular, abundant in some years, scarce in others. Even within the county invasions take place at different times. During the five-year atlas period, robins were by far most numerous in eastern San Diego County

in 2000–01, whereas in coastal north county they were most numerous in 2001–02. High counts in a single day in one atlas square were 186 south of De Luz (C6) 6 January 2001 (K. L. Weaver) and 175 near Wooded Hill, Laguna Mountains (P23) 19 February 1999 (E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer). In the Anza–Borrego Desert the American Robin is confined largely to developed areas and mesquite thickets festooned with mistletoe.

Conservation: As a breeding bird the American Robin is a recent colonist of San Diego County, first reported breeding in the Cuyamaca Mountains by Grinnell and Miller (1944) and in the coastal lowland at Rancho Santa Fe (L8) in July 1951 by Mead (1952). Over the next 50 years, breeding robins spread widely. The distribution by the end of the millennium was much broader than known just 20 years earlier (Unitt 1984). The spread has continued past San Diego County with the species colonizing the sierras Juárez and San Pedro Mártir in Baja California in the 1990s (Erickson et al. 2001).

Lawns with earthworms, of course, offer the robin a suitable habitat lacking before urbanization, but the reason why the range expansion included natural montane forest as well is less clear. Possibly the urbanization of southern California allowed the entire region's population to increase to the point where the birds moved into all suitable habitats. But the southward spread of other montane birds suggests that other, more subtle factors could be playing a role with the robin as well.

Taxonomy: The only subspecies of the American Robin known from southern California is *T. m. propinquus* Ridgway, 1877, pale and usually lacking white corners to the tail.