

American Wigeon *Anas americana*

Though usually classified in the same genus as the dabbling ducks, the American Wigeon differs somewhat in its behavior. It spends considerable time out of the water grazing on terrestrial vegetation. In San Diego Bay it feeds principally on eelgrass. Because of these habits the wigeon is more widely distributed in San Diego County than related ducks. It is preadapted to that novel habitat now so widespread here—the golf course.

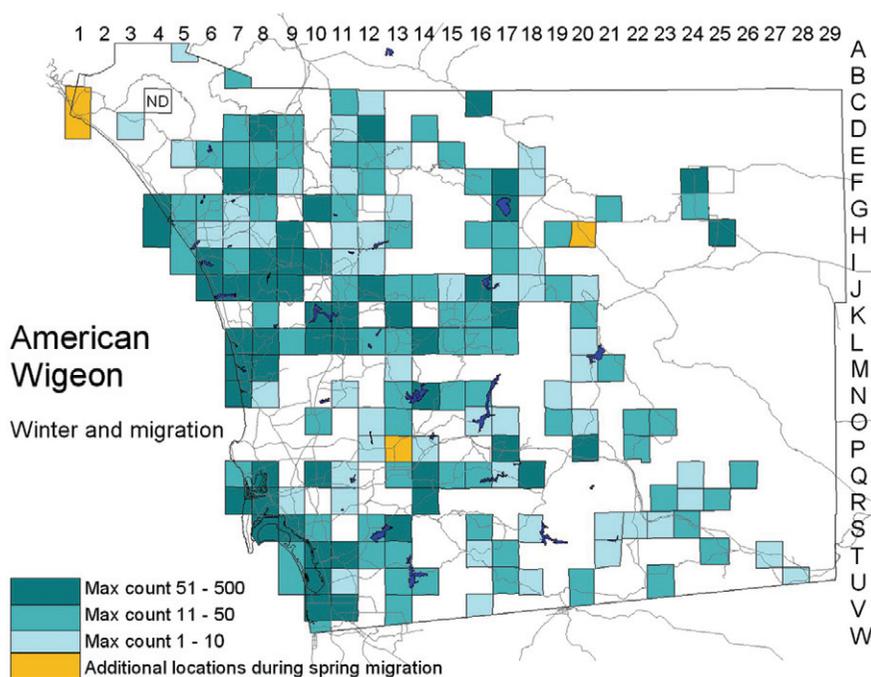
Winter: After the Mallard, the American Wigeon is San Diego County's most widespread duck. It often occurs in numbers in places where other ducks are few or none, especially golf-course ponds (e.g., 60 at the Shadowridge Country Club, Vista, 18, 2 March 2001, C. H. Schork; 420 at Singing Hills, Q14, 5 December 1999, N. Perretta). Nevertheless, coastal wetlands with natural vegetation remain important to the wigeon: our high counts in these habitats ranged up to 387 at San Elijo Lagoon (L7) 26 December 1999 (R. T. Patton), 500 in the San Diego River flood-control channel (R8) 24 December 1997 (P. Unitt), and 500 along the Chula Vista shore of San Diego Bay (U10) 16 December 2000 (B. C. Moore). This last area supports San Diego's most extensive remaining beds of eelgrass.

Some other sites wigeons use heavily are Lake Henshaw (G17; up to 450 on 21 December 1998, J. O. Zimmer), the Wild Animal Park (J12; up to 500 on 30 December 1999, D. and D. Bylin), and Lake Hodges (K10/K11; up to 400 on 11 February 1998, R. L. Barber). Even small lakes in the mountains attract small numbers of wigeons (e.g., 16 in Lower Doane Valley, D14, 7 January 2000, P. D. Jorgensen; up to 40 at Big Laguna Lake, O23, 23 February 2002, K. J. Winter). Because of its use of golf-course ponds, the American Wigeon is the



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

most numerous waterfowl in the Borrego Valley, as judged on the basis of Anza-Borrego Christmas bird counts. The count has yielded as many as 109 on 19 December 1999; the highest number at a single site was 85 at the Roadrunner Club (F24) 30 January 2000 (P. D. Jorgensen).



Migration: The American Wigeon arrives slightly later than most other dabbling ducks that occur in San Diego County as winter visitors. The earliest arrivals are at the end of August, exceptionally 15 August (2003, one at the Sweetwater River mouth, T10, J. R. Barth), but few birds arrive before late September. Maximum numbers are not reached until November. Spring departure may begin in February; it continues through the first half of April, with numbers as high as 200 at the upper end of Sweetwater Reservoir (S13) as late as 10 April (1997; P. Famolaro) and 60 in the San Diego River flood-control channel as late as 15 April (1999; J. R. Barth). Almost all depart soon after this date, but a few migrants may still be seen in the first week of May (13 near Mesa Grande, I17, 5 May 1999, D. C. Seals).

During the atlas period, from mid May through early July, we recorded summering stragglers of the American Wigeon on 10 occasions—an unexpectedly high number for a species not known to nest anywhere in southern California. These records were well scattered from the coast to just over the mountain crest in upper San Felipe Valley (H20; one on 23 May 1999, A. P. and T. E. Keenan). Our largest concentration of summering wigeons was five at Whelan Lake (G6) 19 July 2001 (J. Smith). King et al. (1987) found summering wigeons at San Elijo Lagoon three times 1973–83, maximum 15 on 7 June 1981.

Conservation: Over the long term, it is unclear, from the American Wigeon's point of view, how the gain of lawns and artificial ponds has balanced the loss of natural wetlands. The chemicals used on golf courses may pose a threat to wigeons as well as to other wildlife around them. The organophosphate insecticide Diazinon, used on golf courses, was responsible for at least three mass die-offs of American Wigeons in southern California (Littrell 1986). Sale of this chemical after 2004 has been banned, but other pesticides have been invented to replace it.

Recent trends in American Wigeon numbers on Christmas bird counts have been approximately flat in the Oceanside, Rancho Santa Fe, and Lake Henshaw circles but definitely up in the San Diego, Escondido, and Anza–Borrego circles. In the last two cases, the birds' use of artificial habitats is clearly responsible for the increase. King et al. (1987) observed an increase at San Elijo Lagoon from 1973 to 1983. Improved water quality in San Diego Bay allowed the extent of eelgrass there to increase from at least the mid 1980s to 2000 (M. Perdue pers. comm.). In the latter year the coverage of eelgrass reached 1600 acres, the maximum currently possible. The wigeon's increase on San Diego Bay likely followed the increase in eelgrass.