

### Bendire's Thrasher *Toxostoma bendirei*

In California, Bendire's Thrasher is confined largely to the Mojave Desert. Even there it is so rare and irregular it is regarded as a species of special concern by the California Department of Fish and Game. San Diego County is off the species' normal migration route, so it occurs here less than annually, as a very rare migrant and winter visitor. Nevertheless, a single pair nested successfully near Ocotillo Wells in 1993.

**Breeding distribution:** I found the single known nest of Bendire's Thrasher in San Diego County 2.5 miles southwest of Ocotillo Wells (J28) on 26 April 1993. On that date the nest contained two chicks, one of which later fledged successfully (AB 47:1151, 1993). The winter of 1992–1993 was unusually wet; presumably the lush growth and better food supply of the following spring allowed the species to spread exceptionally far to the southwest of its normal range. On 19 May 1998—also following a wet winter—Lori Hargrove found a single Bendire's Thrasher in ornamental trees around a house 3 miles southeast of Ocotillo Wells (J29)—San Diego County's only other record of the species during the breeding season (FN 52:504, 1998).

**Nesting:** The nest near Ocotillo Wells was in a large, dense desert lavender, about 5 feet off the ground. It was



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

thus typical for the species in height and selection of a rather spiny shrub as a site.

**Migration:** Of San Diego County's 28 records of Bendire's Thrasher, 13 are of fall migrants, on dates as early as 18 August (1991, Point Loma, S7, R. E. Webster, AB 46:151, 1991) and 27 August (1964, Solana Beach, L7, McCaskie et al. 1967b). Of the four spring records of birds not known to have wintered, two are from near the coast (one at Sweetwater County Park, T12, 6 March 1999, S. L. Breisch; one in the Tijuana River valley 4 April 1970, AFN 24:645, 1970), two from the Anza-Borrego Desert (two in Smoke

Tree Wash, E28, 9 March 1997, P. D. Jorgensen, NASFN 51:928, 1997; one at Palm Spring, N27, 19 March 1983, E. A. Cardiff, AB 37:913, 1983).

**Winter:** Winter records of Bendire's Thrasher in San Diego County are nine, four from the Tijuana River valley (Unitt 1984), one from Coronado (S9; 28 January–3 March 1985, J. L. Coatsworth, AB 39:211, 1985), one from Otay Mesa (V12; 16 February–16 March 1985, M. Orell, AB 39:211, 1985), one from Escondido (J11; 2–22 January 1994, J. L. Coatsworth, NASFN 48:249, 1994), one from San Felipe Valley 1.1 miles northwest of Paroli Spring (H21; 21 December 1998, P. Unitt, NAB 53:210, 1999), and one from Agua Caliente Springs (M26; 21 January 1999, E. C. Hall, NAB 53:210, 1999). Several of these records are

of birds remaining for extended periods, yielding a range of 8 November–16 March for known wintering Bendire's Thrashers.

**Conservation:** The reasons for Bendire's Thrasher's rarity in California are not clear, as much of its high-desert habitat is little disturbed. Nevertheless, habitat fragmentation and disturbance resulting from development, often spreading over large areas at low density, is a concern (J. Sterling unpubl. data). Sterling's survey in 2001 yielded only two or three Bendire's Thrashers in areas where England and Laudenslayer (1989) found 41 and 23 in 1986 and 1987, respectively. The difference may have been due to population cycles following rainfall variation, however, than to long-term decline.