

## Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger*

Through the final third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this avian oddity expanded its range greatly, moving northwest from the coast of mainland Mexico and colonizing California. The salt works of south San Diego Bay have become a major colony with hundreds of pairs. The skimmer resides in San Diego County year round, but most of the birds shift between the salt works in summer and Mission Bay in winter. Elsewhere along the county's coast the skimmer is much less abundant, but a small colony has established itself at Batiquitos Lagoon.

**Breeding distribution:** Within the salt works (U10/V10), the skimmers nest on several dikes spread throughout the system; the locations vary year to year and shift through the course of each season. The number of distinct nest clusters or subcolonies has ranged from 7 in 2002 to 13 in 1998 (R. T. Patton, Terp and Pavelka 1999). During the atlas period the total number of nesting pairs varied from about 485 in 1997 to at least 280 in 1998 (Terp and



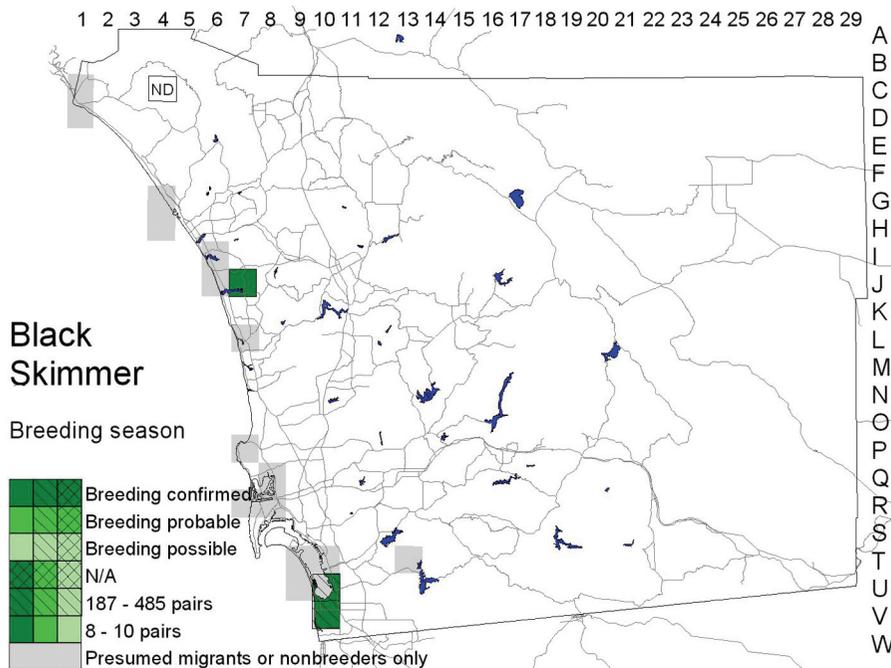
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

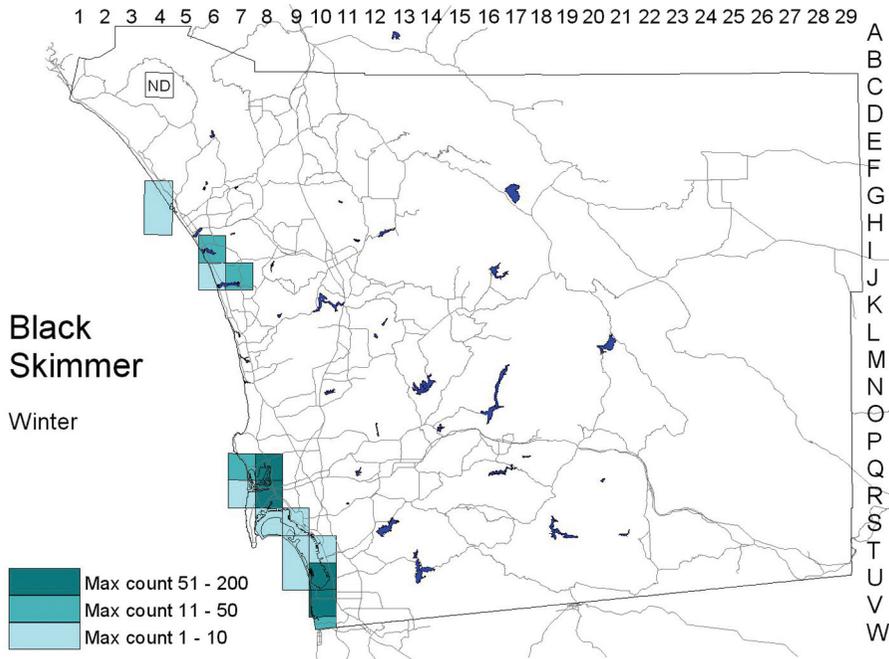
Pavelka 1999) to about 200 in 1999 to 187–216 in 2000 to 268–280 in 2001. In 2002 and 2003 it went back up to 331 (R. T. Patton).

In the west basin of Batiquitos Lagoon (J6), 14 pairs of skimmers colonized in 1995 on dredge spoil installed as nesting habitat for the Least Tern and Snowy Plover

in 1994. Ten pairs nested there in 1996 (Whelchel et al. 1996). Subsequently, the birds shifted to an island in the east basin (J7), where they nested at least in 1997, 1998, and 2001–03. In the last three years the number of pairs increased from 8 to 10 to at least 26, fledging 19, 5, and 15–19 young, respectively (S. M. Wolf).

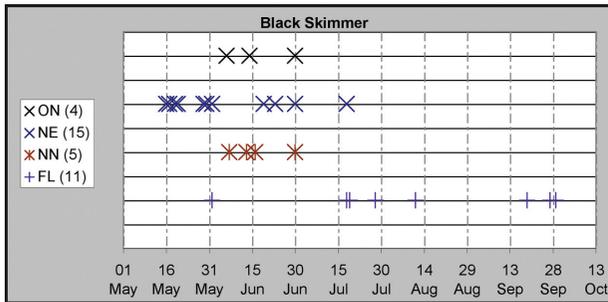
**Nesting:** Black Skimmers nest in a scrape on bare ground, using no nest material. In the salt works, they nest either near the large terns or in separate clusters of their own, the nests spaced a few feet apart. The birds may begin selecting their nest sites and scraping as early as 5 May (1999). From 1997 to 2003, egg laying began between 16 May and 2 June (R. T. Patton, Terp





**Black Skimmer**  
Winter

Max count 51 - 200  
Max count 11 - 50  
Max count 1 - 10



and Pavelka 1999). In 1998, the great majority of the birds laid between 10 and 20 June. Some nesting, however, presumably laying of replacement clutches by birds losing first clutches, continued to late August in 1998 (Terp and Pavelka 1999) and 22 August in 2001 (R. T. Patton). From 1999 to 2003, incubation continued through 22 August to 18 September. Chicks began hatching from 7 to 18 June, and nonflying young were observed as late as 4 September to 7 October. Newly hatched chicks were found as late as 11 September. The first flying fledglings were observed each season between 18 and 28 July, and some remained through 19 September to 7 October.

The year the skimmers first colonized Batiquitos Lagoon they nested late, laying from 30 July to 21 August and fledging from 25 September to 17 October (Whelchel et al. 1996). From 2001 to 2003 their egg dates ranged from 23 May to 2 August with latest fledging in 9 September (S. M. Wolf).

**Migration:** Recoveries of banded birds show that the skimmers move among the colonies on the coast of southern California, at the Salton Sea, and at the head of the Gulf of California (Collins and Garrett 1996). In San Diego County the birds are most concentrated at the nesting colonies from late May through the first week of July. During that interval atlas observers saw no more than four at other locations, as at San Onofre State

Beach (C1) 1 July 1999 (P. D. Jorgensen) and at the San Diego River mouth (R7) 28 June 1999 (F. Shaw). Through July skimmers are seen increasingly at other coastal wetlands and occasionally flying past places where they neither rest nor feed (two at La Jolla, P7, 17 July 1999, E. Wallace). The wintering flock at Crown Point, Mission Bay (Q8), peaks in fall and early winter (up to 140 on surveys 1992–95, Gazzaniga 1996; up to 278 on 18 December 2002, K. C. Molina), but it may remain large until late April (90 on 15 April 1999, E. Wallace)

Only one skimmer has been reported inland in San Diego County, at Upper Otay Lake (T13) 19 July 2000 (T. W. Dorman). Because of population exchange across the mountains and sightings at Lake Elsinore and Mystic Lake in western Riverside County (Garrett and Dunn 1981), such a record is not too surprising.

**Winter:** Mission Bay is the skimmer’s primary winter site in San Diego County; the birds concentrate on the east side of Crown Point. Counts there during the atlas period ranged up to 130 on 13 February 2000 (B. Hendricks). But the birds move around the area; our highest winter count was of 200 in the San Diego River flood-control channel and at Fiesta Island (R8) 28 February 1999 (B. C. Moore). The number remaining in south San Diego Bay is variable, sometimes large (up to 70 on 19 December 1998, D. C. Seals), sometimes small or zero. Other sites where skimmers often winter in some numbers are Agua Hedionda Lagoon (I6; up to 35 on 9 February 2001, P. A. Ginsburg), Batiquitos Lagoon (up to 16 on 4 December 1998, C. C. Gorman), and the Tijuana River estuary (V10/W10; up to 50 on 19 December 1998, S. Walens). Winter sightings elsewhere along the coast were of six or fewer.

**Conservation:** The skimmer’s range expansion has been facilitated by its use of artificial habitats like the salt works. The species was first seen in the county 18–19 September 1971 (AB 26:121, 1972) and first nested at the salt works (a single pair) in 1976 (AB 30:1004, 1976). For the next 20 years the population increased fairly steadily; the 485 pairs estimated in 1997 is the highest figure yet. Subsequently the population seems to have stabilized at around 300 to 400 pairs (K. C. Molina unpubl. data).

Even though its numbers have increased, the skimmer is vulnerable to several threats. The heavily urbanized coast of southern California offers few secure nesting sites to colonial water birds that nest on the ground. The concentration of the population at just three or four locations means that a disruption of one site has a large effect on the entire population. In the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup>

century, skimmer nesting at the Salton Sea began to fail as the sea could no longer sustain fish (K. C. Molina, NAB 56:486, 2002; 57:545, 2003). The incorporation of the San Diego Bay salt works into the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge was an important step, facilitating monitoring and management of a site critical to many nesting water birds, but threats remain. The site must be policed with vigilance; disturbance by people, dogs, and predators getting onto the dikes is a continuing problem. Disturbance at a

critical time could eliminate an entire year's production of young.

**Taxonomy:** Black Skimmers on both the Pacific and Atlantic coasts of North America are nominate *R. n. niger* Linnaeus, 1758. It is distinguished from other subspecies in South America by having the tail white except for the central black pair of rectrices.