

Black-chinned Hummingbird

Archilochus alexandri

Unlike Costa's and Anna's Hummingbirds, the Black-chinned has a rather conventional biology, occurring in San Diego County as a fairly common migrant and summer resident, in the latter role mainly in riparian and oak woodland. Like other hummingbirds the Black-chinned feeds on nectar,

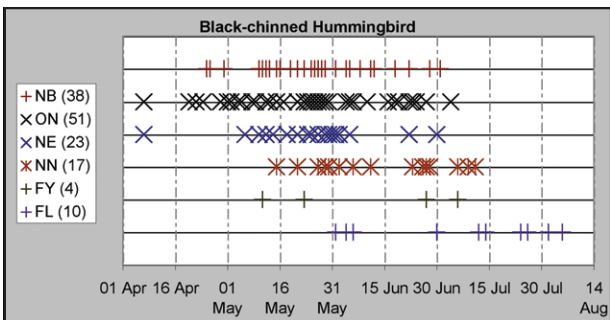
but its special relationship to a plant is not for food but for nesting material. Fuzz from the leaves of the western sycamore is typically the basis of the Black-chinned Hummingbird's nest, and the abundance of the hummingbird seems to parallel that of the sycamore.

Breeding distribution: The Black-chinned Hummingbird is fairly widespread over San Diego County's coastal slope

but strongly concentrated in the county's northwest corner. In this region it can be quite common, with daily counts as high as 33 along the Santa Margarita River north of Fallbrook (C8) 24 May 2001 (K. L. Weaver). Weaver's breeding-bird censuses of an 11.7-hectare plot of riparian woodland in this area revealed four to nine females each year from 1989 to 1994 (average 0.5 per hectare). In coast live oak woodland the density is even higher; a census of this habitat in the Santa Margarita Ecological Reserve (C9) in 1989 yielded 1.8 per hectare (Weaver 1990). Farther south and east the species becomes more localized to the larger riparian strips in the coastal lowland and groves of oak woodland in the foothills. Few Black-chinned Hummingbirds occur above 3500 feet elevation, and the species is largely if not completely absent as a breeding bird from the Campo Plateau east of Pine Valley and Campo. Yet it breeds rarely even as high as 5500 feet on the north slope of Hot Springs Mountain (E21; active nest 19 June 1999, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt). The apparent breeding range barely spills over onto the desert slope at San Ignacio at the head of the middle fork of Borrego Palm Canyon (E21; one on 18 June 1999, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt) and in upper San Felipe Valley (two at the south base of Cerro de la Hechicera, H20, 23 May 1999, A. P. and T. E. Keenan; one near Paroli Spring, I21, 26 April 1999, J. O. Zimmer).



Photo by Anthony Mercieca



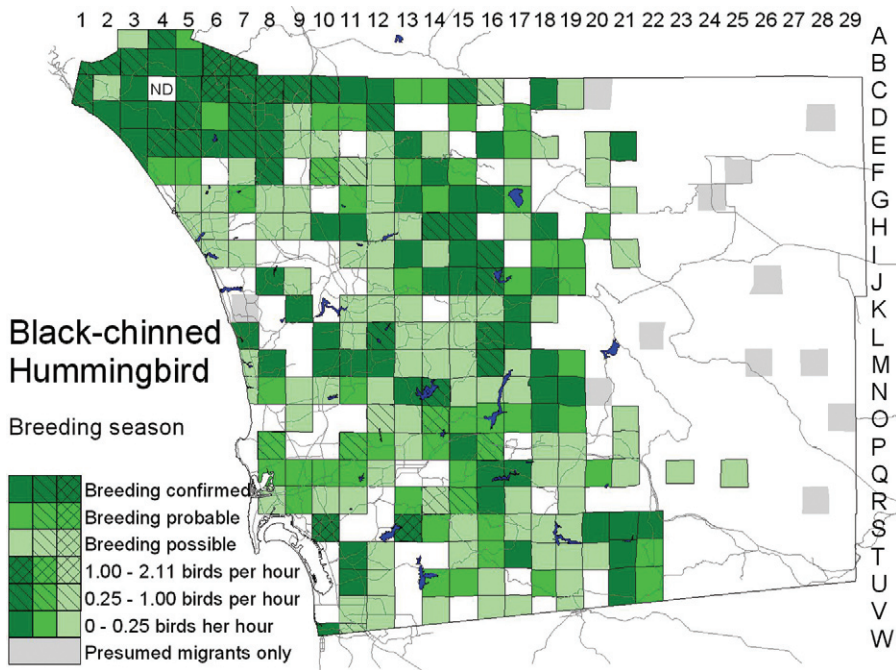
Nesting: To build their nests, female Black-chinned Hummingbirds gather plant down and mat it together with spider webs. The fuzz from the blades and petioles of sycamore leaves is the dominant material in San Diego County, giving the nest the golden-buff color of that fuzz. The amount of lichen and other flaky material used to decorate the nest is variable but is often little or none, making the nest look like a smooth orange sponge. But the birds use the fluff from willow and cottonwood trees as well, sometimes to the exclusion of sycamore fuzz, so

we noted some grayish-white nests too. Not surprisingly, we noted many nests in sycamore trees but even more in coast live oaks.

Our observations from 1997 to 2001 corresponded to egg laying from late April to the beginning of July, the same interval documented by 96 egg sets collected in San Diego County from 1895 to 1942.

Migration: The Black-chinned Hummingbird's spring migration takes place largely in April. From 1997 to 2001, the earliest date reported ranged from 15 March (2001, two at Whelan Lake, G6, J. Smith) to 2 April. The Black-chinned Hummingbird is a rare migrant through the Anza-Borrego Desert, recorded as late as 12 May (1997, three at Agua Caliente Springs, M26, E. C. Hall) and 21 May (1995, one at Lower Willows, D23, L. Clark, C. Sankpill). At the latter location, a riparian oasis, the species could nest irregularly.

Fall migration begins by 11 July with reports from nonbreeding localities on that date from Bucksnot Mountain (C20) in 1999 (P. Flanagan) and Cuyamaca Rancho State Park (N20) in 1998 (B. Siegel). Fall migration peaks in late August and early September. Adult males depart in August,



weeks before the last females or immatures are seen (and heard) in early October. The latest recorded dates are 10 October (1981, Tijuana River valley, E. Copper, AB 36:218, 1982) and 12 October (1980, one at Point Loma, AB 35:227, 1981).

Winter: The Black-chinned Hummingbird is casual in California in winter, not yet confirmed with a specimen. Most reports are likely misidentifications. The best-supported records are of birds, none adult males, identified by call by observers aware of the species' rarity at this season. In San Diego County such records are of one at La Jolla 13 January 1990 (J. O'Brien, AB 44:330, 1990), two at Point Loma 28 December 1986 (J. Oldenettel, AB 41:330, 1987), and six in Balboa Park, although four of these are likely of a single individual that returned annually to the

same canyon from 1979 to 1982 (AB 27:339, 1983). All wintering birds were in ornamental trees including flowering eucalyptus.

Conservation: In contrast to Anna's and Costa's, the Black-chinned Hummingbird has undergone no obvious changes in its distribution or abundance in San Diego County. Breeding birds have moved into developed areas built over former sage scrub on only a small scale, where sycamores or cottonwoods have been used in landscaping, as in Greenwood Cemetery, San Diego (S10) or Hilltop Park, Chula Vista (U11). Where native trees have been retained amid low-intensity development, the Black-chinned Hummingbird remains, though it may be outcompeted by Anna's Hummingbird around feeders, as is Costa's (Stiles 1973).