

## STILTS AND AVOCETS — FAMILY RECURVIROSTRIDAE

Black-necked Stilt *Himantopus mexicanus*

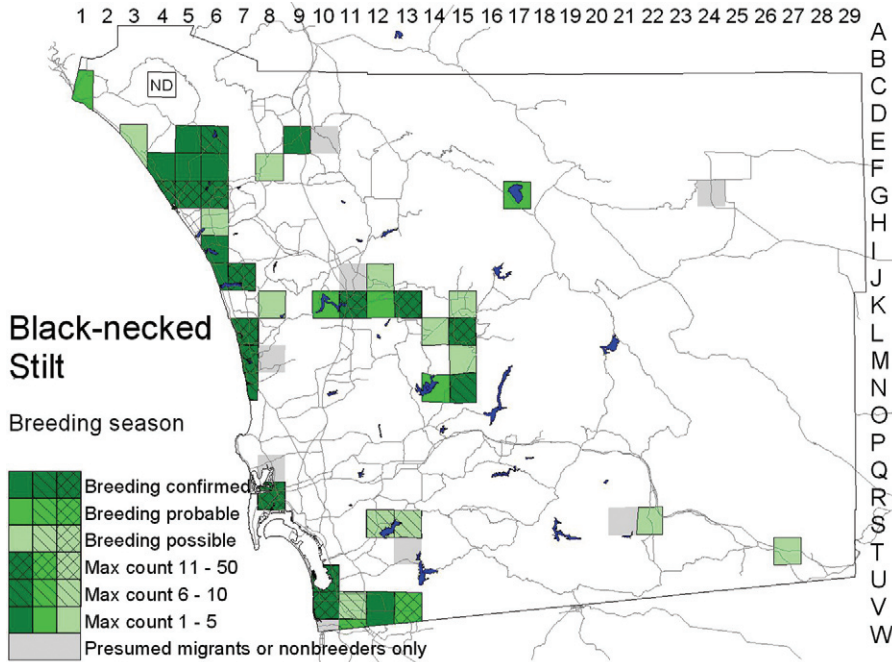
The comical Black-necked Stilt is a common year-round resident of shallow lagoons and ponds along San Diego County's coast. It avoids tidal mudflats but uses some inland lakes and ponds—especially sewage ponds. The salt works of south San Diego Bay are by far the stilt's primary site in San Diego County, hosting a third to a half of the approximately 1000 stilts wintering in the county. The stilt apparently colonized the county as a breeding species in the 1930s and 1940s; by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it was about as abundant in summer as at other seasons.

**Breeding distribution:** The ponds of the south San Diego Bay salt works (U10/V10) offer the stilt ideal foraging habitat, while the dikes offer ideal nest sites. On their weekly surveys of the salt works through spring and summer 1993, Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) found



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

close to 200 stilts, and in summer 1997 Michael R. Smith estimated 100 nests. In the Tijuana River estuary (V10), the stilts prefer the old sewage ponds and gravel pits, now reintegrated into the estuary (up to 70 on 21 March

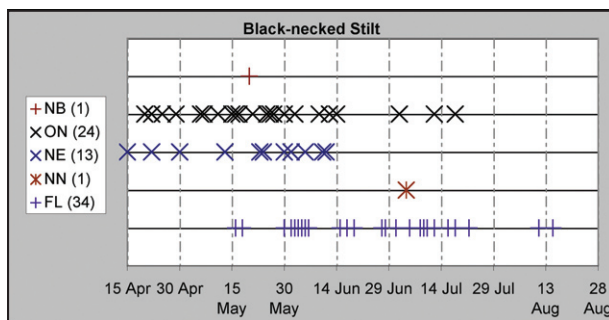


1999, C. G. Edwards). Mission Bay attracts few stilts, with no suggestion of breeding, but the San Diego River flood-control channel and Famosa Slough (R8) are regular breeding sites (up to 25 on 8 April 2000, Y. Ikegaya). In northern San Diego County the stilt occurs at all coastal wetlands, with nesting confirmed for most of them. In this region the most important sites are the east basin of Batiquitos Lagoon (J7; up to 140 on 3 April 1998, F. Hall) and San Elijo Lagoon (L7; average 100 on June–September monthly surveys 1973–83, King et al. 1987).

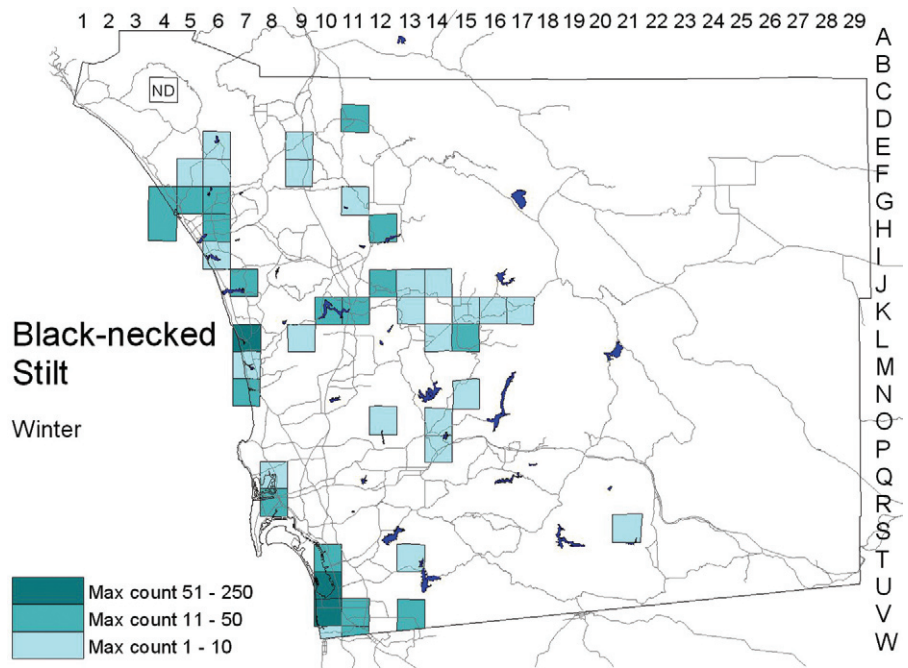
Breeding stilts are also fairly widespread inland, though generally uncommon. There they occur mainly in the coastal lowland and especially in the valleys

of the lower Santa Margarita and San Luis Rey rivers, where there are many ponds. Fifty on a pond at Siempre Viva and La Media roads, Otay Mesa (V13), 12 June 2001 (P. Unitt) and 24 (including juveniles) at ponds at the west end of Santa Maria Valley (K13) 14 July 2000 (P. M. von Hendy) are high inland counts for the breeding season. At 1300–1400 feet elevation, the most inland sites at which we confirmed stilt breeding were Santa Maria Valley, sewage ponds at the base of Spangler Peak in San Vicente Valley (L15; 12 on 6 June 2000, A. Mauro), and Barona Valley (N15; six, including young, on 16 July 2001, J. Smith). But the species may breed also at Lake Henshaw (G17; up to four on 18 June 2000, P. Unitt), the upper end of Lake Morena (S22; up to 12 on 2 July 2000, R. and S. L. Breisch), and Tule Lake (T27; up to four on 6 June 2001, J. K. Wilson).

**Nesting:** The Black-necked Stilt nests on the ground, sometimes amid low vegetation, sometimes in the open, as on the dikes of sewage ponds or the salt works. If there is loose debris around the nest, the birds gather it around the eggs. The adults call constantly and feign injury and incubation as an intruder approaches the nest, driving birders as well as predators to distraction. Our dates for nests with eggs or incubating adults ranged from 15 April to 18 July.



**Migration:** Information on stilt movements in San Diego County is contradictory, perhaps because of changes in habitat use by season and the irregularity of water levels attractive to the birds. Unitt (1984) reported the species most abundant in fall migration, peaking in August. At Lake Hodges K. L. Weaver noted a maximum of 30 on 3 August 1985. At San Elijo Lagoon, King et al. (1987) found the stilt most common from June to September, least common from November to March. In the salt works, Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) found the numbers maintained from February to August 1993 increasing to a higher level from September 1993 to February 1994.



At ponds in the Borrego Valley the stilt is a rare migrant, recorded from 28 March (P. D. Ache) to 12 May in spring, from 31 July to 22 September in fall (ABDSP database). Numbers there are usually small; the maximum is of 25 at the Borrego sewage ponds (H25) 25–26 April 1987 (A. G. Morley).

**Winter:** The stilt’s distribution in winter is quite similar to that during the breeding season. In the salt works, Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) found up to 685 on 9 February 1994; during the atlas period, our maximum there was 253 on 19 December 1998 (D. C. Seals et al.). Along the north San Diego County’s coast, where the stilt becomes less abundant in winter, our high counts were of 40 in the Santa Margarita River estuary (G4) 10 December 1999 (P. A. Ginsburg), 39 at sewage ponds near there (G5) 6 December 1998 (R. E. Fischer), and 80 at San Elijo Lagoon 22 December 2000 (G. C. Hazard). Numbers inland ranged up to 30 at Whelan Lake (G6) 23 December 2000 (D. K. Adams) and 41 at Siempre Viva and La Media roads 29 December 2000 (P. Unitt).

From 1997 to 2002 our winter records farthest inland were of one in Ballena Valley (K17) 15 January 1999 (D. C. Seals) and three on the north side of Lake Morena (S21) 24 February 2002 (R. and S. L. Breisch). The species has been found once on a Lake Henshaw Christmas bird count, with two on 19 December 1994, and once on an Anza–Borrego Christmas bird count, with one on 31 December 1988.

**Conservation:** The Black-necked Stilt was first found nesting in San Diego County in 1931 (Willett 1933); previously it was known as a migrant only (Stephens 1919a). Creation of the salt works undoubtedly increased the stilt’s numbers greatly, and the installation of sewage ponds and reservoirs added new sites. Kenneth L. Weaver suspected nesting inland at Lake Hodges since the late 1970s and first confirmed it there and in the San Pasqual Valley (J12)

in 1982. Over the final quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the stilt's numbers seem to have held steady.

**Taxonomy:** The classification of the world's stilts has varied, but the current practice (A. O. U. 1998) is to

group the subspecies of the New World, including that of Hawaii, under *Himantopus mexicanus* (Müller, 1776). The nominate subspecies occurs throughout North America.