

Black-throated Gray Warbler

Dendroica nigrescens

William E. Haas

The handsome Black-throated Gray Warbler occurs in San Diego County primarily during migration, but even then it is only uncommon to fairly common. It is rare but regular in winter, when several are found annually, mainly in riparian woodland or ornamental trees. Historically, the species was rare in summer, though the atlas study revealed small numbers in mixed conifer-oak woodland in all of the county's higher mountain ranges. Remarkably, in the late 1990s a population burgeoned in the canyon of the San Luis Rey River just below Lake Henshaw, swelling to more than 70 pairs by 2003.

Breeding distribution: The Black-throated Gray Warbler is most widespread on Hot Springs Mountain, where it occurs uncommonly around the base as well as near the summit (up to five, including four singing males, in Lost Valley, D21, 25 June 1998, P. Unitt). It breeds more sparsely on Palomar Mountain (two family groups one quarter mile apart near the Palomar Observatory, D15, 12 July 2000, K. L. Weaver), on Volcan Mountain (H20; one on 23 or 30 May 1999, A. P. and T. E. Keenan; I20; three 30–31 May 1993, P. Unitt), in the Cuyamaca Mountains (up to six, including four singing males, at William Heise County Park, K20, 19 May 1998, E. C. Hall), and in the Laguna Mountains (up to five singing males near Oasis Spring, N23, 24 May 2001, K. J. Winter).

Completely unexpected was the Black-throated Gray Warbler's colonization of the San Luis Rey River between Lake Henshaw and La Jolla Indian Reservation (F16/G16). Other nesting locations for the species in San Diego County are at elevations of 4200 feet and above, but the section of canyon the warblers inhabit along the San Luis Rey ranges in elevation from 2300 to 2700 feet. The Black-throated Gray first appeared as a summer visitor in this area, which Haas has studied intensively since 1993, only in 1995, when it nested. The numbers soon ballooned astonishingly, reaching at least 25 pairs in 2000 and at least 70 in 2003. Elsewhere in San Diego County the species' breeding habitat is patchy woodland of pine and oak, especially the canyon live oak, at least on Palomar and Hot Springs mountains (K. L. Weaver). But along the San Luis Rey the coast live oak dominates, with velvet ash and willow trees at the water's edge.

Nesting: Haas has found 26 Black-throated Gray Warbler nests along the San Luis Rey River; all were as described by Bent (1953), built of grasses and leafy forbs, bits of cocoons, dry leaves, plant down, and hair, always with feathers woven into the interior lining. Harrison (1978) reported that nests are woven together and suspended from the branch with spider webs; E. C. Hall observed a female making repeated trips for nest material to spider webs at William Heise County Park. Nests found recently in San Diego County were built well out on lower to inter-



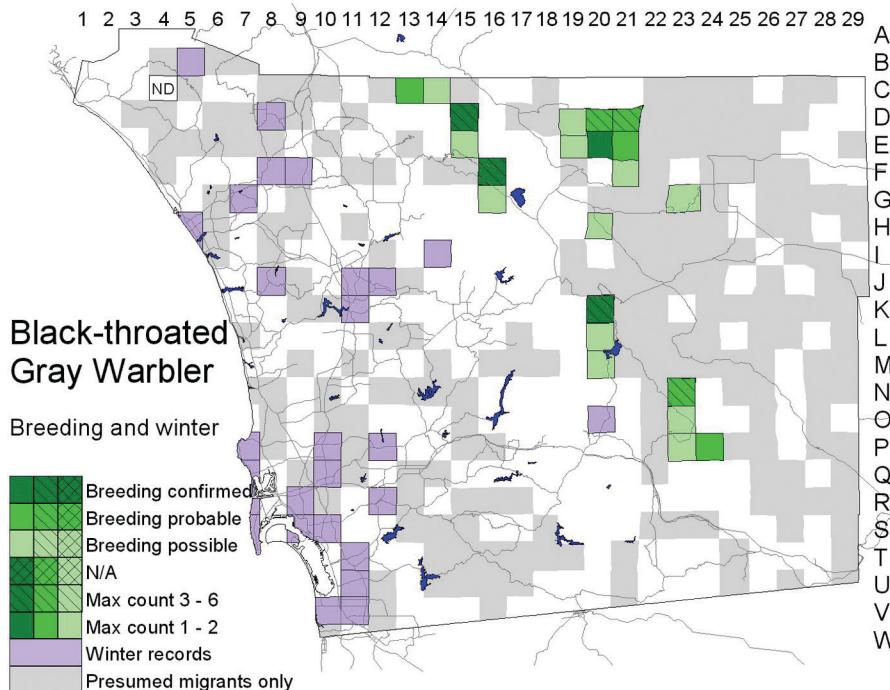
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

mediate limbs of coast live oaks along the San Luis Rey River, in canyon live oaks on Palomar and Hot Springs mountains, in incense cedar in the Cuyamaca Mountains, and in ponderosa pine on Palomar (W. E. Haas, K. L. Weaver). All nests were 15 or more feet above the ground; two along the San Luis Rey River were over 40 feet above the ground.

Bent (1953) reported clutch sizes of three to five, with four the usual number. Along the San Luis Rey River fledglings are usually three or four per brood, with some variation from year to year, possibly related to weather and availability of prey. The Black-throated Gray Warbler is generally thought to have only one brood per year, but observations of adults with nest material into June and nests with eggs as late as July suggest double broods (Guzy and Lowther 1997). During the atlas period at least two pairs along the San Luis Rey River raised two broods per year, in 1999 and 2001 (W. E. Haas).

In San Diego County Black-throated Gray Warblers lay eggs at least from early May to mid June. Most young have fledged by mid July.

Migration: In spring, the Black-throated Gray Warbler arrives annually in late March. During the atlas period, first dates ranged from 24 to 30 March. One in Balboa Park (R9) 10 March 1998 (J. K. Wilson) had presumably wintered in the area; the earliest spring arrival date recorded is 20 March (1976, AB 30:886, 1976; 1983, AB 37:911, 1983). Migrants continuing northward pass through the county primarily in April; our largest counts were of 22 at Wilderness Gardens (D11) 5 April 1997 (V. Dineen), 28 in Carrizo Valley (O28) 19 April 2000 (D. C. Seals), and 25 at Vallecito (M25) 29 April 1997 (M. C. Jorgensen). Few are seen after the middle of May; our latest records of spring migrants are of two along Vallecito Creek near Campbell Grade (M23) 20 May 1999 (R. Thériault) and one near Barrel Spring (G20) 24 May 1998 (C. G. Edwards). The birds arrive in local breeding habitat beginning in late April and remain through July. Fall migration extends mainly from 15 August (1998, one along Roblar Creek, C5, J. M. Wells) through November. Single birds along the Elephant Tree Trail (K29) 3 December 1991 (A. G. Morley) and at Tamarisk Grove (I24) 4 December 1988 were probably late migrants. Fall



migrants are fewer than spring migrants, with no more than five per day and usually only one or two.

Winter: San Diego County lies at the northern edge of the Black-throated Gray Warbler's usual winter range. Countywide, about 10 were reported per year through the atlas period. Eight on the San Diego Christmas bird count 18 December 1999 was a record high for the county, though the maximum per atlas square per day was only two. Almost all wintering Black-throated Gray Warblers are in the coastal lowland, but birds near Margarita Peak (B5) 31 January 1988 (W. E. Haas) and near Oakzanita (O20) 13 and 28 January 1999 (D. W. Povey, M. B. Stowe) were at elevations up to 3900 feet in oak woodland more suited to breeding. There are also three late December records from the Borrego Valley from Anza-Borrego Christmas bird counts.

Conservation: Although the Black-throated Gray Warbler is not a common species, its numbers in San

Diego County appear to be on the rise. Reasons for the sudden expansion into the oak woodlands below the Lake Henshaw dam could include displacement from forest at higher elevations following a nearby fire in 1999 and the low level of cowbird parasitism currently enjoyed by all songbirds nesting at this site. This species may be a good colonizer once it invades suitable new habitats; for example, it has colonized Vancouver Island only since 1950 (Guzy and Lowther 1997). It also responds positively to the early successional stages of forest regeneration within certain forest types (Paige et al. 1999).

Taxonomy: The Black-throated Gray Warbler is sometimes divided into two subspecies, a shorter-winged nominate *D. nigrescens* (Townsend, 1837)

breeding west of the Cascade Range in the Pacific Northwest, south to northern California, and a longer-winged *D. n. halseii* (Giraud, 1841) with more white in the tail breeding in the remainder of the species' range. Morrison (1990) identified a difference in song between these two populations in Oregon, but adequate testing of the size and plumage differences over the entire range of the species, which would allow a decision on the subspecies' validity, has yet to be done. Migrants and winter visitors to San Diego County are presumably nominate *nigrescens*, but the identity of the local breeding population is unclear. When he proposed the division of the Black-throated Gray into two subspecies, Oberholser (1930) included southern California in the breeding range of *halseii*.