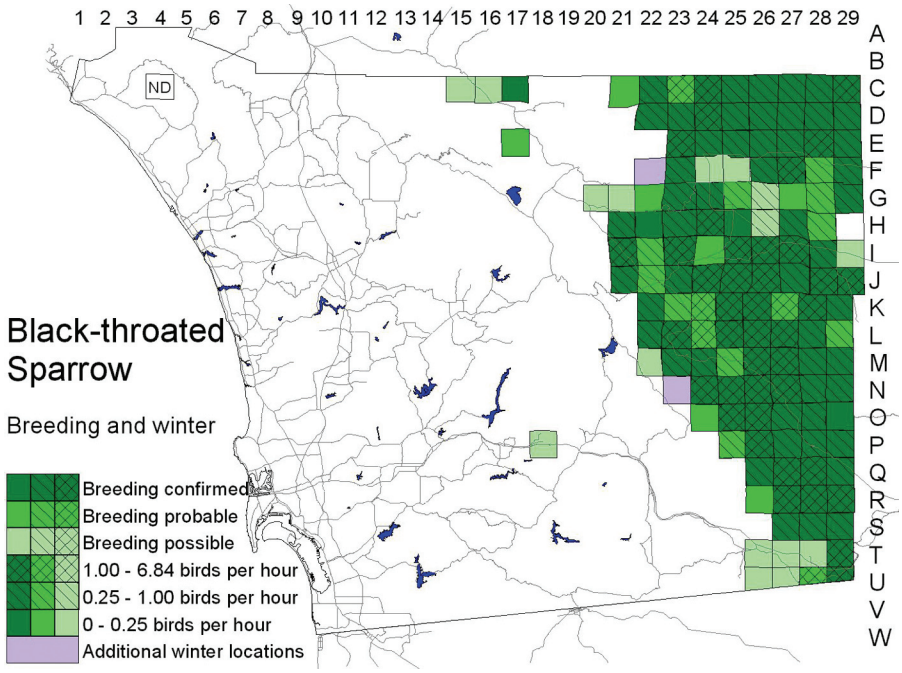
## Black-throated Sparrow *Amphispiza bilineata*

Few birds evoke the rugged beauty of the Anza–Borrego Desert more than the Black-throated Sparrow. Rocky bajadas graced with agaves, yuccas, cacti, and thorny shrubs are its prime habitat, and it is common there year round. It ranges upslope into the junipers and, in smaller numbers, down onto the valley floors. To the east its numbers diminish, until around the Salton Sea it is absent.

**Breeding distribution:** The Black-throated Sparrow occurs almost throughout the Anza–Borrego Desert but very little outside it. Its numbers are highest on well-drained slopes supporting a diversity of cacti and thorny shrubs. In such areas, searching for a day, one can reach counts as high as over 50 in Chuckwalla Wash (J24) 15 April 2001 (L. and M. Polinsky), 82 around Jacumba (U28) 20 March 1998 (C. G. Edwards), and 100, including 90 singing males, around Indian Hill (R28) 26 April 1999 (J. O. Zimmer). On valley floors, especially on alkaline soil sparsely grown with halophytic shrubs, the

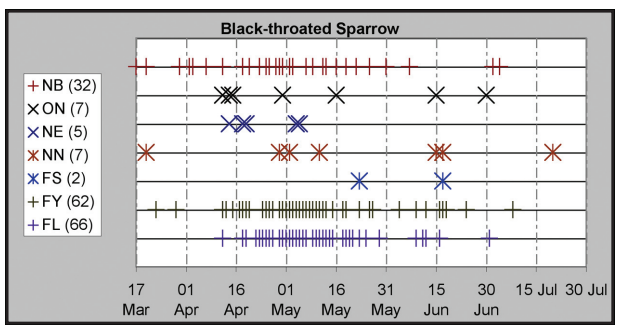
*Photo by Jack C. Daynes*

Black-throated Sparrow is quite uncommon. Only in the Ocotillo Wells off-road vehicle area, though, does the species appear absent from an entire atlas square (H29). Altitudinally, Black-throated Sparrows range from under 200 feet near Ocotillo Wells (J29) to over 5000 feet along the ridgeline of the Santa Rosa Mountains (C27).




Toward the west, the Black-throated Sparrow drops out as chamise crowds out desert shrubs along the divide. Along the Mexican border, the Black-throated Sparrow extends west as far as Lake Domingo (U26, 21 May 1997, F. L. Unmack), still east of the Tecate Divide. In the Ranchita area, a few range a short distance onto the coastal slope west to Cañada Buena Vista (G20, one singing male 12 May 2001, A. P. and T. E. Keenan). Also on the coastal slope, a population in the Aguanga region of Riverside County extends sparsely into San Diego County in semidesert scrub on the south-facing slopes of Dameron and Oak Grove valleys, e.g., one carrying food items northeast of Oak Grove (C17) 9 June 2001 (J. M. and B. Hargrove). A tenuous linkage between Oak Grove and Ranchita is possible, implied by a report of three Black-throated Sparrows on Aguanga Ridge near Sunshine Summit (E17) 25 April 2001 (J. D. Barr).

Elsewhere on the coastal slope, the only suggestion of Black-throated Sparrow breeding before or during the atlas period was a single singing male in a patch of native needlegrass on the south slope of Poser Mountain (P18) 18 June 1999, not relocated six days later (K. J. Winter). In the record dry year of 2002, however, two appeared in burned chaparral just east of Buckman Springs (R22) in mid May (M. Sadowski, J. K. Wilson), with one still singing territorially 15 June (M. B. Stowe), and yet another was reported from north of Pine Valley (P21) in July 2002 (N. Ferguson). On the Pacific slope of Baja California, the Black-throated Sparrow ranges north to Sangre de Cristo and San Rafael Valley, just east of Ensenada and only about 50 miles south of the international border.




**Nesting:** The Black-throated Sparrow builds its cup nest in a wide variety of desert shrubs and cacti. Nest plants reported by atlas observers—desert lavender, ocotillo, smoketree, and cholla—are all spiny enough to offer the nest substantial protection. Elsewhere Black-throated Sparrows commonly nest in nonthorny shrubs like the creosote bush (Johnson et al. 2002). Little was known of the schedule of Black-throated Sparrow nesting in San Diego County before our field work for the atlas. Rain stimulates this species to nest, and the birds may raise two broods in wetter years (Johnson et al. 2002). Our observations suggest that egg laying ranges from about 5 March to 8 July, making even three broods possible. A nest with young 2–4 days old in Palo Verde Canyon (E28) 20 March 1998 (P. D. Jorgensen) implies eggs laid about 5 March. In dry years, though, there is little nesting activity before April. A pair was still building a nest near Sentenac Ciénaga (J23) 4 July 1999 (R. Thériault), and nestlings hatched—in a nest built in a hanging basket around a house—in Borrego Springs (G24) 20 July 2000 (P. D. Jorgensen).

**Migration:** San Diego County's population of the Black-throated Sparrow is apparently resident, but that breeding in the northern part of the species' range is migratory. Such migrants occur rarely near the coast, most frequently in fall. There are only six coastal records in spring, between 26 March (1995, Torrey Pines State Reserve, N7, S. Summers, NASFN 49:311, 1995) and 30 May (1984, Point Loma, S7, V. P. Johnson, AB 38:965, 1984). Black-throated Sparrows, still in juvenile plumage, are somewhat more frequent along the coast in the fall, with at least 21 individuals reported between 20 August (1984) and 11 October (1973 and 1984; AB 28:111, 1974; 39:104, 1985). An adult in downtown San Diego (S9) 10 July 1997 (R. Scalf, FN 51:1055, 1997) was perhaps an early fall migrant or postbreeding disperser.

**Winter:** The distribution and abundance of the Black-throated Sparrow in winter do not differ noticeably from those in the breeding season, though the birds flock more in winter. Maximum winter counts are similar, with up to 100 in Borrego Palm Canyon (F23) 19 December 1999 (A. DeBolt) and 72 in the Table Mountain/In-Ko-Pah area (T29) 2 February 1999 (L. J. Hargrove). Numbers

increased following the wet winter of 1997–98 but far less dramatically than in some other species of sparrows. Small numbers still occur in winter on the north sides of Dameron and Oak Grove valleys (maximum winter count two northeast of Oak Grove, C17, 31 December 2000, L. J. Hargrove). There are two coastal winter records, of one near Sweetwater Dam (S12) 21 December 1969 (AFN 24:541, 1970) and one in Coronado (S9) 11 December 1988 (J. Oldenettel, AB 43:368, 1989).

**Conservation:** Living largely on land conserved by Anza–Borrego Desert State Park and the Bureau of Land Management, on terrain that isolates it from human disturbance, and adapted to a harsh climate, the Black-throated Sparrow seems insulated from man-made problems. Ever longer droughts, though, could depress its population and shift its range to the west.

**Taxonomy:** *A. b. deserticola* Ridgway, 1898, is the only subspecies known or expected in California.