

### Blue Grosbeak *Passerina caerulea*

Lush, low plants, growing in damp swales, offer prime habitat for the Blue Grosbeak. The grosbeak is primarily a summer visitor to San Diego County, locally common at the edges of riparian woodland and in riparian scrub like young willows and mulefat. Blue Grosbeaks can also be common in grassy uplands with scattered shrubs. Migrants are rarely seen away from breeding habitat, and in winter the species is extremely rare.

**Breeding distribution:** The Blue Grosbeak has a distribution in San Diego County that is wide but patchy. Areas of concentration correspond to riparian corridors and stands of grassland; gaps correspond to unbroken chaparral, forest, waterless desert, and extensive development. Largely insectivorous in summer, the Blue Grosbeak forages primarily among low herbaceous plants, native or exotic. So valley bottoms, where the water necessary for the vegetation accumulates, provide the best habitat. Grassland is also often good habitat, as can be seen on Camp Pendleton (the species' center of abundance in San Diego County) and from Warner Valley south over Mesa Grande to Santa Ysabel Valley. Blue Grosbeaks take advantage of grassland invaded by nonnative plants, using stands of mustard. Because of its preference for herbaceous undergrowth, the Blue Grosbeak is more widespread after wet winters than after dry ones. It is primarily a species of low to middle elevations but probably

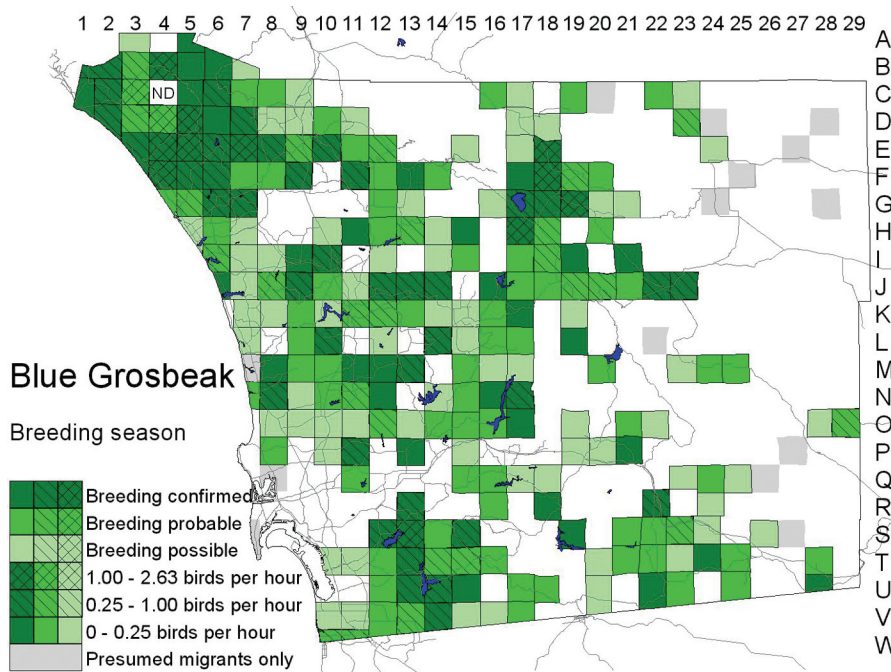


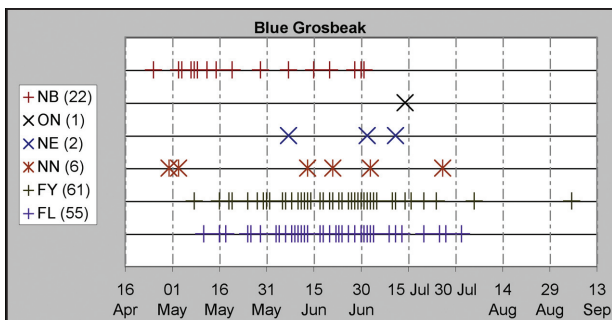
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

breeds up to 4100 feet elevation north of Julian (J20; up to nine on 1 July 1999, M. B. Stowe) and to 4600 feet at Lake Cuyamaca (M20; up to five on 10 July 2001, M. B. Mulrooney). A male near the Palomar Observatory (D15) 11 June–21 July 1983 (R. Higson, AB 37:1028, 1983) was exceptional—and in an exceptionally wet El Niño year. In the Anza–Borrego Desert the Blue Grosbeak is confined as a breeding bird to natural riparian oases.

**Nesting:** The Blue Grosbeak places its cup nest in herbaceous vegetation, shrubs, or trees, with no one type of site apparently favored. The nest is usually hidden in dense vegetation, and difficult to find, accounting for atlas observers' reporting only eight. The one whose situation was described was 3 to 4 feet above the ground in coyote brush.

After wet years, Blue Grosbeaks enjoy a long breeding season. Then they pair, build a nest, and lay within a week of arriving. Nests with nestlings along the San Diego River near Lakeside (P13) 30 April 1998 (W. E. Haas), at Goodan Ranch County Park (N12) 3 May 1998 (W. E. Haas), and fledglings at the Wild Animal Park (J12) 11 May 1998 (D. and D. Bylin) must have come from clutches laid around the earliest recorded date for eggs of the Blue Grosbeak in California, 18 April (Austin 1968). The season ran late that year too, with young being fed at Lake Henshaw (G17) 5 September 1998 (C. G. Edwards). Raising of





second broods is apparently common (Ingold 1993) but probably more so after wet years than dry ones.

**Migration:** In spring, Blue Grosbeaks begin arriving in mid April. From 1997 through 2001 we recorded earliest dates ranging from 11 April (1998, two in Oriflamme Canyon, L22, D. and C. Batzler; 2001, one along San Mateo Creek, C2, S. Brad) to 16 April. No earlier dates appear in the literature. A report from Otay Valley (V12) 22 March 1998 (P. Walsh) is so much earlier than other spring dates it more likely represents a wintering bird. In migration, Blue Grosbeaks are rare away from their breeding habitat. From 1997 through 2001 we recorded only about 15 such migrants in spring. The latest of these was at Point Loma (S7) 17 May 1997 (C. G. Edwards). In fall, migrants pause little in San Diego County. By late September the species is very rare, and 1 November (1984, one at Point Loma, R. E. Webster, AB 39:104, 1985) is the latest recorded fall date.

**Winter:** During the atlas period, one was near Moretti's Junction (H18) at the surprisingly high elevation of 2800 feet on 12 December 2000 (P. Unitt, M. G. Mathos), and

another was at the Dairy Mart pond in the Tijuana River valley (V11) on 9 December 2001 (G. McCaskie). The only previous records are from Escondido (I10) 20–22 February 1957 (AFN 11:291, 1957), Otay Mesa (V12) 29 January 1964, Solana Beach (L7) 22 February–13 March 1964 (McCaskie et al. 1967c), and the Sweetwater River in National City (T10) 12 December 1979 (AB 34:308, 1980).

**Conservation:** As a species primarily of undergrowth, the Blue Grosbeak shows no ability to cope with urbanization. Occurrences in isolated patches of suitable habitat within heavily developed areas are rare (one in Tecolote Canyon, Q8, 14 June 1999, J. C. Worley; one singing male near the mouth of the Sweetwater River, T10, 30 June 1999, P. Unitt). Loss of riparian habitat to agriculture, golf courses, and sand mining have undoubtedly taken their toll, but the Blue Grosbeak never experienced population collapse on the scale of some other riparian songbirds. The Blue Grosbeak has been subject to heavy parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird in Orange County (7 of 7 nests parasitized in 1949, Bleitz 1956), but the effect on the grosbeak's population is unclear; it may have been able to sustain the parasitism better than smaller birds. Yet the Blue Grosbeak is not represented among 38 cowbird-parasitized egg sets collected in San Diego County 1915–52.

**Taxonomy:** San Diego County specimens are all *P. c. salicaria* (Grinnell, 1911), with a smaller bill than the subspecies east of the Colorado River. The inclusion of the Blue Grosbeak in the genus *Passerina*, so strongly suggested by the birds' calls, songs, posture, behavior, and plumage, is now supported by mitochondrial DNA as well (Klicka et al. 2001).