

Brewer's Blackbird *Euphagus cyanocephalus*

Another colonial icterid, Brewer's Blackbird was one of southern California's early urban adapters. It became a common resident in city parks and shopping centers and capitalized on the clearing of chaparral for ranchettes in the countryside. But it remains common in the less-developed regions of the county where ponds, low grass, and open ground offer foraging. For nesting, exotic dense-foliaged vegetation suits it even better than native trees. Around rural houses, Italian cypresses attract Brewer's Blackbirds the way fan palms attract Hooded Orioles. Brewer's Blackbird is a recent colonist at Borrego Springs. Yet in spite of these adaptations to civilization, something in the urban environment is not right, for Brewer's Blackbird is disappearing from many of its former haunts in San Diego.

Breeding distribution: Brewer's Blackbird is fairly widespread over the coastal slope. The larger gaps in its distribution correspond mainly to areas thickly covered with chaparral and little open country or water. Some smaller gaps, though, include considerable suitable habitat. Colonial habits lead to a patchy distribution. The greatest numbers of breeding birds are along the Highway 79 corridor from Oak Grove (C16) south

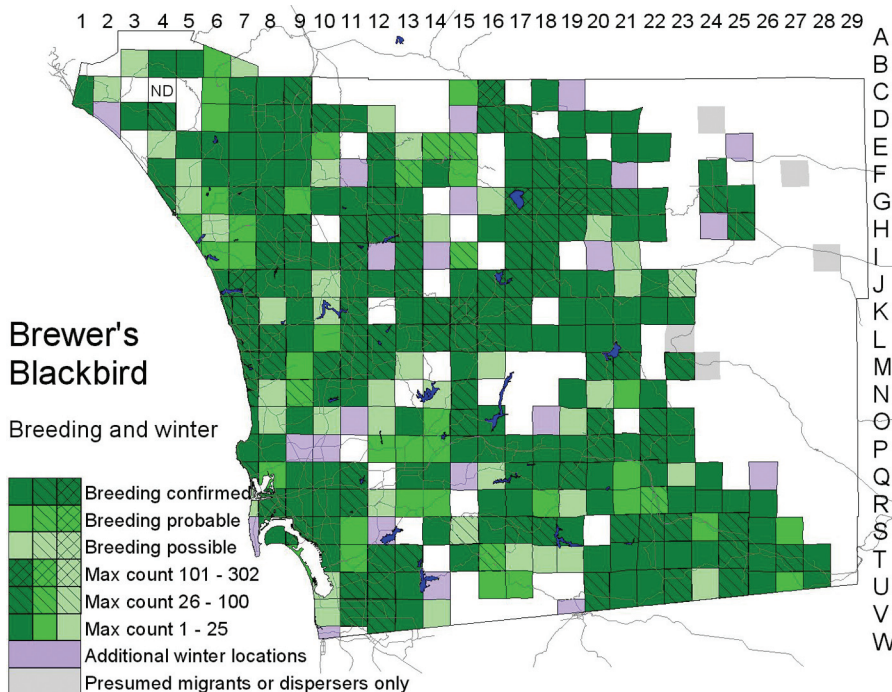


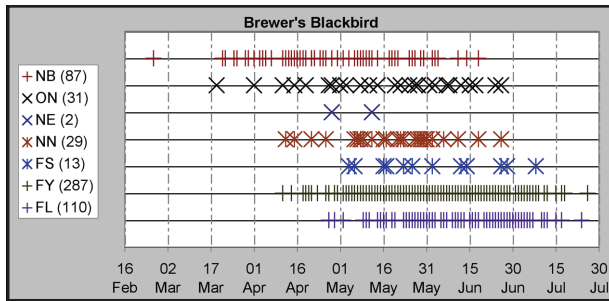
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

through Warner Valley to Santa Ysabel (J18), in the Santa Maria Valley, and on the Campo Plateau. Daily counts of Brewer's Blackbirds during the breeding season range up to 200 around Warner's Ranch (G19) 17 June 2000 (J. D. Barr) and 302 in Ramona (K15) 25 May 1998 (M. and B. McIntosh). Numbers along the coast can also be large: up to 150 at La Costa (J7) 8 July 1998 (C. C. Gorman) and 70 at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7) 1 August 1998 (S. Grain).

On the desert slope, breeding Brewer's Blackbirds extend down San Felipe Valley and Banner Canyon to Earthquake Valley (J23/K23; up to 30 on 13 June 2001, R. Thériault). The species also breeds at Butterfield Ranch in Mason Valley (M23; 25, plus active nests, 22 May 2001, P. K. Nelson). Elsewhere in the Anza-Borrego Desert, Brewer's Blackbirds breed only in the developed and agricultural areas of the Borrego Valley, where they are recent colonists. Though first reported breeding at the Roadrunner Club (F24) only in 1995 (M. L. Gabel in Massey 1998), Brewer's Blackbirds are now common around irrigated developments, with up to 40, plus nests with nestlings, at Club Circle (G24) 15 April 2001 (L. and M. Polinsky).

Nesting: Brewer's Blackbirds build their bowl-shaped nest in





a wide variety of situations: in trees, shrubs, or on the ground. The common theme is that the nest is screened from view behind thick vegetation. The Italian cypress, an exotic ornamental growing as a narrow column, offers just this kind of screening. It appears that in San Diego County Brewer's Blackbirds often select the Italian cypress preferentially, and eight of 16 Brewer's Blackbird nests whose sites atlas observers described were in this single species of tree. Eight of 24 sites described by egg collectors were also cypresses, so this preference was established decades ago. Other elevated sites reported by atlas observers included, of native plants, California rose, and, of ornamental plants, pine, podocarpus, bottlebrush, Natal plum, oleander, and ivy growing over the wall of a shopping center. Ground sites were on a creek bank in the Cuyamaca Mountains and under a bed of baby sun rose iceplant separating a gas station from a street.

Atlas records indicate that Brewer's Blackbirds usually begin nest building in late March, begin laying about 1 April, and continue to lay until about 26 June. Exceptional early nesting is attested by a bird gathering nest material at the Camp Pendleton golf course (F6) 26 February 1999 (B. E. Bell) and an occupied nest in Encinitas (K6) 19 March 2000 (J. Ciarletta). This pattern is practically identical to that of 26 egg sets collected in San Diego County 1897–1934: range 31 March–28 June, except for one dated 5 March 1932.

Migration: Brewer's Blackbird migration is noticeable only in parts of the Anza–Borrego desert where the species does not nest. There were six spring records during the atlas period, from 20 March (2001, nine at Whitaker Horse Camp, D24, K. L. Weaver) to 1 May (1999, six near Font's Point, F27, G. Rebstock, K. Forney). Massey (1998) also reported Brewer's Blackbird as a rare spring migrant in the Anza–Borrego Desert's natural habitats. Previous desert records extend as late in the spring as 20 May (Unitt 1984). Fall migration is less well known, but a few Brewer's Blackbirds have been noted at nonbreeding locations beginning 26 September (1998, one at Tamarisk Grove, I24, P. D. Jorgensen).

Winter: Where foraging is good, Brewer's Blackbirds gather into large flocks in winter, up to 1400 southwest of Ramona (L14) 3 January 1998 (W. E. Haas) and 1000 in the San Pasqual Valley (J12) the same day (M. and S. Cassidy). But the species' distribution in winter differs

little from that during the breeding season. Even in urban areas its dispersal away from breeding colonies seems slight; for example, from 1997 to 2002 we never recorded Brewer's Blackbird at Greenwood, Mount Hope, and Holy Cross cemeteries (S10) and only once even at Point Loma (S7), so often visited by birders. Brewer's Blackbird may be irregular in winter at the higher elevations, where snow covers the ground for days. We had no winter records for San Ignacio at 4900 feet elevation on the east flank of Hot Springs Mountain (E21), where counts during the breeding season ranged as high as 18 per day. But at Laguna Meadow (O23), 5400 feet elevation, wintering Brewer's Blackbirds were found repeatedly, in numbers as high as 28 on 24 December 2001 (P. Unitt).

Conservation: Brewer's Blackbird seems ideally adapted to an urban lifestyle. Shade trees and ornamental shrubbery offer it better nest sites than native vegetation. It forages readily on lawns, disturbed open areas, and even parking lots. Furthermore, the importation and management of water have created lakes and ponds that offer breeding habitat in many areas where once there was none. It seems likely that Brewer's Blackbird's population in San Diego County increased with settlement and irrigation, though all the early writers already described it as common. Now, however, the trend appears to be heading into reverse. Some colonies persist in heavily urbanized areas, as on the campus of City College (S9) and at Colina del Sol Park (R11). But Brewer's Blackbird now appears absent from Point Loma, where it occurred during the breeding season as recently as 1995. In western and central Balboa Park (R9) our only record during the breeding season was of three birds nesting 14 May 1997 (J. K. Wilson); none have been noted subsequently. The species was formerly common there. Brewer's Blackbird is now absent from the campus of San Diego State University, where it was once common too. Totals of over 1000 on the San Diego Christmas bird count, routine from the 1960s to the early 1980s, are no longer reached. The totals for Oceanside 2000–02 were the lowest for that count since 1976. Why should Brewer's Blackbird be going into decline? One possible factor is a disease of the feet that leads to loss of toes and ultimately the entire foot. This condition has been common among Brewer's Blackbirds in San Diego for decades.

Taxonomy: No new information on geographic variation in Brewer's Blackbird has come to light since Rea (1983) tentatively recognized three subspecies based largely on variation in the females. Specimens from San Diego County, as elsewhere in coastal California, are *E. c. minusculus* Oberholser, 1920, with short wings, thin bill, and pale gray female. An exception is one female from La Mesa Heights (R12) 2 October 1926, larger and browner and so apparently a migrant of *E. c. cyanocephalus* (Wagler, 1829) from the Great Basin and Rocky Mountains (Unitt 1984).