

Bufflehead *Bucephala albeola*

About 2000 Buffleheads winter on San Diego Bay, making the species the third most abundant diving duck on the bay, behind the Surf Scoter and Lesser Scaup. The Bufflehead is a common winter visitor in other coastal estuaries also. It is widespread on lakes and ponds inland but common on just a few of these. Stragglers remaining through the summer are only occasional.

Winter: South San Diego Bay is the center for the Bufflehead in San Diego County, as for so many other ducks. Weekly counts of the salt works and adjacent bay from February 1993 through February 1994 disclosed a maximum of 976 on 3 March 1993 and a steady level of about 300 through the winter of 1993–94 (Stadtlander and Konecny 1994). These numbers remained fairly consistent through the beginning of the 21st century: the San Diego Christmas bird count 15 December 2001 yielded 478 within the salt works (D. C. Seals) and 397 just outside them in southwestern San Diego Bay (P. R. Pryde). The Bufflehead is also common elsewhere in the bay: systematic counts 1993–95 recorded up to 375 in the north bay 21 December 1993 and 480 in the central bay 3 January 1994 (Mock et al. 1994, Preston and Mock



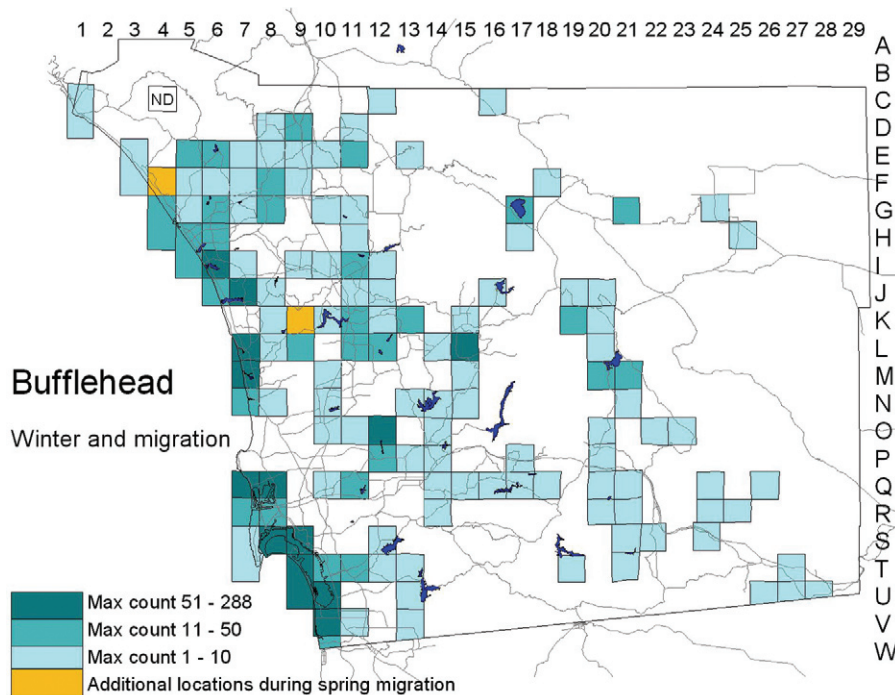
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

1995). Substantial numbers of Buffleheads winter also in Mission Bay, with up to 150 in the bay's northwest quadrant (Q7) 8 January 2000 (L. Polinsky) and 133 in the northeast quadrant (Q8) 16 January 2000 (J. C. Worley).

The Bufflehead uses all other substantial coastal wetlands as well, being most numerous in Batiquitos Lagoon (J6/J7; up to 120 on 22 December 2001, R. and A. Campbell) and the San Dieguito River estuary (M7; up to 114 on 16 December 1997, D. R. Grine). The most consistent inland sites are Dixon Lake (I11; up to 40 on 6 January 2001, L.

Hunter), sewage ponds in San Vicente Valley at the base of Spangler Peak (L15; up to 60 on 2 February 2001, A. Mauro), and the upper ponds of Santee Lakes (O12; up to 53 on 18 February 2001, R. Breisch). Smaller numbers are regular elsewhere on the coastal slope, including the higher mountains and the Campo Plateau. On ponds in the Borrego Valley the Bufflehead is rare. Most records there are of just one or two individuals and none is of over five, as at the Roadrunner Club (F24) 15 December 1987 (A. G. Morley) and at Club Circle (G24) 5 December 1998 (P. D. Ache).

Migration: Buffleheads arrive occasionally in late October (four in the San Diego River flood-control channel, R8, 22



October 1985, D. Patla; two there 25 October 1981, P. Unitt). But weekly surveys of San Diego Bay 1993–95 did not have any before 2 November (Mock et al. 1994, Preston and Mock 1995). Manning's (1995) weekly surveys of San Diego Bay found the Bufflehead's numbers there steady from December through March. Departure is largely in April. Late stragglers were four in Baticuitos Lagoon (J7) 4 May 2001 (C. C. Gorman) and two in central San Diego Bay 9 May 1994 (Preston and Mock 1995).

Summer stragglers average less than one per year in San Diego County. During the atlas period there were

three, near Ramona (K13) 26 May 2000 (P. M. von Hendy), at Big Laguna Lake (O23) 2 June 2001 (C. G. Edwards), and along the lower Sweetwater River (T11) 2 July 1998 (P. Famolaro).

Conservation: In contrast to the decreases evident in the Surf Scoter and Common Goldeneye, the Bufflehead appears to have maintained its numbers through the second half of the 20th century. Christmas bird counts suggest much annual variation but no consistent trend.