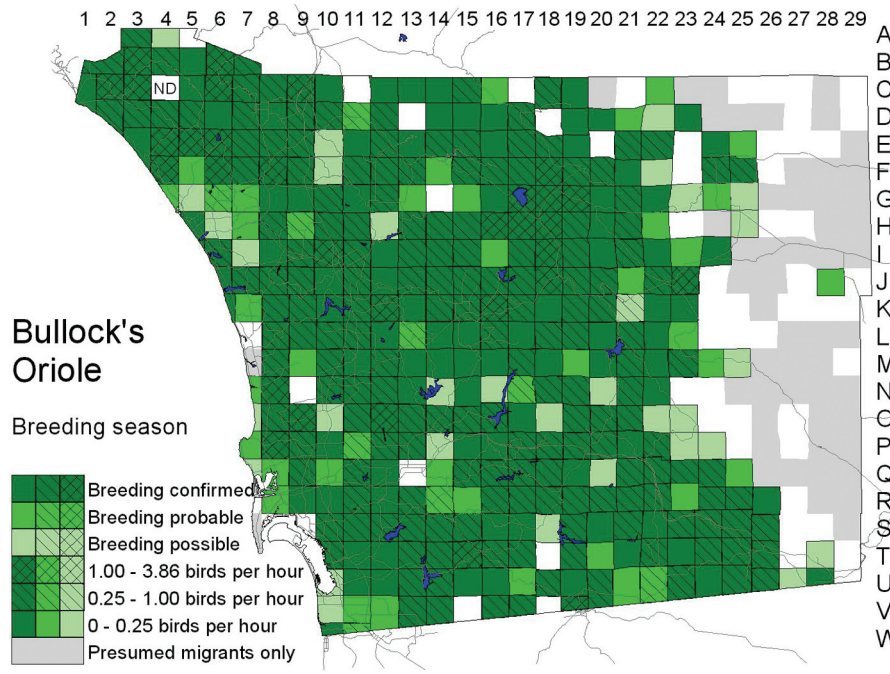
### Bullock's Oriole *Icterus bullockii*

Open woodland, woodland edges, and scattered trees are home to one of San Diego County's most colorful birds, Bullock's Oriole. Riparian edges, sycamore groves, and oak woodland were the species' primitive habitat, and the birds are still common there. Bullock's Oriole also takes full advantage of eucalyptus and other exotic trees in rural areas, where its characteristic baglike nest can be found easily—even long after the birds themselves have headed south. The species is primarily a summer visitor and migrant in San Diego County; only a few individuals are found each winter.

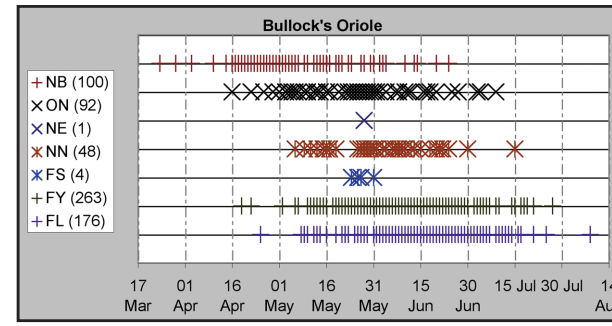
*Photo by Anthony Mercieca*

**Breeding distribution:** Bullock's Oriole breeds over practically the entire coastal slope of San Diego County. The largest numbers are in the inland valleys; there are fewer right along the coast, and the species is absent as a breeding bird from Point Loma and Coronado. The zone of greatest concentration appears to extend from Wynola (J19) and Santa Ysabel (J18) north through Mesa Grande (H17) and Warner Valley to Lake Henshaw (G17) and Warner Springs (F19), where the orioles are common both on the valley floors and in the wooded hills (31 around Mesa Grande 12 May 2001, C. and J. Manning; 30 at Lake Henshaw the same day, R. and S. L. Breisch). Even

small oak groves or scattered ranches offer enough habitat for a few pairs, so the distribution appears almost uniform at the scale of the atlas grid. There were few atlas squares (D18, V15, V18) so completely covered with treeless chaparral that the orioles were absent. Bullock's Oriole is sparse at the higher elevations, above 5000 feet, but is lacking only near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain (E20), the county's highest peak.

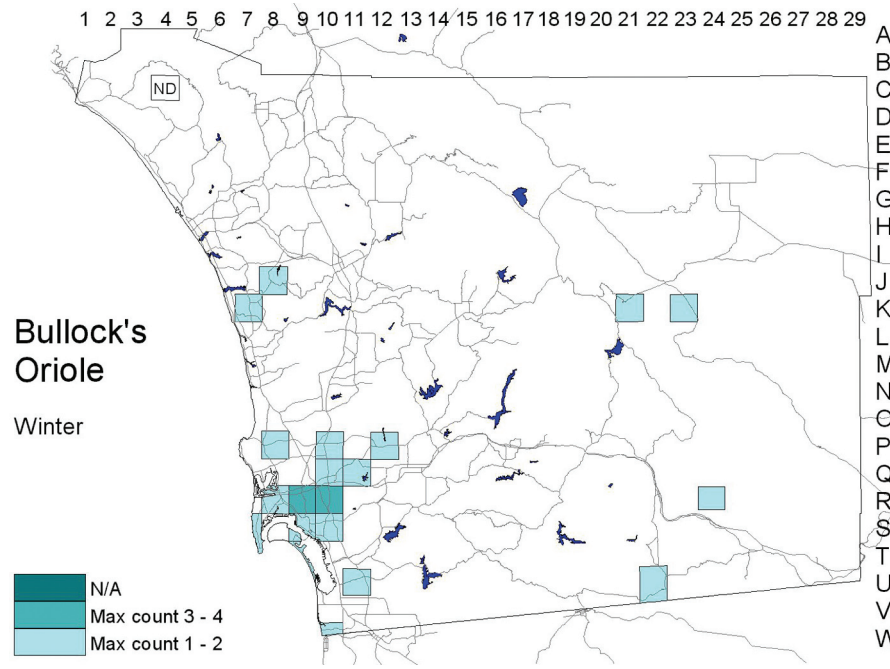



On the desert slope, Bullock's Oriole breeds in the riparian woodland along Coyote and San Felipe creeks and where trees are irrigated around buildings, as at Tamarisk Grove (I24), in Earthquake Valley (K23), and at Butterfield Ranch (M23). In the low desert Bullock's Oriole breeds uncommonly in the Borrego Valley (maximum count of breeding birds four, including one building a nest, at Ellis Farms nursery, F25, 13 May 2001, P. D. Ache). Near Ocotillo Wells (J28) the closest suggestion of breeding was an apparent pair 5 May 2000 (J. R. Barth). In southern San Diego County breeding Bullock's Orioles extend into the desert no farther than Vallecito (M24/M25; six on 11 June 2002, J. R. Barth et al.). The gap in the range is the result of lack of habitat; Bullock's Oriole is a common breeding bird in the cultivated areas of the Salton Sink (Patten et al. 2003).




**Nesting:** Bullock's Oriole builds its nest in the middle to upper levels of trees and large shrubs, often at edges or hanging over an opening. The nests are thus easy to see if not to reach, so atlas observers reported many. Described sites were in coast live oak (10), sycamore (6), eucalyptus (6), willow (3), mistletoe (2), mulefat (1), catclaw (1), mesquite (1), and deodar cedar (1), at heights of 7 to 60 feet. The pensile nests are woven of a variety of filaments: observers described nests built predominantly of grass, horsehair, dodder, and fishing line.

Twenty-eight egg sets of Bullock's Oriole collected 1889–1935 range in date from 22 April to 18 June, but atlas records imply a somewhat wider spread, from early April to early July. The two records suggesting laying as early as the first week of April were both in the wet spring of 1998 (adults carrying



insects near Upper Otay Lake, T13, 19 April, J. F. Walters; fledgling at La Costa, J7, 25 April, M. Baumgartel).

**Migration:** Bullock's Oriole occurs throughout the county as a spring migrant, moving commonly through desert habitats where it does not breed. It arrives typically in mid March. From 1997 to 2001 dates of first arrivals ranged from 11 to 18 March. The earliest date reported for San Diego County is 5 March (1982; AB 36:893, 1982), possibly 1 March (Cooper 1880). The locally breeding population presumably arrives first, with migrants headed farther north coming through mainly in April, then in decreasing numbers through May. Records for places in the Anza–Borrego Desert where the species does not breed extend as late as 17 May (2001, one in Carrizo Valley, O28, D. C. Seals). In fall, the local population departs in July and August, and migrants after 1 September are rare.

**Winter:** Bullock's Oriole is a rare winter visitor, regular in urban parks and well-wooded residential areas in San Diego, occasional in riparian woodland elsewhere in the coastal lowland. The maximum daily count in a single atlas square during the atlas period was four in Balboa Park (R9) 1 December 1998 (J. K. Wilson), but the San Diego Christmas bird count 19 December 1998 totaled five, and earlier Christmas bird counts have gone as high as 14 in San Diego 17 December 1988 and 6 in Oceanside 27 December 1981. The atlas effort generated the first winter records for the Bullock's Oriole in San Diego County outside the coastal lowland, of single birds at Banner (K21) 16 January 1999 (M. B. Stowe), Earthquake Valley (K23) 23 December 1999 (G. P. Sanders), Simmons Canyon (R24) 22 January–7 February 2000 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan, J. Larson), and Campo (U22) 31 January 2000 (C. R. Mahrdt, E. C. Hall). Still farther inland Bullock's Oriole is a casual winter visitor in the Salton Sink (Patten et al. 2003).

**Conservation:** There has been no obvious change in the abundance of breeding Bullock's Orioles through San Diego County history. The species takes readily to low-density development and has probably spread with the planting of shade trees around rural ranches. Trash like ribbon and string offers it nest material superior to natural substances. But intensive urbanization disfavors it; in the inner city it is found mainly in parks and around school campuses planted with sycamores or eucalyptus, or in eucalyptus trees bordering open areas. Conversely, wintering of Bullock's Oriole is largely a result of human modification of the landscape—the planting of exotic trees, especially eucalyptus, on whose flowers the orioles feed. Wintering of Bullock's Oriole was first recorded in San Diego County in 1957, except for Cooper's (1880) mention of one in San Diego 1 March (1862?).

**Taxonomy:** Bullock's Oriole is usually divided into two subspecies, *I. b. parvus* van Rossem, 1945, breeding mainly in California and western Arizona, and the slightly larger *I. b. bullockii* (Swainson, 1827), over the rest of the species' range. The difference is most pronounced in wing length, but even on this basis the distinction is only marginally valid. Comparison of 19 breeding males of *parvus* (type locality Jacumba, U28) from San Diego and Imperial counties (mean wing chord 95.2, standard deviation 1.95; Patten et al. 2003) with samples from British Columbia (Okanagan), Colorado (Greeley), and southern Idaho (from Rising and Williams 1999) yields adequate separation by the 75% standard as quantified by Patten and Unitt (2002). But the same comparison with samples from Kansas (Elkhart), Oklahoma (Boise City), and northern Nevada does not, so Bullock's Oriole is best considered monotypic.