

## BUSHTIT AND LONG-TAILED TITS — FAMILY AEGITHALIDAE

### Bushtit *Psaltiriparus minimus*

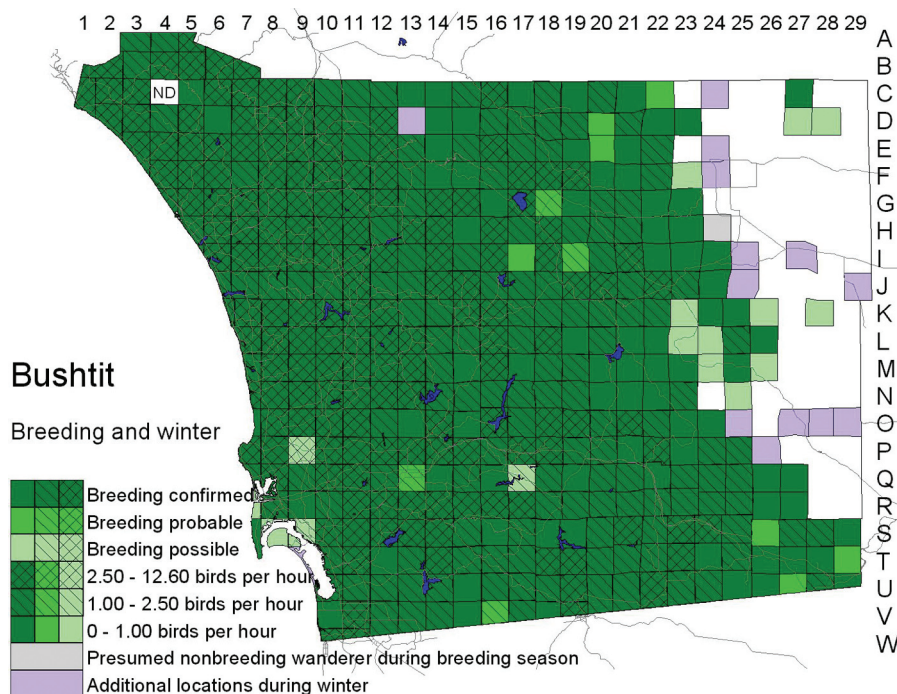
San Diego County's smallest songbird is also one of its most common. The Bushtit is a year-round resident, gathering into flocks of as many as 40 birds in late summer, fall, and winter. In spring, for nesting, the flocks break up into pairs, which sometimes have helpers. The Bushtit is one of southern California's most successful urban adapters, familiar because of its flocking habits, characteristic baglike nest, and indifference to people. Yet it remains common in native habitats too, in oak and riparian woodland, chaparral, and sage scrub.

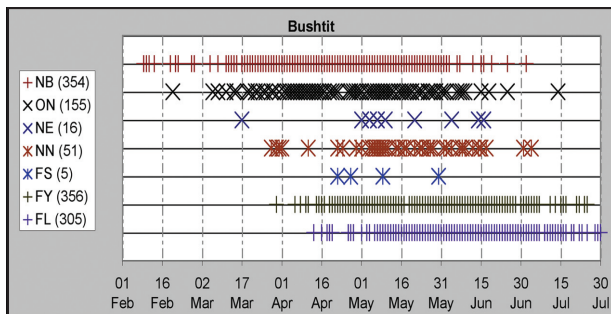
**Breeding distribution:** The Bushtit is resident over San Diego County's entire coastal slope and down the east slope of the mountain to the desert edge. Numbers are greatest in the coastal lowland, where estimates for single days are as high as 260 at San Elijo Lagoon (L7) 11 May 1999 and 250 in Lakeside (P14) 20 May 1999 (M. B. Stowe). Even as high in the mountains as 4000–4500



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

feet elevation, however, the Bushtit can be abundant in oak woodland (100 at Wynola, J19, 2 July 1999, S. E. Smith; 100 north of Julian, J20, 1 July 1999, M. B. Stowe). East down the desert slope the Bushtit becomes sparser as the chaparral gives way to open scrub, but it can be common at oases even at the base of the mountains. Points along the edge of the range are Lower Willows in Coyote Creek canyon (D23; up to 20 on 12 May 2001, B. L. Peterson), Yaqui Well (I24; family of five on 4 May 1998, P. K. Nelson), Agua Caliente Springs (M26; only one record, of one on 25 April 1998, M. U. Evans), and Dos Cabezas Spring (S29; pair nest building 18 April 1999, P. Unitt). Furthermore, the Bushtit occurs uncommonly in the pin-yons and junipers of the Santa Rosa and Vallecito mountains. Counts in these areas are under





10, except for 36 near Whale Peak (L25) 18 June 2000 (R. Thériault). A single Bushtit in Alma Wash at the east base of the Vallecito Mountains (K28) 20 May 2000 (L. J. Hargrove) was an unusual outlier. Robert Thériault (in Massey 1998) reported the Bushtit as an occasional visitor in spring as well as winter to the mesquite bosque in the center of the Borrego Valley (G25), but even with thorough coverage he did not find it there at any season from 1997 to 2002.

**Nesting:** The Bushtit's nest is unique: a bag about 6 to 8 inches long, roofed over its top, and entered through a small hole at the side just under the roof. The nest is built of spider web and bits of plant material matted into the consistency of felt or dryer lint. Some nests hang free, so their bottom swings in the wind, but often the nest is well attached by its sides to multiple vertical twigs, either hanging down or growing up. Thus the outer canopy of a coast live oak, where the twigs hang down, is an especially favored site, and this tree was the most frequent site of Bushtit nests reported by atlas observers. The exotic Peruvian pepper tree, with many pendulous twigs, is also attractive. Bushes like the broom baccharis and coyote brush with many vertical twigs are frequent sites as well; they allow the Bushtit to occupy low scrub in which these are the only taller shrubs. Bushtits nest in a wide variety of other plants, however, both native and exotic, including the invasive saltcedar and pampas grass. In and at the edges of coastal sage scrub around San Diego, of 28 nests found in 2001 and 2002 by M. A. Patten and co-workers, 10 were in laurel sumac and 7 were in California

sagebrush. Nests whose heights atlas observers reported ranged from 3 to 45 feet above the ground. The nests are surprisingly durable; months after being built, even if they have been torn apart or have fallen to the ground, the fragments can be identified by their unique texture.

The Bushtit's nesting season begins early, with nest building noted in La Jolla (O7) as early as 9 February 1998 (S. E. Smith). Eggs have been collected in California as early as 26 February (Bent 1946), but our observations do not suggest any successful clutches in which incubation was begun before about 13 March. The breeding season continues through July, with a nest along the Sweetwater River (S13) still active 14 July 1997 (P. Famolaro) and fledglings in family groups to the end of the month.

**Winter:** The Bushtit is nonmigratory, but dispersal takes occasional individuals or flocks onto the desert floor, outside the species' breeding range. Such visitors are regular in the northern half of the Borrego Valley (E24/F24), with up to 75 at Borrego Springs (F24) 19 December 1999 (P. K. Nelson et al.). Four near Halfhill Dry Lake (J29) 10 January 2000 (L. J. Hargrove), 16 in Alma Wash at the east base of the Vallecito Mountains (K28) 4 December 1999 (P. Unitt et al.), and two at Carrizo Marsh (O29) 15 February 2001 (M. C. Jorgensen) had made it almost to the Imperial County line. Bushtits remain at the higher elevations year round, as illustrated by 36 on 13 February 1999 and 40 on 9 December 2000 near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain (E20), San Diego County's highest peak (K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt).

**Conservation:** The Bushtit is as much at home in urban shade trees as in native woodland or chaparral. Bolger et al. (1997) reported the Bushtit indifferent to fragmentation of native habitat by urban development. The birds move freely between natural and artificial environments.

**Taxonomy:** Bushtits from San Diego County are like those from northwestern Baja California in being darker on the crown, back, and flanks than those from the coast of central California. Thus they represent *P. m. melanurus* Grinnell and Swarth, 1926, extending that subspecies' range north of the international border (Rea in Phillips 1986; many SDNHM specimens).