

Cassin's Kingbird *Tyrannus vociferans*

“ChiBEER!” The loud call of Cassin's Kingbird is becoming ever more familiar as this noisy bird's population increases. Once localized to sycamore groves in the coastal lowland, Cassin's Kingbird has capitalized on the proliferation of eucalyptus and other exotic tall trees, which offer it nest sites and perches as it sits on the lookout for flying insects—and flying predators. The clearing of chaparral and

sage scrub and their replacement with suburbs and rural ranches has allowed Cassin's Kingbird to expand its range and become a common year-round resident.

Breeding distribution: Cassin's Kingbird is widespread over the coastal slope of San Diego County wherever large trees are scattered on open ground. It occurs up to about 3000 feet elevation, rarely as high as about 3800

feet, as along Los Coyotes Road (F20; pair on 17 April 1999, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtd). On the east slope of the mountains, the species nests at only one site, Jacumba (U28; six on 9 April 1998, C. G. Edwards; pair nest building on 1 May 2001, F. L. Unmack).

Cassin's Kingbird is most numerous in the inland valleys, where it lives in the same habitat as the Western Kingbird. But Cassin's is fairly common along the coastal strip, as a breeding species far more common there than the Western. Thus in San Diego County the two breeding kingbirds reverse the pattern over most of their ranges, where Cassin's is the species breeding at higher elevations (Tweit and Tweit 2000). Some areas where Cassin's Kingbirds were reported in exceptionally high numbers were Lake Hodges (K10; 40, including several fledglings, 9 July 1998, R. L. Barber), Los Peñasquitos Canyon (N8; 28 on 5 July 1998, D. K. Adams), and Valley Center (G12; 21 on 6 June 1998, A. G. and D. Stanton). Along the coast, daily counts range up to 12, as at Batiquitos Lagoon (J7) 8 July 1998 (C. C. Gorman). At the upper limit of their elevational range, the birds are rare. For example, in Dameron Valley (C15) K. L. Weaver had only one record, of three on 14 June 1997; around Lake Morena (T21) R. and S. L. Breisch had no more than one pair, on 5 July 1997.

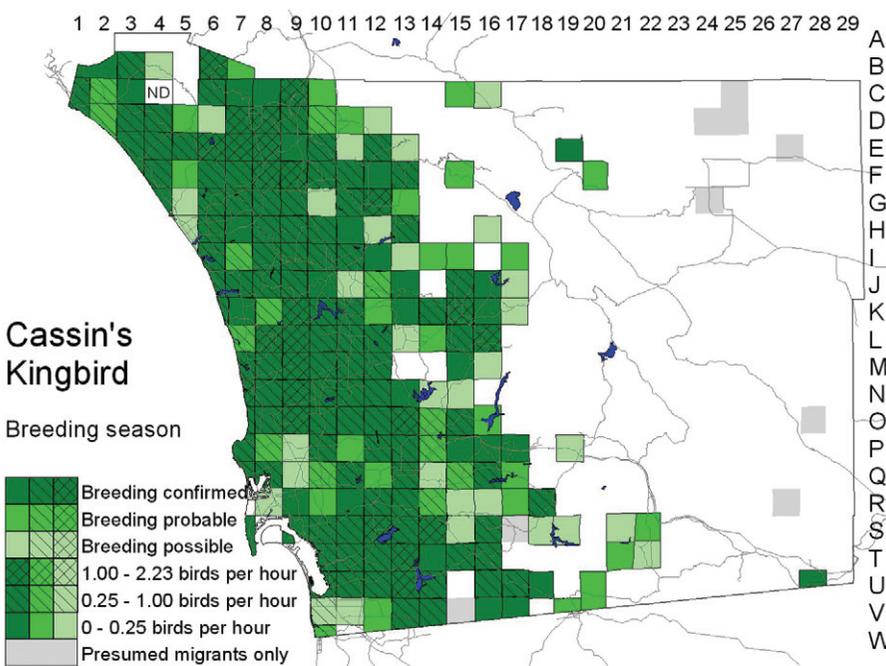
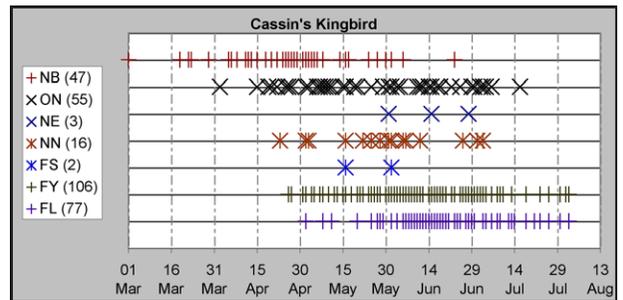
Nesting: Cassin's Kingbirds place their nests in the forks of large branches in the upper levels of tall trees. Of the 13 nests whose locations our observers described, eight were in eucalyptus trees, three in sycamores, one in a pine, and one in an unidentified conifer, at heights estimated up to 70 feet. The nests may be in rather open situations, allowing them to be seen from the ground, even when in the canopy. Cassin's Kingbird relies on aggressive nest defense rather than nest concealment, as reflected in the 61 times our observers specified "distraction display" for such defense, against crows, ravens, Western Scrub-Jays, and Red-tailed and Cooper's Hawks. Nevertheless,



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

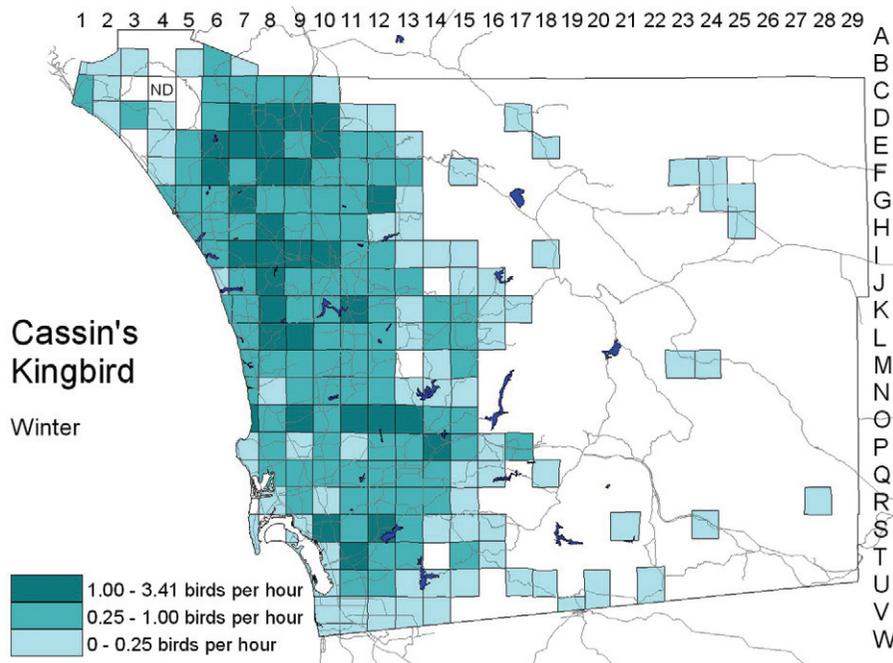
they noted also success against the kingbirds by all these predators except the Red-tailed.

Because Cassin's Kingbirds nest high in trees, determining their nesting schedule is not easy. An earliest occupied nest on 2 April, earliest nest with nestlings on 23 April, and earliest fledglings on 2 May suggest the birds begin laying in the first few days of April, agreeing with Cooper's (1870) finding them "breeding at San Diego as early as March 28th." Nest building at Oak Hill Cemetery (I12) as early as 1 March 1999 (C. Rideout) and



a male with greatly enlarged testes from Santee (P12) 14 March 2001 (SDNHM 50529) suggest that some Cassin's Kingbirds begin even earlier. With adults feeding fledglings as late as 2 August 2001 in Gold Gulch, Balboa Park (S9) and 18 August 1978 near the Santa Margarita River mouth (G4; P. Unitt), it seems likely that some Cassin's Kingbirds are double-brooded in San Diego County, in contrast to other parts of the range where the species begins nesting much later (cf. Tweit and Tweit 2000).

Migration: With Cassin's Kingbirds increasing in San Diego County in both the breeding season and winter, the passage of migrants becomes less and less noticeable. Nevertheless,



our highest counts from 1997 through 2001, of 60 southwest of Fallbrook (E7) 28 March 2001 (P. A. Ginsburg) and 41 at Lower Otay Lake (U13) 23 March 2001 (T. Stands), suggest concentrations of migrants at a season suggested by past records. Eight reports from the Anza-Borrego Desert, outside the breeding distribution, extend from 15 April (2001, one in south Borrego Springs, G24, L. Polinsky) to 7 May (2001, two in Box Canyon north of Coyote Creek, C25, D. C. Seals); four other sightings reported by Massey (1998) range as early as 22 March (1993, Yaqui Well/Tamarisk Grove, I24) and so include more of the March migration evident on the coastal side. Some of these desert records are from wilderness areas remote from trees but others are from developed areas that the species could colonize.

Winter: Neither the distribution nor abundance of Cassin's Kingbird in winter differs appreciably from that during the breeding season. The species is most concentrated in winter in the inland valleys of northwestern San Diego County. Daily counts there range up to 44 in Fallbrook (D8) 24 February 2001 (M. Freda), 36 in Rancho Santa Fe (L8) 28 December 1997 (A. Mauro), and 36 east of Lake Hodges (K11) 15 January 1998 (E. C. Hall). Winter records range in elevation as high as 3500 feet in Miller Valley (S24, one on 21 Feb 1998,

M. and B. McIntosh). There are now 12 winter reports from the Anza-Borrego Desert, where the species was first noted at this season only on 17 December 1995 (Christmas bird count). Most of these records are from the Borrego Valley, but there are single reports each from Butterfield Ranch (M23, one on 26 February 2000, E. C. Hall), Vallecito Valley (M24, two on 21 January 2001, B. Siegel), and Carrizo Palms (R28, one on 6 January 2000, J. O. Zimmer).

Conservation: Cassin's Kingbird is on the increase in San Diego County, both in winter and as a breeding species. Stephens (1919a) called it "rather rare." Most other early writers called it "uncommon," and that term still applied in the 1970s (Unitt 1984). Christmas bird count results suggest that a gradual increase began accelerating in the mid 1980s. Our atlas results revealed the species in both greater numbers and ranging to higher elevations than reported previously. The next step may be colonization of the Anza-Borrego Desert. The species was unknown there even as a vagrant before 1985, but one or two individuals were noted in the Borrego Valley on Christmas bird counts each year 1998-2001. Cassin's Kingbird is also becoming more of an urban bird, infiltrating residential areas as trees mature.

Why should Cassin's Kingbirds be increasing? A trend toward warmer temperatures, especially of winter lows, may help them. The planting of ornamental and shade trees, especially eucalyptus, gives them nest sites in many areas that once had none. Development, especially low-density suburban development that leaves large cleared areas around scattered houses, shaded by a tree or two, has created much new Cassin's Kingbird habitat. Urban parks, schoolyards, and ranchettes have become more important to Cassin's Kingbird than the sycamore groves that constituted its primitive habitat.

Taxonomy: Binford (1989) synonymized the only subspecies of *Tyrannus vociferans*, leaving Cassin's Kingbird monotypic.