

Chipping Sparrow *Spizella passerina*

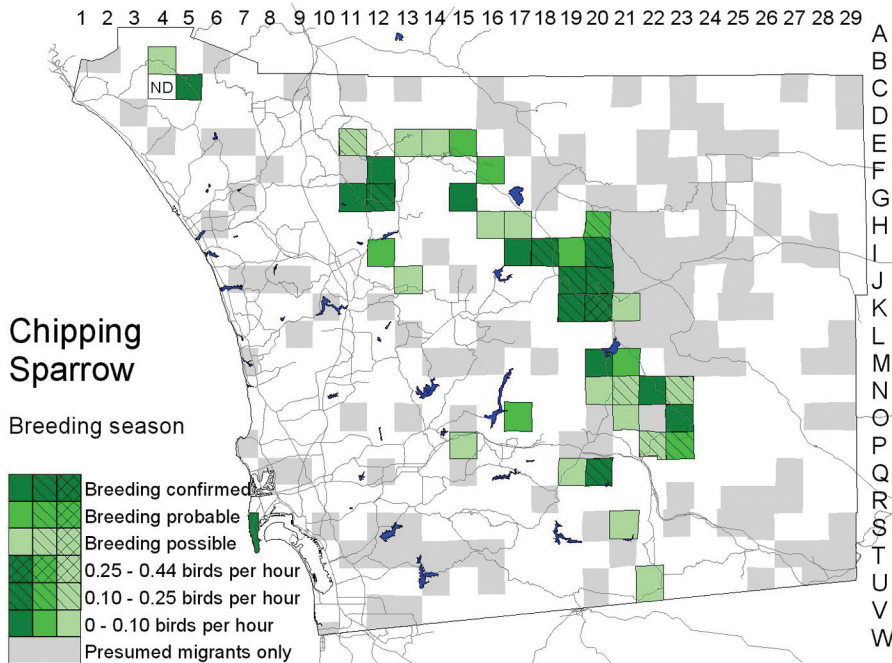
Though the Chipping Sparrow takes to man-made habitats like orchards, cemeteries, and landscaped parks, it is at best locally common in San Diego County. Its distribution is complex: it breeds primarily in the mountains among the pines, only sparingly elsewhere. In winter it is even less predictable, fluctuating with the supply of seeds in natural habitats and being most consistent in irrigated parks. The Chipping Sparrow is most widespread as a spring migrant, at this season concentrating at the east base of the mountains.

Breeding distribution: The Chipping Sparrow's distribution in San Diego County is curious and unique. Open pine/oak woodland with a grassy understory is the species' principal breeding habitat, so the higher mountain ranges constitute the core of the sparrow's range. Yet even here the distribution is patchy: the Chipping Sparrow is uncommon and local on Palomar Mountain and now absent from Hot Springs Mountain (previously, only a single bird seen on two of three visits in summer 1980, Unitt 1981). It is most numerous in the Julian area, with up to 20 at Wynola (J19) 17 April 1999 (S. E. Smith), 18 (all singing males) between Julian and William Heise County Park (K20) 10 June 1998 (E. C. Hall), and 12 on Volcan Mountain (I20) 28 June 2000 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan).



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

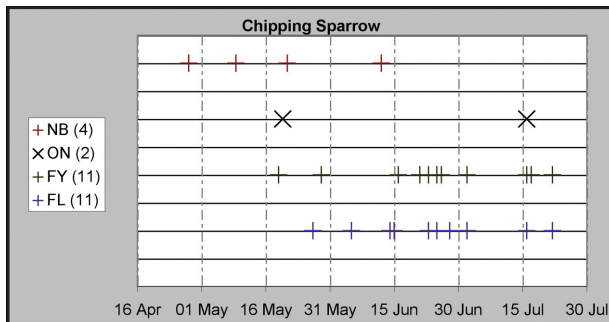
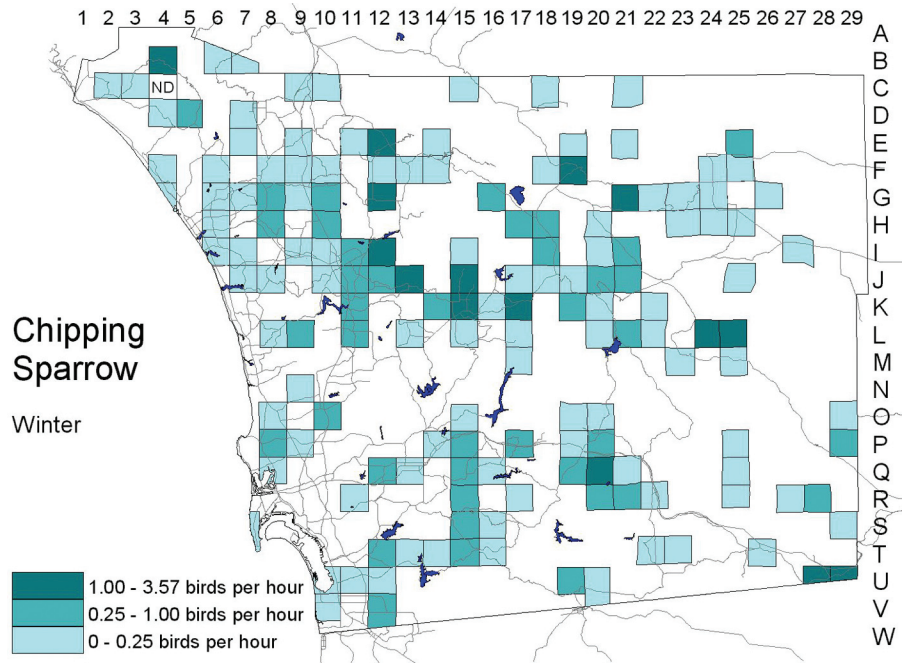
In oak woodland without conifers the Chipping Sparrow is very local and usually rare, with only scattered pairs. It occurs at several sites from near Santa Ysabel northwest through Mesa Grande to Pine Mountain (G15), a region also occupied by several other birds more typical of coniferous woodland. Eight in the Edwards Ranch (J18) near Santa Ysabel 25 June 2000 (S. E. Smith) was the highest count in this area. The only other substantial population in natural habitat—open Engelmann oak woodland—is in Camp Pendleton at the south end of the Santa Margarita Mountains between Roblar Creek and Case Spring (B4, C5). From 1998 to 2001 the species was consistent there, unlike the scattered ephemeral pairs or individuals at most other oak woodland sites, in numbers ranging up to 16 on 27 May 2001 (C5; L. J. Hargrove).



The Chipping Sparrow is also an uncommon and localized breeding bird in avocado and citrus orchards, mainly around Pauma Valley, Valley Center, and San Pasqual. The highest count in this habitat was of six 1.5 miles northeast of Weaver Mountain (E11) 27 May 1999 (D. C. Seals), and most reports are of scattered individuals or pairs. Yet another isolated colony, known since the 1970s, is at Point Loma (S7), where the birds occur fairly commonly both around the edges of native scrub and in the ornamental plantings

of Cabrillo National Monument and Fort Rosecrans Cemetery. The Chipping Sparrow may be colonizing La Jolla (P7) as well, where L. and M. Polinsky noted six and two on 16 and 27 May 1999, respectively.

Nesting: The Chipping Sparrow prefers to nest in conifers (Middleton 1998), a preference that may account for its concentrating in San Diego County's mountain forests. There is little information about the species' nesting in the county, though. On Point Loma the birds have been found nesting in shrubs; one early collected egg set from Palomar Mountain was in a wild rose. The schedule of breeding activity we observed was consistent with the eight egg sets collected 1895–1920, whose dates ranged from 29 April to 21 June. Any differences in nesting schedule among the Chipping Sparrow's diverse habitats remain unknown.



Migration: Over much of San Diego County the Chipping Sparrow occurs only as a migrant. Records far from wintering and breeding localities suggest that spring migration extends mainly from late March to mid May, with extreme dates 16 March (1998, one in Travertine Palms Wash, C29, R. Thériault) and 24 May (1999, 10 at Yaqui Well, I24, P. K. Nelson). Spring migrants are most numerous in the Anza–Borrego Desert along the east base of the mountains, with up to 59 in Blair Valley (L24) 3 April 1998 (R. Thériault), 30 near Scissors Crossing (J22) 26 April 1999 (E. C. Hall), and 30 near San Felipe Narrows (I25) 10 April 1999 (P. K. Nelson). Twenty-five at Sunshine Summit (D17) 1 May 1999 (A. Mauro) were at a concentration point for migrants crossing the mountains. Numbers of migrants elsewhere on the coastal slope were small—all counts of over 10 in a day were from sites where the species winters. Fall migration begins in late August or early September.

Winter: At this season the Chipping Sparrow is widespread but patchy. The species can be seen almost

anyplace where bare ground or short grass for foraging lies near dense shrubs or trees for refuge from predators. Wintering birds range from the coast to the low desert and up to at least 4700 feet in the mountains (15 northeast of Lake Cuyamaca, L21, 5 January 1999, J. K. Wilson). They appear to be most numerous, though, in the inland valleys. They typically flock with other wintering sparrows, especially the White-crowned and, in the desert, Brewer's. Lawns and open ground with scattered trees attract wintering Chipping Sparrows, so parks and cemeteries are the most consistent sites for them. In natural habitats, especially desert, the species is irregular, presumably according to the food supply. The numbers reported in the eastern two-thirds of San Diego were at least twice as high in 1998–99 (the winter following the wet one) than in any other of the five. By 2001–02, an exceptionally dry winter, numbers of Chipping Sparrows reported from this region were only 12% of those three years earlier.

Conservation: Although the Chipping Sparrow uses artificial landscaping, and has become a suburban bird in the eastern United States (Middleton 1998), it has not taken to residential areas in San Diego County. Breeding birds have benefited to a modest extent from the planting of orchards—and have suffered from their replacement by urban sprawl. Anecdotal observations do not imply a conspicuous change in the status of the Chipping Sparrow in San Diego County over the last third of the 20th century, but the Breeding Bird Survey implies a significant decrease in California as a whole over this period (Sauer et al. 2003). Stephens (1919a) called the species a “rather common summer resident” in San Diego County, Willett (1912) a “common resident of orchards, gardens, and parks in the foothill and mesa region, abundant in summer in coniferous forests of the mountains” of coastal southern California as a whole—evaluations that no

longer apply. Brown-headed Cowbird parasitism is likely a factor in this decrease; the cowbird parasitizes the sparrow heavily, reducing its nest success (Middleton 1998).

Taxonomy: Chipping Sparrows of the western United States are now generally all listed as the pale *S. p. arizonae*

Coues, 1872. Kenneth C. Parkes identified two fall specimens from San Diego County as probably *S. p. boreophila* Oberholser, 1955, a far-northern darker-backed subspecies of uncertain validity (Unitt 1984).