

Clark's Nutcracker *Nucifraga columbiana*

A bird of subalpine forests, Clark's Nutcracker lives in an elevation zone too high for San Diego County's mountains. Yet it is a permanent resident in the San Jacinto Mountains (it is seen easily at the top of the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway) and

sporadic in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir. It reaches San Diego County only as a vagrant, principally to the mountains, and principally during broader-scale irruptions that often coincide with those of the Pinyon Jay. Both species rely for food primarily on

pine seeds, and both are forced out of their normal habitats if the trees fail to bear.

Winter: Clark's Nutcracker invasions of San Diego County's mountains are rare: just eight winters (1877, 1920, 1935, 1955, 1972, 1973, 1996–97, and 2000–01) account for almost all of the records. Sometimes the irruptions bring scattered individuals, sometimes flocks. The most notable were on 21 February 1877 (“a fair-sized flock” at Mount Laguna, O23, F. Stephens in Willett 1912, SDNHM 755), in spring 1920 (see under Migration), and in fall 1935 (flocks of 50 to 60 in the Volcan and Cuyamaca mountains; anonymous 1935; two specimens from Volcan Mountain, I20, 28 September 1935, SDNHM 17095–6). The winter preceding the five-year atlas period brought six to Cuyamaca Rancho State Park (M20) 7 November 1996 (J. Katetzky) and three to Buddy Todd Park, Oceanside (H6), 29 December 1996–1 January 1997 (D. and C. Wysong, NASFN 51:800, 1997). In 2000–01, 15 were on Cuyamaca Peak (M20) 16 October (P. D. Jorgensen), with two seen as late as 15 April (R. Wheeler), two were in Pine Valley (P21) 17 October (M. Heilbron), and five were on Volcan Mountain (I20) 18 December 2000 (R. T. Patton).

Though occurring mainly in the mountains, Clark's Nutcrackers have been noted seven times in the coastal lowland (at Oceanside in 1996–97; earlier records listed by Unitt 1984). The only nutcrackers recorded in the Anza-Borrego Desert are still the five during the irruptions of 1955 and 1972 (Unitt 1984).

Migration: Records of Clark's Nutcracker in San Diego County form an interesting seasonal pattern. Most are for fall and winter, on dates ranging from 11 August (1972, one at Palomar Mountain, AB 26:907, 1972) to 21 February (1877, the flock at Mount Laguna), except for the two at Cuyamaca Peak 15 April 2001. Eight records, though, are



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

from late May and June: “flocks ranging from a few birds to 15 or 20 in the flock” in the Laguna Mountains 31 May–1 June 1920 (Fortiner 1920), one on Palomar Mountain 24 June 1967 (A. G. Morley, AFN 21:605, 1967), one along Agua Dulce Creek, Laguna Mountains (O23), 25 May 1974 (P. Unitt, AB 28:853, 1974), one along High Point Truck Trail, north slope of Palomar Mountain (C15), 31 May 1997 (K. L. Weaver), one near Filaree Flat, Laguna Mountains (N22), the same day (G. L. Rogers, FN 51:926, 1997), one near Laguna Campground (O23) 8 June 1997 (C. G. Edwards, FN 51:1054, 1997), four flying north in Lark Canyon (S26) 9 June 2001 (P. Unitt), and one at the southwest base of Volcan Mountain (J20) 15 June 2001 (E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer). Evidently some nutcrackers leaving their breeding range in fall have still not made it back by the middle of the following breeding season.