

Gray Flycatcher *Empidonax wrightii*

Though a rare migrant and winter visitor in San Diego County, the Gray Flycatcher can be found—after a wet year—by the birder willing to invest time in the mesquite bosques and palo verde-lined washes of the Anza-Borrego Desert. In the inland valleys of the coastal lowland it was once fairly common but is now only occasional.

Winter: The Gray Flycatcher’s main winter range lies in Mexico—the bird is common in the thorny scrub covering the southern half of Baja California and decreases toward the north. So San Diego County lies near the northwestern extremity of its winter range. The Gray Flycatcher is most frequent in the Anza-Borrego Desert, but that frequency is governed by rainfall. Ten of 11 desert winter records 1997–2002 were in the two years following the wet El Niño year of 1998; there were none at all in the extremely dry two final winters of the atlas period. Most of the desert winter records are from the floors of the Clark, Borrego, and Carrizo valleys, in or near mesquite thickets or developed areas. There are three records also from the riparian corridor of San Felipe Valley: one on 16 December 1998 (I21; J. O. Zimmer), up to two on 23 February 1999 (J22; E. C. Hall).

On the coastal side, the seemingly random scatter of winter records of the Gray Flycatcher (14 from 1997 to 2002) conceals a preference for open riparian scrub in inland valleys. Pockets of semidesert scrub on south-facing slopes at some locations, especially those of repeated occurrences such as the east end of Lake Hodges (K11), and Proctor Valley (T13/14), suggest wintering Gray Flycatchers seek warm, dry microclimates, in spite of being more frequent in wet years. The burned scrub with prickly pear thickets remaining as the most prominent vegetation, habitat of two in Jardine Canyon (C3) 15



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

February 1999 (P. Unitt), also evoked an image of desert. But other records from parks, cemeteries, and disturbed areas imply the Gray Flycatcher’s winter habitat needs are not overly specialized. One bird returned to Whelan Lake (G6) for seven consecutive winters, 1980–86 (AB 41:330, 1987).

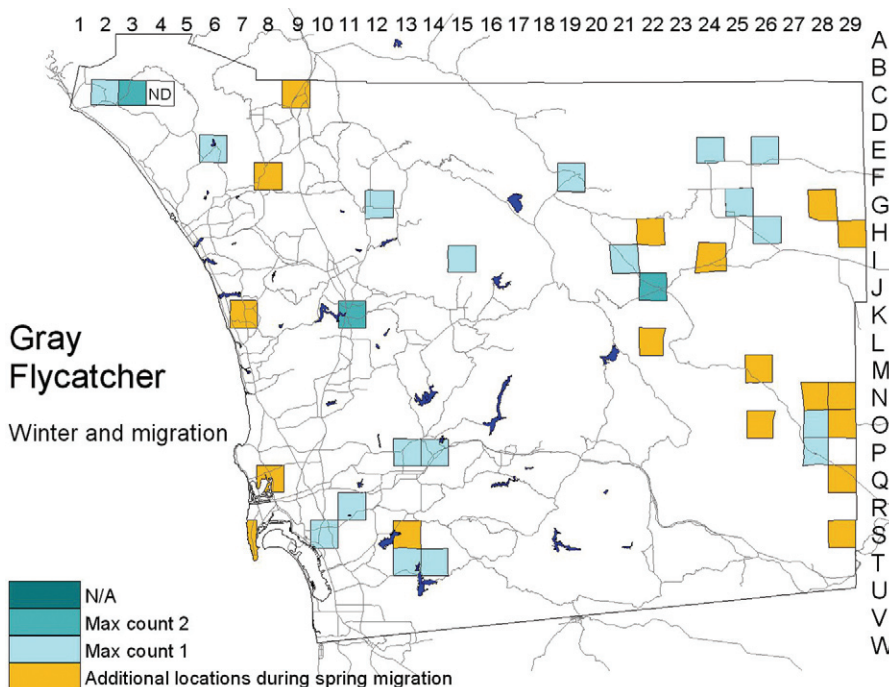
Most winter records are from low elevations (under 1000 feet), but a few are higher, exceptionally up to 3100 feet at Warner Springs (F19; one on 9 December 2001, C. G. Edwards).

Migration: Despite wintering commonly in Baja California, the Gray Flycatcher is rare as a migrant in San Diego County. It is a bit more widespread in that role than in winter, especially in the Anza-Borrego Desert in spring. Almost all spring migrants are seen in April and the first week of May. Aside from birds known to have wintered, the earliest was one near the Borrego Air Ranch (H26) 20 March 1998 (M. L. Gabel); late were two near Yaqui Well (I24) 13 May 1998 and 23 May 1997 (P. K. Nelson). Normally only one or two individuals can be seen in a day; eight in San Felipe Valley (I21) 24

April 1999 during a spectacular fallout of migrants made by far the highest one-day count (W. E. Haas). Along the coast, three at Point Loma (S7) 15 April 2001 (J. C. Worley) and nine there between 6 and 30 April 1983 (AB 37:913, 1983) are maximal.

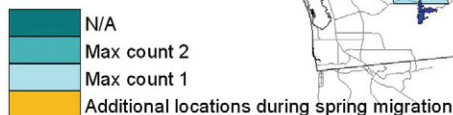
In fall, records extend from 24 August to 18 November (1984, three at Point Loma, R. E. Webster, G. McCaskie, AB 39:103, 1985).

Conservation: The Gray Flycatcher was “fairly common” or “rather common” as a winter visitor in coastal southern California early in the 20th century (Grinnell 1915, Stephens 1919a, Willett 1933). Yet no one since at least 1950 would use such a term for it. Why would



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Winter and migration



a bird's winter range retract south at a time when winter low temperatures are on the rise? Most of the floodplains and semidesert scrub making up the Gray Flycatcher's typical winter habitat have been developed, but the species' scarcity in the remaining habitat, and its use of disturbed areas, leave the explanation of habitat loss unsatisfying. No further change in the Gray Flycatcher's winter status has been evident for decades. The trend of numbers in the

breeding range is, if anything, positive, and since 1970 the species has colonized new areas north, west, and, south of its historic range in the Great Basin and intermountain plateau region (Sterling 1999). Its spread along the north slope of the Transverse Ranges, and a summer record even for the Santa Rosa Mountains of Riverside County (Garrett and Dunn 1981), suggest the possibility of the Gray Flycatcher's breeding some day in San Diego County.