

Green Heron *Butorides virescens*

Unlike most herons, which forage in the open in marshes and along shorelines, the Green Heron prefers to fish in ponds and channels bordered or shaded by trees. It is thus as much a bird of riparian woodland as one of marshes. And unlike many other herons it is not colonial, at least in San Diego County, so it appears uncommon. But because it takes advantage of many small wetlands little used by the other species, its population in the county may be just as large.

Breeding distribution: In San Diego County the Green Heron is most widespread in the northern part of the coastal lowland, where strips of riparian woodland and small ponds are most frequent. In the southern part of the county the distribution clearly traces the major rivers and lakes. Thirty at Lake Hodges (K10) 14 June 1999 (R. L. Barber) and 16 at Lower Otay Lake (U14) 4 July 1999 (S. Buchanan) were exceptionally high counts; otherwise, we noted no more than eight per day per atlas square. Small numbers use the scattered wet areas of southeastern San Diego County (family with three fledglings 19 June 1999 at Twin Lakes or Picnic Lake near Potrero, U20, R. and S. L. Breisch) and in the Julian area (up to two at Wynola, J19, 12 March 1999, S. E. Smith). The highest elevation at



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

which we found the Green Heron during the atlas period was 4600 feet in Lost Valley (D20; one on 2 June and 1 July 1999, J. M. and B. Hargrove, W. E. Haas).

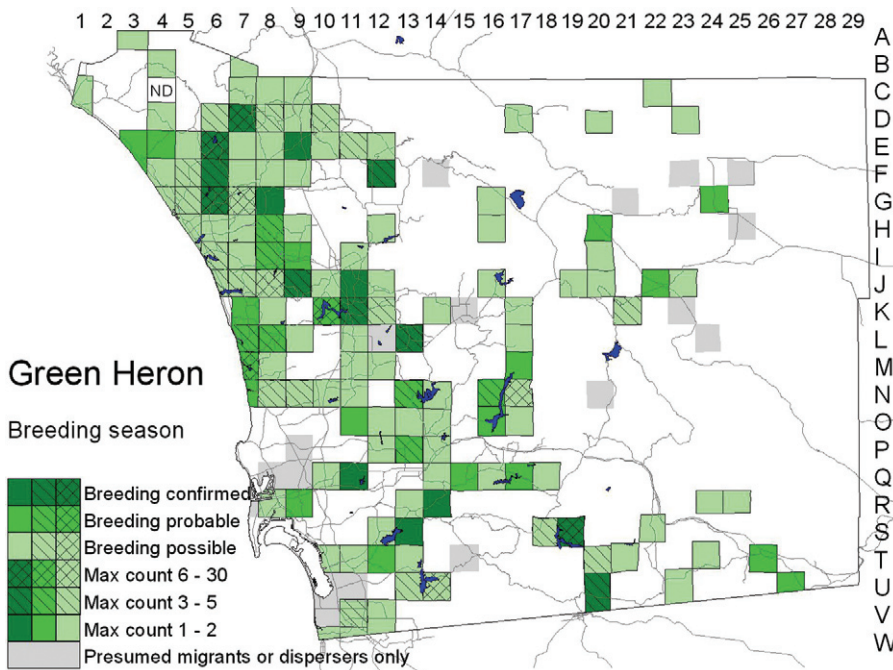
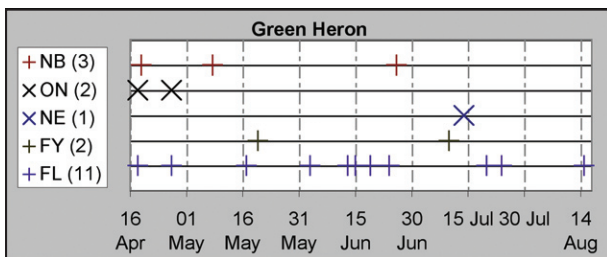
Draining the east slope of the mountains, Coyote, San Felipe, and Banner creeks also likely support nesting Green Herons, at least occasionally. Though no nests have yet been found in the Anza-Borrego Desert, the birds are regular along Coyote Creek at Lower Willows (D23) in spring, with a maximum count of five on 25 April 1998 (B. Peterson) and sightings as late as 4 July (1999, B. Getty, K. Wilson).

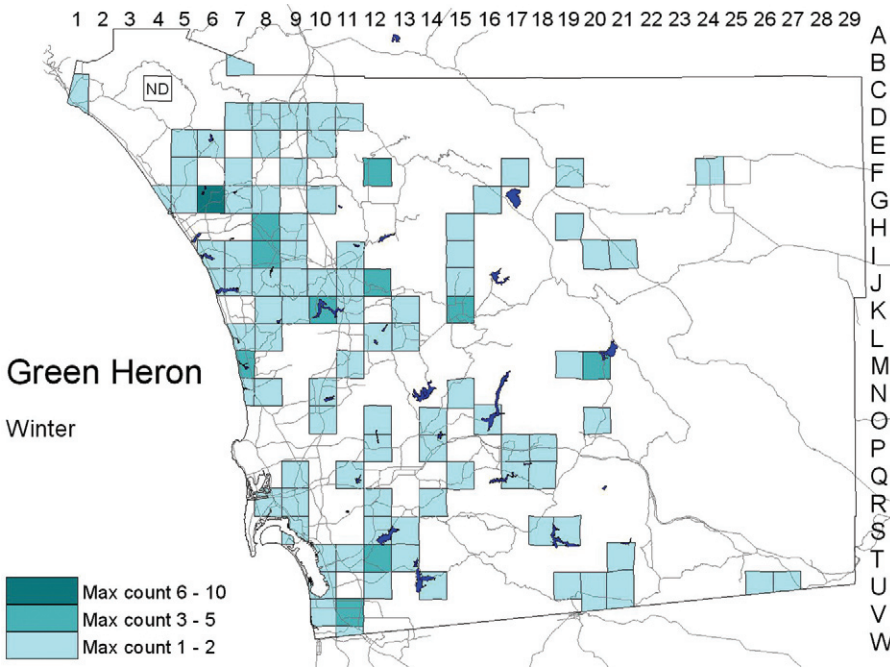
Nesting: Egg collectors who described the sites of Green Heron nests in San Diego County all reported them in willows. A nest at Barrett Lake (S19) 18 June 2000 (R. and S. L. Breisch) was also in a willow. But the Green Heron may nest in cattails as well: one carrying a twig near Potrero 26 June 1999 took it into a stand of cattails (R. and S. L. Breisch).

The Green Heron has a long breeding season and may raise two broods per year. A fledgling near Valley Center (F12) 18 April 2001 (E. C. Hall) suggests laying as early as the second week of March; a nest at the upper end of Sweetwater Reservoir (S13) still had eggs on 14 July 1998 (P. Famolaro).

Migration: The Green Heron is somewhat less numerous in winter than in summer but does not follow a well-marked schedule of migration. In the Anza-Borrego Desert, away from possible breeding sites, it is reported most frequently in April and May, but these are also peak months for birders in the area. Most desert records are from oases or artificial ponds, but a few are far from water, such as one in a rocky cove on the east side of Blair Dry Lake (L24) 11 April 1999 (R. Thériault).

Winter: The Green Heron's winter distribution in San Diego





County is similar to its breeding distribution but somewhat more patchy. The only site where we noted more than four individuals per day at this season was around Whelan Lake (G6), with up to ten on 14 December 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg). In the foothills and mountains wintering Green Herons are scarce, with seldom more than a single bird seen at a time and a maximum of three at Cuyamaca Lake (M20) 4 December 1998 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan). Our only winter records in the desert during the atlas period were of single birds in Borrego Springs

(F24) 12 January 1998 and 19 December 1999 (M. L. Gabel, P. K. Nelson). The Green Heron has been noted on four of 18 Anza-Borrego Christmas bird counts 1984–2001, with no more than three birds per count.

Conservation: Early in the 20th century, the Green Heron occurred in San Diego County as a migrant and summer resident only. It was first noted in winter at Lindo Lake (P14) on 1 January 1928 (Huey 1928b) and was as numerous in winter as today by the 1950s. Both the breeding and winter ranges have long been spreading north along the Pacific coast (Davis and Kushlan 1994).

It is unclear how much the Green Heron has suffered from the loss of riparian woodland and freshwater marshes versus how much it has benefited from the importation of water. Results of Christmas bird counts suggest that since 1985 its numbers may be declining gradually.

Taxonomy: Green Herons in California are *B. v. anthonyi* (Mearns, 1895), whose adults have the neck rufous, not deep maroon as in *B. v. frazari* (Brewster, 1888) of southern Baja California.