

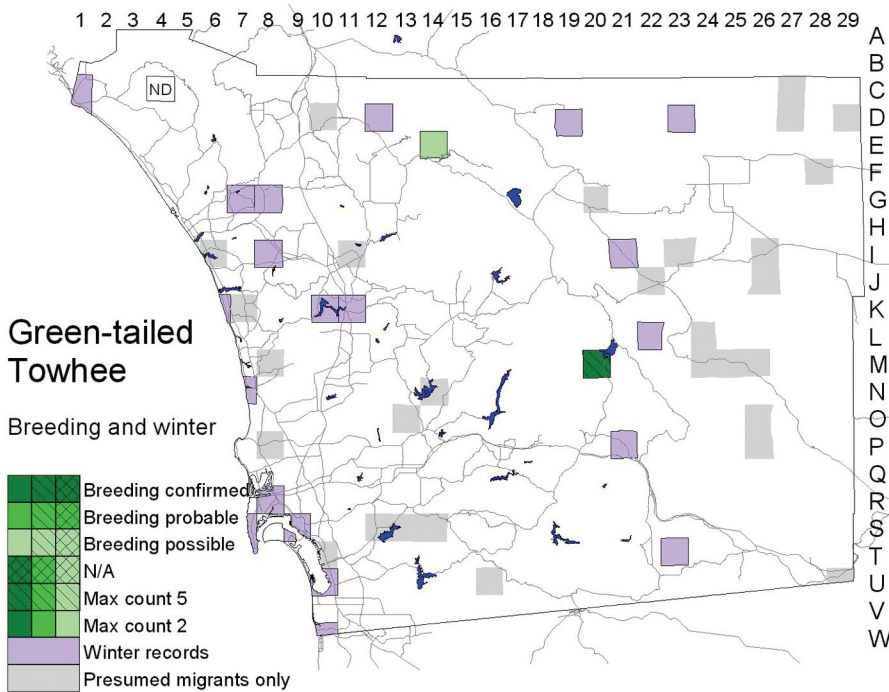
NEW WORLD SPARROWS AND BUNTINGS — FAMILY EMBERIZIDAE

Green-tailed Towhee *Pipilo chlorurus*

The few Green-tailed Towhees breeding high in the Cuyamaca Mountains represent an outpost well isolated from the nearest other populations, in the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa mountains to the north and in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir to the south. Like that of the Yellow-rumped Warbler, Dusky Flycatcher, and Fox Sparrow, the Green-tailed Towhee's preferred habitat of montane chaparral and young conifers is barely touched by San Diego County's highest mountains. Just as the county lies near the southern margin of the species' breeding range, it lies near the northern margin of the winter range,



Photo by Anthony Mercieca



so the Green-tailed Towhee is rare in winter. Even in migration the species largely skips over San Diego County.

**Breeding distribution:** During the atlas period, breeding Green-tailed Towhees were seen only near the summits of Cuyamaca and Middle peaks (M20). Their distribution thus closely resembles that of the Fox Sparrow, with which they share the same habitat. On Cuyamaca Peak Green-tailed Towhees occur along the fire road above 5700 feet elevation in chaparral and bracken fern. From 1997 to 2001, the high count there was of five on 5 June 2001 (M. B. Mulrooney). On Middle Peak, the towhees have been seen on the west slope

between 4600 and 5000 feet elevation, with a high count of three, including two singing males, 2 July 2000 (R. E. Webster)

The observations of up to two on Hot Springs Mountain in June 1980 (E20/E21; Unitt 1981) and one at the Palomar Observatory (D15) 24 August 1981 (C. G. Edwards) have not been repeated since.

**Nesting:** During the atlas period, the only confirmations of Green-tailed Towhee breeding were observations of birds building nests on Cuyamaca Peak 22 May 1998 (G. L. Rogers) and 5 June 2001 (M. B. Mulrooney). A juvenile was accompanying adults there 29 July 1978 (AB 32:1210, 1978). The nest is usually well hidden within a dense-foliaged shrub or small tree. On the Mogollon Rim of Arizona, Dobbs et al. (1998) found nests predominantly in white firs, also available in the Green-tailed Towhee's habitat in San Diego County.

**Migration:** The Green-tailed Towhee is recorded in its breeding habitat in the Cuyamaca Mountains from 19 May (1998, R. E. Webster) to 27 August (1978, D. W. Povey, Unitt 1984); records from elsewhere in the Green-tailed Towhee's breeding range suggest these dates could be extended three or four weeks in both directions.

In spite of breeding commonly in the Sierra Nevada and Transverse Ranges and wintering commonly in southern Baja California, the Green-tailed Towhee is rare as a migrant through San Diego County, suggesting most birds fly nonstop over southern California. Fall migration extends from early September to mid November, spring migration from early April to mid May. From 1997 to 2001 spring dates extended from 4 April (1999, one at the Paradise Creek marsh, National City, T10, W. E. Haas; 1998, two in a cowbird trap in Goat Canyon, W10, J. M. Wells) to 14 May (1998, one near Scissors Crossing, J22, E. C. Hall). Of the 31 spring records during this period, the only ones of more than a single individual were of four at Vallecito (M25) 12 May 1999 (M. C. Jorgensen) and the two in the cowbird trap (one of which was trapped again four days later). Spring migrants appear somewhat more numerous in the eastern half of the county than in the western half: 14 records in the west versus 17 in the east, in spite of nearly 50% more observer-hours in the field in the west. Massey (1998) also reported several April

records in the Anza-Borrego Desert. Near the coast, an unseasonal straggler was in a condominium complex just northeast of Kate Sessions Park (P8) 10 June 1999 (J. Moore).

**Winter:** The Green-tailed Towhee is rare in San Diego County at this season, though hardly more so than in migration. It does not have a clear habitat preference in winter, other than dense low shrubbery, often near water. From 1997 to 2002 we recorded about 21 individual wintering Green-tailed Towhees, 15 in the coastal lowland. Only one record is of more than a single bird: two were at Lake Hodges (K10) 23 December 1998 (R. T. Patton). Some individuals were observed repeatedly through the winter, and at least two, at Point Loma Nazarene University (S7) and the Chula Vista Nature Center (U10), returned for three consecutive years. We noted six Green-tailed Towhees farther inland, where there are only a couple of earlier records, on Lake Henshaw and Anza-Borrego Christmas bird counts. Three were in canyons draining into the desert, while three were scattered in chaparral-dominated landscapes at higher elevations: one at 2800 feet elevation near La Posta microwave tower (T23) 22 January 2000 (G. Rebstock), one at 3600 feet at Indian Flats (D19) 6 January 1999 (K. J. Burns), and one at 3700 feet at a bird feeder in Pine Valley (P21) 24 December 1998 (J. K. Wilson).

**Conservation:** On the scale of the species' entire range, there is no clear evidence of population change (Dobbs et al. 1998). As a bird of undergrowth and second growth, the Green-tailed Towhee colonizes logged forest (Franzreb and Ohmart 1978). Persisting continuously since its discovery on Cuyamaca Peak in 1974, the Green-tailed Towhee seems well established there, though populations so small are vulnerable to extirpation. In winter, the Green-tailed Towhee has become less frequent since the 1960s and 1970s, at least around metropolitan San Diego, the region of most early records. The maximum on a San Diego Christmas bird count, eight on 20 December 1969, is implausible today. From 1980 to 1992, the Green-tailed Towhee was recorded on 8 of 13 counts, but from 1993 to 2001 it was recorded on only one. Most likely the decrease is a result of the elimination of weedy thickets as more and more of the count circle was urbanized.