

Harris' Hawk *Parabuteo unicinctus*

Through recorded history, Harris' Hawk has been irregular in southeastern California, the north-western corner of its range. It died out in the mid 1960s, and efforts to reintroduce it failed, as almost no native riparian woodland is left along the lower Colorado River. Then, in 1994, an incursion, apparently from Baja California, brought nearly 50 individuals north of the border, many of them to San Diego County. Over the next few years the numbers in the county dropped to about five, but one pair in McCain Valley nested repeatedly, achieving success in 2000, 2001, and 2002—the first known successful nesting of wild Harris' Hawks in California for over 40 years. By 2003, however, the birds had disappeared.

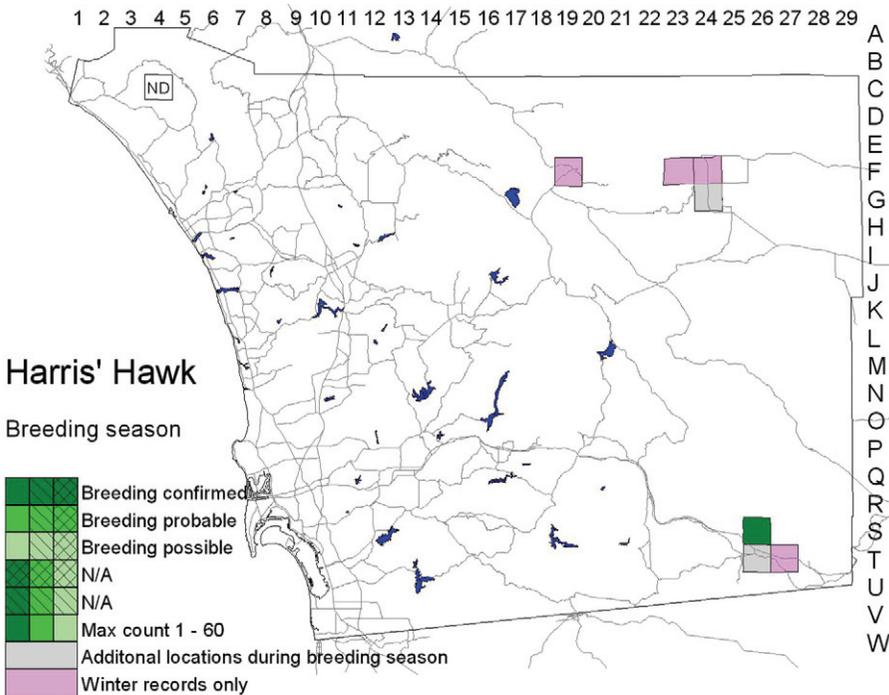


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Breeding distribution: The irruption of 1994 brought nine Harris' Hawks to McCain Valley (S26) just north of Boulevard. Some arrived even earlier, according to local resident Randy West. In December 1994 another local resident, Leslie Mauris, showed me a photo of six huddled together on a phone line and a nest the birds had built earlier that year. Over the next few years four of the birds were killed in various mishaps—three electrocuted on one pole in 1996—but one pair attempted to nest annually, with no success until 2000, when it fledged three young from a nest about 2 miles from that of 1994.

The nest was successful again in 2001 and 2002, but one bird was found dead and mummified 11 September 2001 (R. West; SDNHM 50578). While nesting, the birds in McCain Valley moved little; we had only one sighting during the breeding season in an adjacent atlas square, of two near the fire station in Boulevard (T26) 11 May 2000 (F. L. Unmack).

In the Borrego Valley three Harris' Hawks arrived 15 April 1994 and increased to eight by 13 September (J. Ruddle, R. Thériault). Two were carrying sticks in the valley's mesquite bosque (G25) 8 May 1994, and a pair was copulating in a trailer park in Borrego Springs (G24) 1 March 1995 (P. D. Jorgensen). No further nesting activity was seen, however, and the last report of all eight birds was near Borrego Palm Canyon campground (F23) 12 March 1997 (B. Zuehl). From 1998 on there were no more than two, and by the end of the atlas period in February 2002 only one remained.



Nesting: The nests in McCain Valley in 1994 and 2000 were in the crowns of coast live oaks. Harris' Hawk's breeding season is notably flexible; if prey is abundant, the birds nest earlier and lay repeated clutches (Bednarz

1995). In 2000, the clutch must have been laid in late April, as at least one chick hatched by 1 June and the brood began fledging on 1 July, though the young were still jumping in and out of the nest on 12 July (R. West, P. Unitt). In 2001, three young were still in the nest on 23 July. Late nesting that year may have been due to ravens preying on an earlier clutch (R. West).

Migration: Patten and Erickson (2000) proposed that the history of Harris' Hawk in southern California is a cycle of colonizations and extirpations, of fluctuations at the margins of the species' range. In San Diego County the only records before 1950 are of one collected in Mission Valley 7 November 1912 (Grey 1913a; SDNHM 1842) and one seen near Oceanside 1–6 November 1942 (Kent 1944). From the 1960s until the incursion of 1994, scattered sightings of Harris' Hawks were assumed to be of escapees from falconers, with whom the species is popular.

Besides the concentrations in Borrego and McCain valleys, the irruption of 1994–96 brought one bird to Santee (P13) 26 November 1994–29 October 1996 (D. C. Seals, R. Saldino, NASFN 50:114, 222, 1996; 51:120, 1997; McKee and Erickson 2002), one to Carrizo Creek (Q27/R27) 6–10 July 1995 (P. D. Jorgensen, C. Hayes), one to Tamarisk Grove (I24) 3 December 1995 (R. Thériault), one to the Sweetwater River above Sweetwater Reservoir (S13) 31 March 1996 (P. Unitt, Rogers and Jaramillo 2002), one to Kit Carson Park, Escondido (K11), 3 April 1996 (M. B. Stowe, NASFN 50:332, 1996), and one to Butterfield Ranch (M23) 8 September 1996 (E. Craven, NASFN 51:120, 1997). An adult near Jamacha Junction (R13) 24 April 2001 (M. A. Patten, NAB 55:356, 2001) may have been one of these birds still lingering.

Winter: Sightings of single Harris' Hawks in Coachwhip Canyon (F28) 4 October 1998 (R. Thériault), at Seventeen Palms (F29) 13 January 1999 (J. Meier), and at Warner Springs (F19) 17 December 2001 (N. Osborn, B. Siegel) suggest the birds at Borrego Springs moved up to 15 miles both east and west of their center. In McCain Valley in winter we saw up to four on 17 February 2001 but found none farther than 3 miles from the nest site, as near the corner of McCain Valley Road and old Highway 80 (T27) 29 January 2001 (F. L. Unmack).

Conservation: The Harris' Hawks in McCain Valley have suffered shooting and electrocution by utility wires, the latter a common problem for the species (Bednarz 1995, D. Bittner). Randy West, who lives in McCain Valley, is a licensed falconer who keeps two Harris' Hawks of Texas origin. The wild Harris' Hawks regularly visited his captive birds. West's birds may be responsible for the persistence and nesting of the wild individuals in a raptorial version of the "Wild Animal Park effect." That is, just as the wading birds kept in captivity at the Wild Animal Park and Sea World have served as nuclei for colonies of wild colonial wading birds, West's Harris' Hawks may have been the nucleus for the "colony" near Boulevard. A third bird emerged as a nest "helper" when the chicks hatched in 2002. The Harris' Hawk's highly social habits, entailing cooperative breeding, mark it as a candidate for the "Wild Animal Park effect."

Taxonomy: All North American Harris' Hawks are best called *P. u. harrisi* (Audubon, 1837); *P. u. superior* van Rossem, 1942, described from Imperial County, is not differentiated adequately by size or color (Bednarz 1995).