

Hermit Thrush *Catharus guttatus*

In winter, the Hermit Thrush is common in chaparral and riparian or oak woodland, foraging quietly on the ground for insects or plucking berries from shrubs. Smaller numbers occur in sage scrub, desert-edge scrub, parks, and residential areas. The species is also taking on a new role, a few birds beginning to colonize shady forest in the county's mountains. Field work for this atlas yielded the first confirmations of Hermit Thrushes breeding in San Diego County.

Winter: Wintering Hermit Thrushes are widespread over San Diego County's coastal slope, most concentrated in and near the Santa Margarita Mountains in the county's northwest corner. But large numbers can be seen anywhere in dense chaparral, with up to 146 around Lake Hodges (K10) 27 December 1998 (R. L. Barber et al.) and 60 at Cabrillo National Monument and Fort Rosecrans Cemetery, Point Loma (S7), 15 December 2001 (J. C. Worley). The Hermit Thrush can be fairly common in winter even at high elevations (up to 12 near High Point, Palomar Mountain, D15, 21 December 1999, K. L. Weaver). In the Anza-Borrego Desert it is rare, occurring mainly at oases at the base of the mountains.

Numbers of Hermit Thrushes in San Diego County vary somewhat from year to year, though less so than those of other frugivorous winter visitors. At lower elevations, this variation was rather modest from 1997 to 2002, but in some previous years it was striking. Totals on Christmas bird counts (results of all six counts in the county combined) illustrate this: 651 in 1989-90 and 737 in 1990-91, versus 40 in 1991-92 and 38 in 1995-96. This variation could be due to annual variation in both the numbers reaching San Diego County and to variation in the birds' distribution within the county, according

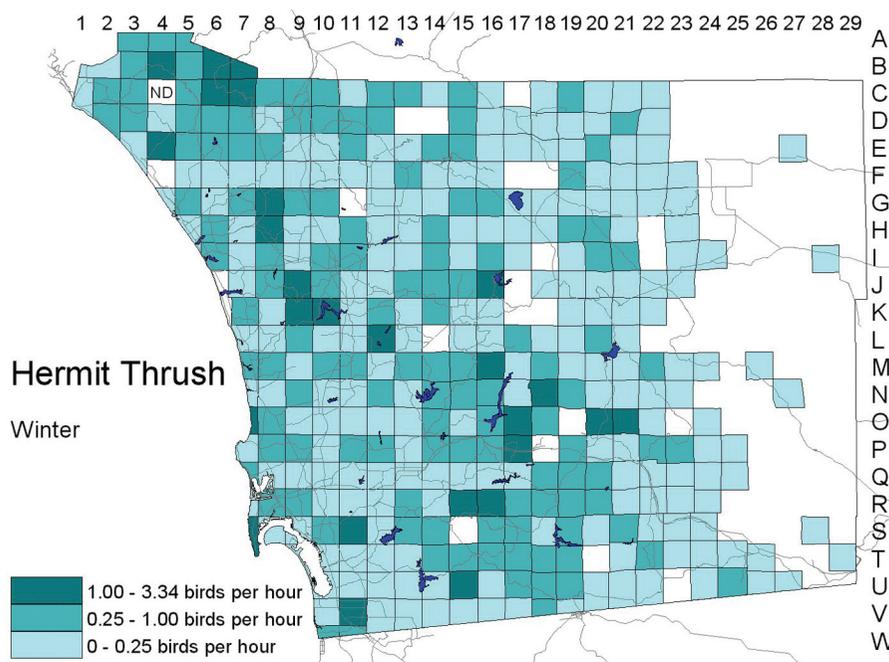


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

to food availability and whether mountain chaparral is covered with snow. In the mountains, the Hermit Thrush was much more numerous in the winter of 1998-99, with little snow, than in the winter of 1997-98, with far more.

Migration: The Hermit Thrush occurs in San Diego primarily from late September through April. By mid May it is rare. During the atlas period 19 May (1999, one at Lake Domingo, U26, J. K. Wilson) was our latest date except for stragglers at Point Loma 22 May 1999 and 4 June 1998 (P. A. Ginsburg). An even later straggler was at the same location 6 June 1984 (R. E. Webster, AB 38:961, 1984).

Even without the specimens that would prove the birds are of different subspecies, the pattern of the Hermit Thrush's migrations assures us that the county's incipient breeding population is different from the wintering population. So far the breeding population has been recorded only from 15 May (1999, one on Cuyamaca Peak, M20, G. L. Rogers) to 19 July (1998, three or four singing along Chimney Creek, E14, Palomar Mountain, D. S. Cooper, FN 52:504, 1998), but further observations would likely extend this interval.



Breeding distribution: Summering Hermit Thrushes are now known in San Diego County from the Palomar, Hot Springs, Volcan, and Cuyamaca mountains, though still in very small numbers. In all areas, they occur in deep forest on north-facing slopes. During the atlas period, they were found most frequently on Palomar Mountain (eight records), between 4400 and 5200 feet elevation from upper Pauma Creek (D14; up to two—a pair—on 15 July 1999, P. D. Jorgensen) southeast to Chimney Creek. On Volcan Mountain (I20), an adult and a fledgling were at 5000 feet elevation in a steep northeast-draining canyon 28 June 2000 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan)—at the same site as one or two singing

males 31 May 1993 (P. Unitt, AB 47:1151, 1993). In the Cuyamaca Mountains, above 5200 feet elevation, summering Hermit Thrushes are known from both Cuyamaca Peak (M20; one on 23 May 1998 and 15 May 1999, G. L. Rogers) and Middle Peak (M20; two singing males 11 June 2000; adult feeding barely fledged young 2 July 2000, R. E. Webster). The first summer record of the Hermit Thrush in San Diego County was from Hot Springs Mountain (E21) 24 June 1980 (Unitt 1981), but there have been no subsequent reports from this site.

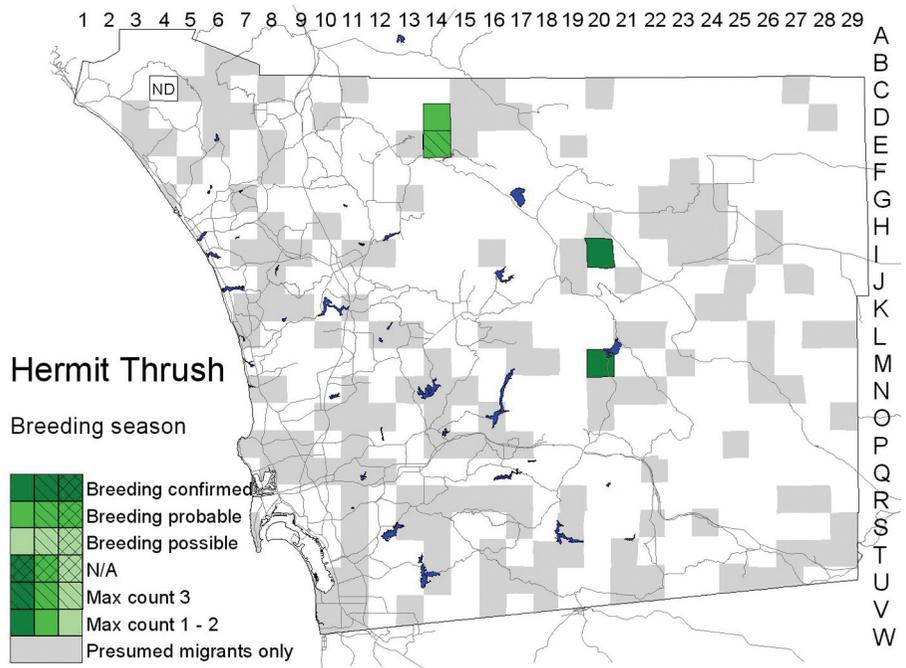
A Hermit Thrush was in pinions at 5600 feet elevation on the north slope of Villager Peak, Santa Rosa Mountains (C27), 2 June 1999 (P. D. Jorgensen). The habitat is atypical for breeding Hermit Thrushes, and visits to the site in 2000 and 2001 did not reveal the species again, so most likely this bird was a wanderer.

Nesting: No nest of the Hermit Thrush has yet been found in San Diego County; the fledglings seen on Volcan Mountain and Middle Peak in 2000 constitute the only evidence for the species' breeding here. Elsewhere in the western United States, the species nests on the ground or up to moderate heights in small trees. The dates of the fledglings seen in San Diego County suggest egg laying in early June.

Conservation: San Diego County's remaining large tracts of chaparral are central to the winter range of at least one subspecies of Hermit Thrush, *C. g. guttatus*. Hermit Thrushes use modified habitats as well, orchards, parks, and gardens with adequate shrubbery. Because they are active mainly on and near the ground, however, when the light is dim, in these habitats they suffer considerable predation from domestic cats and mortality from striking wires and windows.

The traditional southern limit of the breeding range of the Hermit Thrush was the San Bernardino Mountains (e.g., Grinnell and Miller 1944). Thus the species' appearance in summer in San Diego County represents a southward range extension, more likely the result of natural range expansion than the birds being overlooked in the past.

Taxonomy: The Hermit Thrush shows great variation in its broad range, but in spite of the studies of Aldrich (1968) and Phillips (1991), the interpretation of this variation leaves much to be desired. At the San Diego Natural History Museum we have 122 skins of the species from San Diego County, in part because the birds so often fly into windows or otherwise come to grief in places where people



find them. But without a broad sample of specimens from the breeding range, categorizing the variation in the San Diego sample can be only rudimentary. Nevertheless, it is clear that the bulk of Hermit Thrushes wintering in San Diego are the subspecies *C. g. guttatus* (Pallas, 1811), with a medium brownish-gray back and breeding at least in south-coastal Alaska. A significant minority of the specimens (about 15) have darker upperparts, deeper gray flanks, larger blackish breast spots, and a deeper buff wash on the breast. These are apparently *C. g. vaccinius* (Cumming, 1933), breeding on and near Vancouver Island. San Diego County represents the southern limit of this subspecies' winter range (Phillips 1991). The Hermit Thrushes of southeastern Alaska, *C. g. nanus* (Audubon, 1839), also winter in San Diego County, in numbers smaller than those of *guttatus*. They are more rufous above than *guttatus* but not as dark as the species' dark extreme.

Between Vancouver Island and the Olympic Peninsula is an abrupt break. Along the Pacific coast from Washington to central California breeding Hermit Thrushes are paler and longer billed, though even smaller in other dimensions, than those farther north. This subspecies is *C. g. slevini* (Grinnell, 1901), which occurs in San Diego County primarily as an uncommon migrant. Its identity may be suspected even in the field on the basis of its pale grayish upperparts, small sparse breast spots, and pale flanks. One specimen has been collected in fall (Volcan Mt., 9 October 1993, SDNHM 48587), two in early spring (4 April 1877, Campo, U23, SDNHM 1701; 11 April 1984, La Posta Truck Trail, R24, SDNHM 42997). *C. g. slevini* winters mainly in the tropical dry forest of western Mexico, but San Diego County may be at the northern fringe of its normal winter range. Allan R. Phillips identified specimens from Balboa Park (R9) 15 December 1958 (SDNHM 30128) and Pacific Beach (P7) 18 February 1971 (SDNHM 37879) as *C. g. jewetti*

Phillips, 1962, which he split from *slevini* on the basis of browner birds from the Olympic Peninsula. Subsequently he recognized *jewetti* only inconsistently (Monson and Phillips 1981, Phillips 1991).

Finally, the birds summering in San Diego County's mountains must be *C. g. sequoiensis* (Belding 1889),

though no specimen has yet been collected. *C. g. sequoiensis* breeds from the Sierra Nevada south to the mountains of southern California and migrates to and from a winter range in the mountains of western Mexico with only rare stops in the Mojave Desert. It is pale like *slevini* but larger, with heavier breast spots.