

Hermit Warbler *Dendroica occidentalis*

One of our most attractive western warblers, in San Diego County the Hermit Warbler is also one of the least commonly seen. It is now uncommon in spring migration, rare in fall migration, and very rare in winter. There are no midsummer records; the San Bernardino Mountains are the southern tip of the

Hermit Warbler's breeding range. Reflecting their habitat preference at other seasons, migrants are often seen high in conifers, be they native or planted as landscaping in urban parks. Unfortunately, the species' numbers may be declining. Both the main breeding habitat, forests of Douglas fir in the Pacific Northwest, and the main winter habitat, pine-oak

forests in the mountains of Middle America, are subject to large-scale logging. Better quantitative data are needed, but the number of migrants moving through San Diego County appears less than it did 30 years ago.

Migration: The Hermit Warbler passes quickly through San Diego County on its spring migration; the birds are strongly concentrated in late April and early May. The range of spring dates recorded during the atlas period essentially equaled that recorded previously, extending from 12 April (2000, one on the east slope of Whale Peak, L26, J. R. Barth) to 6 June (2000, one along upper La Posta Creek, P24, D. C. Seals). First spring dates from 1997 to 2001 varied from 12 to 21 April. During the atlas' five-year term, the highest daily count was of 15 near Little Stonewall Creek, Cuyamaca Mountains (M21), 6 May 1999 (P. D. Jorgensen); subsequently, 30 were around the head of Chariot Canyon (L21) 26 April 2003 (R. C. Sanger). The Hermit is widespread through San Diego County in spring migration but, like other migrant warblers, may be concentrated by headwinds as it ascends the east slope of the county's mountains. Preferring conifers, it often pauses in montane woodland.

Fall migrants are known from 19 July (1987, one on Middle Peak, M20, R. E. Webster, AB 41:1489, 1987) to early November. Some adults may pause in San Diego County's mountains in August, but the scattered individuals seen later in the fall are probably all straggling immatures. San Diego County lies astride the Hermit Warbler's spring migration route but off its fall migration route.

Winter: Far from the species' main winter range in central Mexico, small numbers of Hermit Warblers winter regularly on the coast of central California. South of Point Conception, their numbers decrease markedly. At the latitude of San Diego County the Hermit Warbler is very rare. Six individuals were reported during the five-year atlas period, at O'Neill Lake (E6, 19 December 1997, P. A. Ginsburg), near Bonsall (F8, 6 December 2000, P.



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

A. Ginsburg; 23 December 2000–12 February 2001, J. Evans), in Kit Carson Park (K11, 2 January 2001, J. D. Barr), in Mt. Hope Cemetery (S10, 19 December 1997–22 January 1998, P. Unitt, FN 52:259, 1998), and at the Dairy Mart pond, Tijuana River valley (V11, 19 December 1998–23 January 1999, G. McCaskie, NAB 53:210, 1999). Only about 20 Hermit Warblers ever have been noted wintering in the county. Interestingly, nearly half of them have been in north-coastal San Diego County, in spite of birders' more intensive coverage of the south coast, implying the species' north-south trend of winter abundance is perceptible even within San Diego County.

Conservation: The Hermit Warbler appears to be on the decline as a migrant through San Diego County. It can no longer be called "fairly common to common," as I did in 1984. Concentrations of 30 to 40 in a day, as seen occasionally in the 1960s and 1970s, are no longer encountered along the coast. Likely negative factors for this bird of mature coniferous forest are logging of both the summer and winter ranges and displacement at the northern edge of the breeding range by Townsend's Warbler (Rohwer and Wood 1998).