

### Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus*

Being adapted to use disturbed bare ground and a minimum of water enabled the Killdeer to become San Diego County's most widespread shorebird. It is common from coastal wetlands and bayfills to agricultural fields, lakeshores, golf courses, ball fields, sand mines, graded clearings, cobbly washes with intermittent pools, and even some oases in the Anza-Borrego Desert. Despite the Killdeer's predilection for bare dry dirt, its distribution suggests it needs water to drink, at least during the breeding season. One of the few shorebirds that breeds in San Diego County, Killdeer appears more abundant in winter, perhaps just a result of the local population clumping into loose flocks.

**Breeding distribution:** In San Diego County the Killdeer is most widespread in the coastal lowland, at coastal wetlands (up to 31 at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon, N7, 2 April 2000, D. K. Adams) and in inland valleys (up to 89 along the San Diego River between Santee and Lakeside, P13, 23 April 1998, W. E. Haas). At higher elevations, more rugged topography and less imported water mean the species' distribution is patchier, but it is just as common where habitat is available (38 on the north side of Lake Morena, S21, 7 July 2001, R. and S. L. Breisch; 50 at Tule Lake, T27,



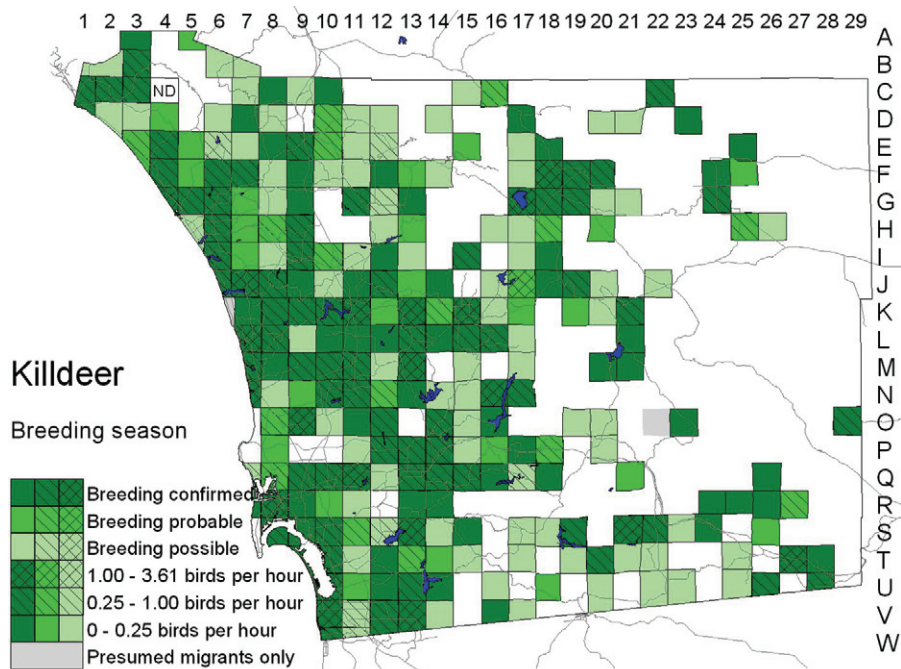
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

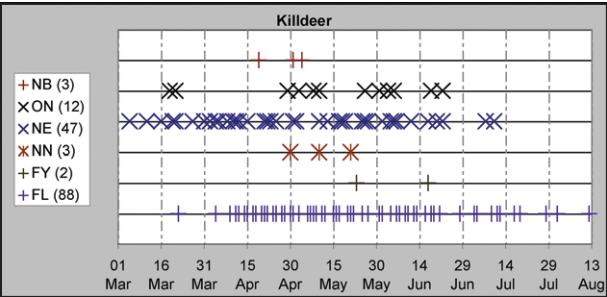
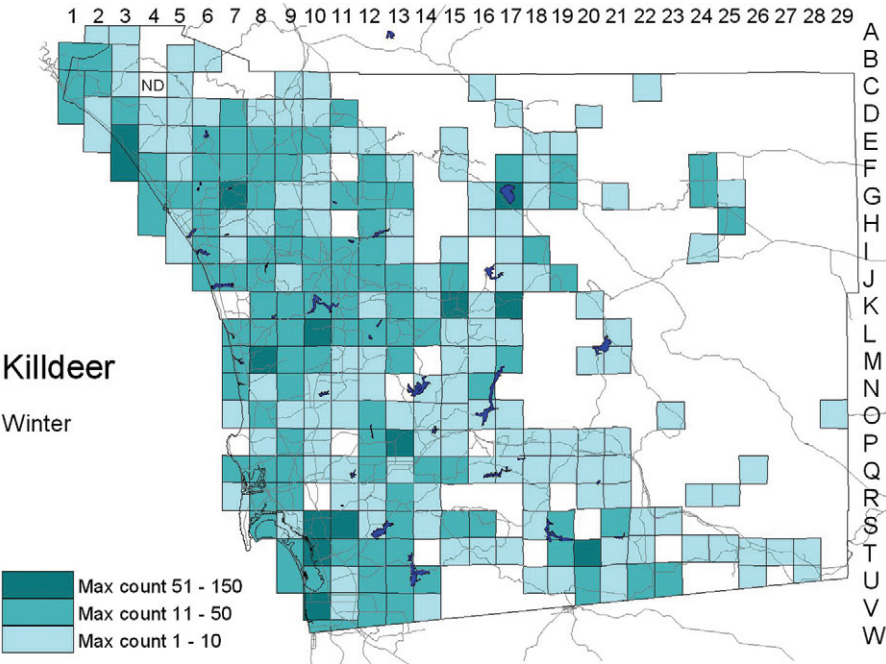
27 June 2001, J. K. Wilson). If the habitat is suitable, the Killdeer is not constrained in San Diego County by elevation, as it breeds up to 5400 feet at Big Laguna Lake (O23; 10, including young, 9–10 June 2001, C. G. Edwards).

In the Anza-Borrego Desert, the Killdeer breeds widely in the irrigated parts of the Borrego Valley (up to 16 at golf-course ponds in Borrego Springs, G24, 25 April 1998, P. D. Ache). Along Coyote Creek the Killdeer breeds regularly at both Lower Willows (D23; up to four on 19 May 2001, M. L. Gabel) and Middle Willows (C22; up to seven, including young, on 6 May 2001, P. D. Jorgensen). Near the junction of San Felipe Creek and Grapevine

Canyon (I23), where the species was absent from 1997 to 2001, it bred in 1982, with nests on 7 and 25 April (P. D. Jorgensen, ABDSP database). Clearing in 2002 of the saltcedar clogging Sentenac Ciénaga (J23) allowed a pair to colonize in 2003 (J. R. Barth); our only Killdeer in this area from 1997 to 2002 was a single individual at nearby Scissors Crossing (J22) 25 May 1998 (E. C. Hall). In the southern section of the desert the Killdeer's only site is Carrizo Marsh (O29; up to four, including a pair in distraction display, on 25 April 2001, M. C. Jorgensen).

**Nesting:** The Killdeer nests in a scrape on the ground, lining it with shells, pebbles, or debris. It compensates for the nest's being





so exposed by distracting predators—and birders—with loud calls and conspicuous displays of feigned broken wings. It also nests regularly on flat gravel rooftops, obliging the chicks to leap to the ground. Our records of nests with eggs extend from 5 March (1998, Rancho Santa Fe, L8, A. Mauro) to 10 July (2001, two nests, D Street fill in Sweetwater River estuary, T10, R. T. Patton), an interval considerably wider than the 18 March–10 June known from egg sets collected 1901–64. A chick at Valhalla High

School (R14) 22 March 2001 suggests egg laying as early as the last week of February (S. Brad).

**Migration:** There is little evidence in San Diego County for Killdeer migrating through areas where they neither nest nor winter. Possible migrants through the Anza–Borrego Desert are one in Culp Valley (G23/H23) 18 March 1992 (M. L. Gabel) and up to two near Tamarisk Grove (I24) 19–21 April 1985 (N. Foley).

**Winter:** The Killdeer’s distribution in San Diego County in winter differs little from that in the breeding season, but the birds are seen often in flocks rather than in pairs. Most are still in the coastal lowland, but our largest flock, of 150 on 25 January 1998,

was at about 2400 feet elevation in Long Potrero (T20; D. C. Seals). In spite of the freezing temperatures, the Killdeer is fairly regular in winter at Big Laguna Lake (up to six on 23 February 2002, K. J. Winter). The species’ desert locations are the same as in the breeding season except for Tamarisk Grove, site of three on 2 December 1998 (P. K. Nelson).

**Conservation:** The Killdeer benefits from many human modifications of the San Diego County environment such as importation of water, maintenance of lawns, and bulldozing of brush. But a countryside dominated by agriculture and pastures is far more favorable to the Killdeer than one dominated by pavement, buildings, and manicured landscaping. Presumably as a result of more intensive urbanization, the number of Killdeer per party-hour on San Diego Christmas bird counts declined from 2.05 from 1953 to 1977 to 1.23 from 1978 to 2002.

**Taxonomy:** Killdeer throughout North America are nominate *C. v. vociferus* Linnaeus, 1758.