

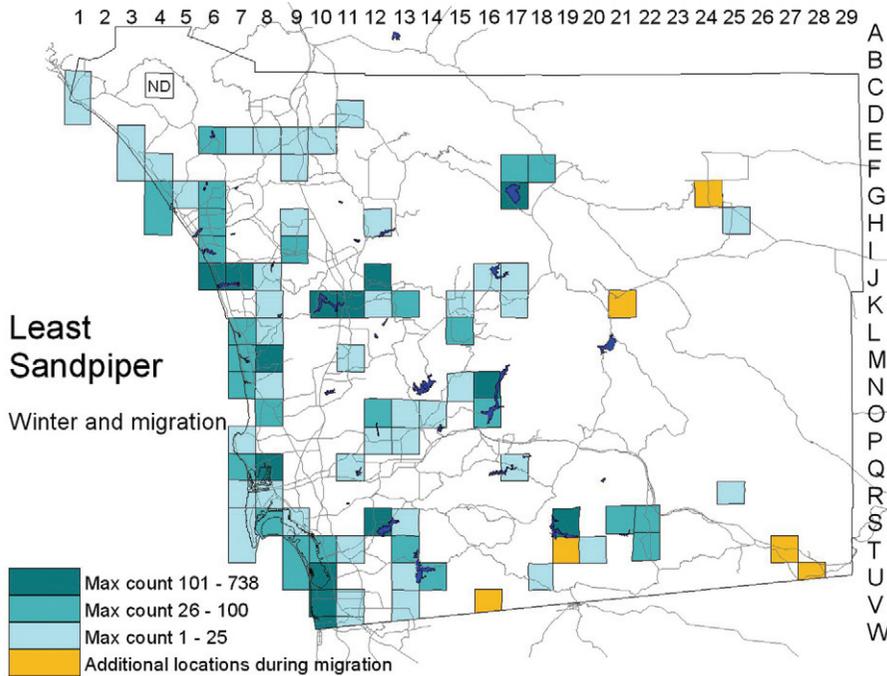
**Least Sandpiper *Calidris minutilla***

San Diego County's smallest sandpiper is also one of its most widespread, being common at wetlands inland as well as those along the coast. Though often found near or in mixed flocks with the other common small sandpiper, the Western, the Least differs slightly in its microhabitat. The Least Sandpiper prefers higher, drier mudflats, wading less in water and soft mud than does the Western Sandpiper. In San Diego County the Least is a migrant and winter visitor occurring mainly from early July to early May.

**Winter:** Along San Diego County's coast, the Least is generally outnumbered by the Western Sandpiper, especially on the tidal mudflats of San Diego and Mission bays so favored by the Western. Nevertheless, the Least



*Photo by Anthony Mercieca*



may winter in large numbers; counts as high as 600 in the east basin of Batiquitos Lagoon (J7) 2 January 1998 (C. C. Gorman), 500 along the Chula Vista bayshore (U10) 16 December 2000 (B. C. Moore), and 738 in the Tijuana River estuary (V10) 19 December 1998 (R. B. Riggan) are exceptional. On weekly counts in and near the salt works 1993–94, Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) found numbers from December to February varying from almost none to about 220. In February 1989, Macdonald et al. (1990) found about 275 in south San Diego Bay outside the salt works. On the basis of monthly surveys of San Elijo Lagoon (L7) 1973–83, King et al. (1987) recorded an August–February average of 65.

Inland the Least Sandpiper winters on both small temporary ponds and the shores of larger reservoirs. Sites of especially large numbers inland are Lake Henshaw (G17; 270 on 21 December 1998, S. J. Montgomery), Lake Hodges (K10; 208 on 22 December 2000, R. L. Barber), El Capitan Reservoir (N16; 185 on 2 January 2002, J. R. Barth), and Sweetwater Reservoir (S12; 250 on 20 December 1997, P. Famolaro). The natural seasonal wetlands most frequented by the Least Sandpiper are in the San Pasqual Valley (J12; 125 on 3 January 1998, P. Unitt) and San Dieguito Valley (M8; 125 on 28 February 1999, R. T. Patton). The sandpiper's use of these wetlands is subject to variation in rainfall, as suggested by the wide variation in the species' numbers on Escondido Christmas bird counts, from 129 in the wet winter of 1997–98 to zero on 4 of 18 counts 1986–2002. The Least Sandpiper winters regularly up to 3000 feet elevation around the upper margins of Lake Morena (S21/S22/T22; up to 80 on 23 January 2000, S. E. Smith), but our only winter record at a higher elevation was of one about 4000 feet in the

Manzanita Indian Reservation (R25) 22 January 2000 (J. K. Wilson).

In the Anza–Borrego Desert wintering Least Sandpipers are rare, reported only from sewage ponds in the Borrego Valley (H25). From 1997 to 2002 our only record was of up to four from 23 to 30 January 2000 (P. D. Jorgensen). On Anza–Borrego Christmas bird counts 1984–2002 the species has been found in 7 of 19 years, with six or fewer except for 28 on 24 December 1989.

**Migration:** In San Diego County, fall migration of the Least Sandpiper begins in early July, exceptionally in late June. The numbers build to a peak in October that is not much higher than the level maintained through the winter.

In spring, migrants appear occasionally on creeks where they do not winter, e.g., five in Marron Valley (V16) 7 April 1999 (D. C. Seals), 12 along Banner Creek (K21) 22 April 1999 (P. K. Nelson), and three at Lower Willows, Coyote Creek (D23), 15 April 1987 (A. G. Morley). The last provided the only desert record away from artificial ponds, where spring counts range up to 40 at Borrego Springs (G24) 25 April 1998 (P. D. Ache). Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) encountered a pulse of spring migrants in the salt works on 21 April 1993, yielding their maximum count of 375. In spite of a peak of spring migration in mid to late April, the numbers of Least Sandpipers drop abruptly in early May. Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) did not encounter the species in May or June. From 1997 to 2001 our dates for migrants ranged from 3 July to 3 May; previously I reported 28 June–8 May (Unitt 1984).

Summering Least Sandpipers average fewer than one per year and are known only from the coast. In 10 years of surveys of San Elijo Lagoon King et al. (1987) found just one, and the only record published in *American Birds* and its successors since 1981 is of one near Imperial Beach (V10) 8 June 1987 (R. E. Webster, AB 41:1487, 1987). The only one reported during the atlas period was at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7) 4 June 2000 (K. Estey).

**Conservation:** Human modification of the environment has both created and destroyed habitat for the Least Sandpiper, as for many water birds. Reservoirs offer new habitat, but most of the tidelands and nearly all of the seasonal wetlands in floodplains have been lost. San Diego County's Christmas bird counts imply considerable chaotic variation in the Least Sandpiper's numbers and local distribution from year to year but no clear trend.