

Lesser Goldfinch *Carduelis psaltria*

The Lesser Goldfinch is one of San Diego County’s most widespread birds. It is a year-round resident and a habitat generalist, taking advantage of any weedy area for foraging. Nesting birds need shrubs or trees for nest sites and water for drinking within an easy commute of the foraging habitat. Our most interesting discovery about the Lesser Goldfinch was its response to El Niño: following the wet winter of 1997–98, the birds spread over the Anza–Borrego Desert, some nesting far from the oases to which they are usually restricted there. When drought returned, the spread proved as ephemeral as the bloom of desert wildflowers.

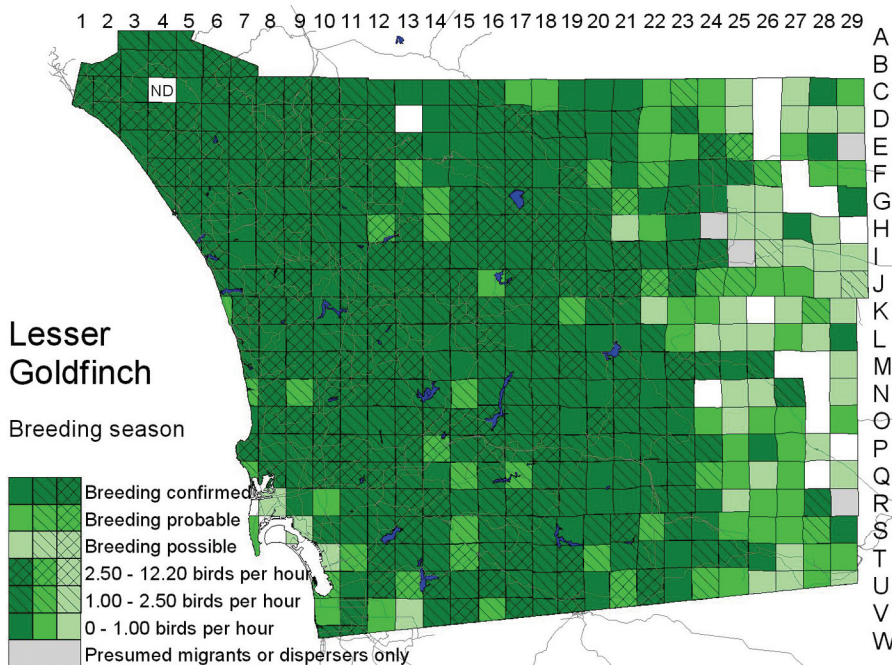
Breeding distribution: The Lesser Goldfinch is almost ubiquitous in San Diego County. It is especially abundant in the inland valleys, where as many as 150 have been counted during a day in the breeding season, as near Monserate Mountain (D9) 19 May 1999 (E. C. Hall), in lower Boden Canyon (J14) 1 June 1999 (C. R. Mahrtdt), and near Ramona (K15) 18 June 1999 (M. and B. McIntosh). Because male Lesser Goldfinches defend only a small area around the nest, the species may breed semicolonially; Weaver (1992) recorded 11 territories in one 11.7-acre study plot along the Santa Margarita River north of Fallbrook (C8). Large numbers occur also in the



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

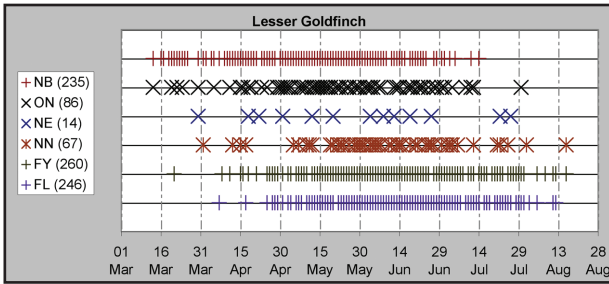
mountains (up to 125 in Matagal Valley, H19, 18 June 2000, S. E. Smith) and in the Borrego Valley (up to 65 in the north end of the valley, E24, 12 March 2000, P. D. Ache). The Lesser Goldfinch occurs in heavily urbanized areas though less commonly than where development is sparse or none; we did not find it in the breeding season in the two most completely developed atlas squares, R7 (Ocean Beach) and S8 (North Island).

Only in the remoter waterless reaches of the Anza–Borrego Desert do we see large holes in the distribution of this species that must drink regularly. Even there the Lesser Goldfinch is surprisingly widespread. The lack of nesting confirmations from many desert areas, however, suggests that many of the goldfinches there during the



breeding season are not nesting. It was primarily in the wet year 1998 that Lesser Goldfinches spread over the Anza–Borrego Desert and were confirmed nesting in washes far from oases. Only two nestings in such dry habitats were noted in the other four years of the study (nest building on the northeast slope of the Santa Rosa Mountains, C28, 2 May 2000, R. Thériault; occupied nest along Fish Creek Wash at Split Mountain, L29, 11 April 2000, J. R. Barth).

Nesting: The Lesser Goldfinch usually builds its nest in a dense-foliaged shrub or tree, generally placing the nest toward the tip of a limb in a situation where it will be shaded at least part of the day (Linsdale 1957, Dawson 1923).



Of 29 nests atlas observers described, nine were in coast live oaks; others were in Engelmann oak, sycamore, willow, cottonwood, pine, ash, eucalyptus, avocado, mulefat, laurel sumac, coyote brush, and Chinese weeping elm. Clearly, the Lesser Goldfinch is a generalist when it comes to nesting.

We observed quite a bit of nesting activity beginning in mid March, especially in the wet year 1998. An occupied nest as early as 13 March 1998 (near Lake Murray, Q11, N. Osborn), an adult feeding a nestling as early as 21 March 1998 (Lower Willows, D23, B. Peterson), and a fledging as early as 7 April 1998 (west end of Batiquitos Lagoon, J6, M. Baumgartel) all imply egg laying in the second week of March, and therefore earlier than the 6 April attested by collected egg sets from San Diego County or 22 March from all of California. The season winds down in late July and early August (nest with nestlings in Poway, L12, as late as 16 August 1999, K. J. Winter). But the Lesser Goldfinch is also known to nest in the fall, in San Diego County (Sharp 1908, Carpenter 1919) as elsewhere. During the atlas period we noted fall nesting twice, with an adult male feeding a fledgling in the Rolando neighborhood of San Diego (R11) 3 December 1998 (F. Shaw) and a nestling found fallen

out of a nest on the campus of San Diego State University (Q11) 20 October 2000 (SDNHM 50489).

Migration: The Lesser Goldfinch does not undertake any regular migration in San Diego County. Nonbreeding birds, however, flock and wander. In open desert scrub, where few if any Lesser Goldfinches nest, small flocks have been seen as late as 7 April (1998, eight at Yaqui Meadows, H24, P. K. Nelson).

Winter: The distribution of the Lesser Goldfinch in San Diego County in winter differs little from that during the breeding season. The species' flocking in winter leads occasionally to counts as high as 293 east of Chula Vista (U12) 19 December 1998 (W. E. Haas) and 207 at Sentenac Ciénaga (J23) 16 February 1998 (R. Thériault). There is some shifting downslope from the highest elevations; we did not find the species in winter near the summits of Hot Springs Mountain (E20) and the Laguna Mountains (O23), where it occurs in summer. The Lesser Goldfinch is scattered over the Anza-Borrego Desert in winter but more sparsely than in spring. Probably the difference is due to the birds being able to take greater advantage of the desert when spring growth follows the rains.

Conservation: The Lesser Goldfinch benefits from many of man's alterations of the southern California environment. It feeds heavily on introduced weeds like the common sow-thistle and yellow star-thistle (Beal 1910, Linsdale 1957). Rural ranches offer disturbed open areas for foraging, shade trees for nesting, and water sources for drinking lacking in undeveloped native chaparral. The widespread use of the native white alder in landscaping puts another of the goldfinch's favored seed sources in many places where it does not grow naturally. These factors likely outweigh negative ones like overgrazing, overpumping of groundwater, and landscaping so intensive it eliminates weedy edges.

Taxonomy: The subspecies of the Lesser Goldfinch resident in San Diego County is the Green-backed Goldfinch, usually called *C. p. hesperophilus* (Oberholser, 1903). There are at least two sight records of black-backed males elsewhere in southern California (Patten et al. 2003), apparently nominate *C. p. psaltria* (Say, 1823). Such birds could be escapees from captivity, however, rather than vagrants or variants. The black-backed subspecies is widespread in mainland Mexico, the source of many escaped cage birds.

