

NIGHTJARS — FAMILY CAPRIMULGIDAE

Lesser Nighthawk *Chordeiles acutipennis*

The Lesser Nighthawk is San Diego County’s most easily seen nightjar, often flying at sunset and sometimes active at midday. Nesting on bare ground, it inhabits sparsely vegetated areas: open desert scrub or sage scrub, broken chaparral (as among vernal pools or along ridge tops), and even disturbed areas if these are not thickly grown to weeds. Mainly a summer visitor, it is generally uncommon and patchily distributed even in the Anza–Borrego Desert, its stronghold within the county. In the coastal lowland it has been greatly reduced by urbanization.

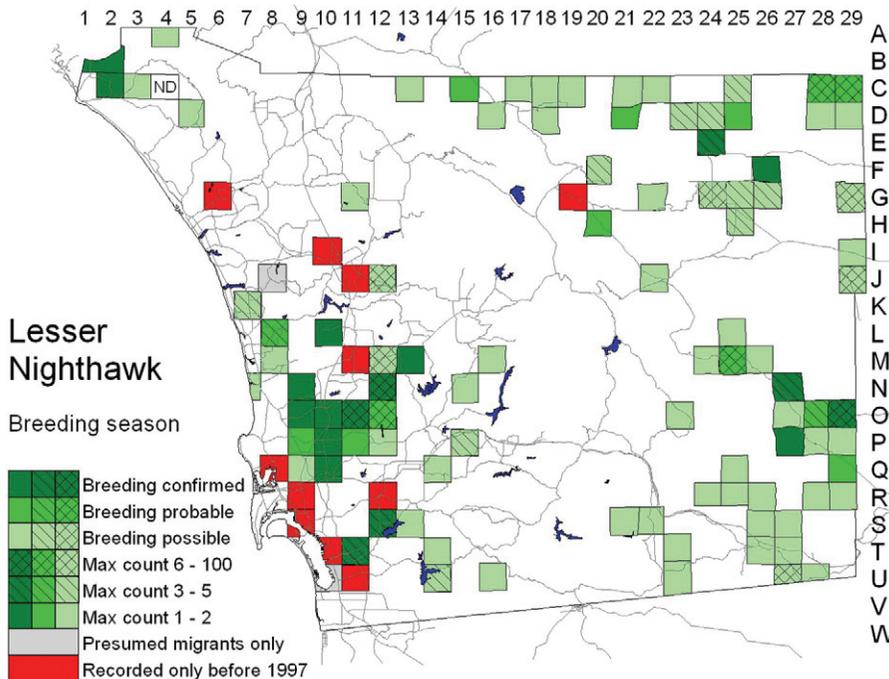
Breeding distribution: The Lesser Nighthawk is most numerous in the Anza–Borrego Desert, but even there we found it to be quite local. It is frequent in the Borrego Valley, though the largest concentration there, of 100 on 27 April 2000 (G24; P. D. Ache) may have included migrants. Another large concentration was of 48 at the northeastern corner of San Diego County (C29) 1 August 1998 (R. Theriault). The birds had roosted by day in the undisturbed desert within Anza–Borrego Desert State Park then at dusk flew toward the Salton Sea and irrigated



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

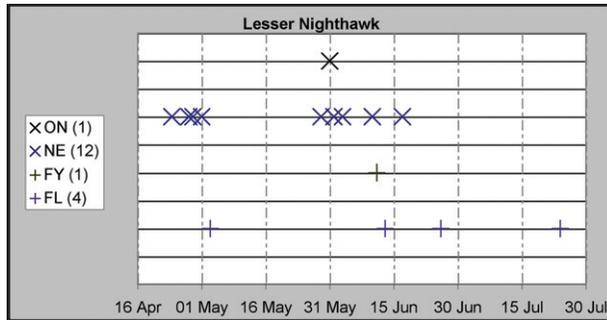
agriculture of the Coachella Valley where flying insects abound. Generally, however, daily counts numbered 10 or fewer. The nighthawk tends to be more frequent in flatter desert and absent from rocky or rugged regions, but there are exceptions, such as the nine on the northeast slope of the Santa Rosa Mountains (C28) 3 May 2000 (R. Thériault). Probably the abundance of flying insects is more important than the nature of the terrain.

In the coastal lowland the Lesser Nighthawk is now found mainly in Marine Corps Air Station Miramar and nearby areas remaining undeveloped north into eastern Poway. This region still has the dry cobbly washes and mesa tops studded with vernal pools that constitute ideal Lesser Nighthawk habitat. Numbers in this area still



range as high as 12 in Goodan Ranch County Park (N12) 28 April and 3 May 1998 (W. E. Haas). Elsewhere in the coastal lowland, the Lesser Nighthawk is rare, especially in northwestern San Diego County, and found mainly in scattered sage scrub. A few still nest near developed areas, as on Mira Mesa at the edge of Los Peñasquitos Canyon (N9; adult with fledgling 13 June 1998, A. G. and D. Stanton), in Sandmark Canyon, Serra Mesa (Q10; nest in spring 2001, M. A. Patten), and in the Lynwood Hills area of Chula Vista (T11; adults with fledgling 24 July 2001, T. W. Dorman)

At higher elevations the Lesser Nighthawk is lacking over most of San Diego County but scattered over the Campo



Plateau (up to six just east of Old George Mountain, U27, 7 May 1997, F. L. Unmack). It also occurs sparsely in central northern San Diego County, even up to 5800 feet on the south slope of Hot Springs Mountain (F20; four on 14 July 2000, K. L. Weaver) and 4600 feet elevation in Lost Valley (D21; two on 26 June 1999, L. J. Hargrove; male with moderately enlarged testes collected 24 June 1998, SDNHM 50059). The only other record from a high elevation is of one at 5500 feet in the Laguna Mountains (O23) 9 or 10 June 2001 (C. G. Edwards).

Nesting: The Lesser Nighthawk lays its eggs on the bare ground, perhaps in a slight scrape, often in full sun. One nest in Murphy Canyon (P10) 3 June 1998 was in sand and gravel remaining on the foundation of a demolished building (G. L. Rogers). Our egg dates ranged from 24 April to 17 June, practically the same interval attested by early egg collections. Chicks at Goodan Ranch County Park (N12) 3 May 1998, however, must have hatched from eggs laid no later than 14 April (W. E. Haas). There is no evidence for the species' nesting earlier in the desert than on the coastal slope.

Migration: The Lesser Nighthawk arrives consistently in late March. From 1997 to 2001 our earliest spring dates ranged from 20 March to 1 April, except for one at 2000 feet elevation on the east slope of Otay Mountain 8 March 2001 (K. J. Winter), possibly a bird that had wintered. In the past, flocks of postbreeding birds had been seen in the coastal lowland, up to 40 in the Tijuana River valley 20 September 1977 (J. L. Dunn), but there are no recent reports of such

numbers. The species decreases in abundance in October and is only rarely reported in November.

Winter: The Lesser Nighthawk is very rare in winter, with all 14 records being from the coastal lowland, mainly in southern San Diego County. The only winter occurrence during the atlas period was of two at Poway (M12) 11 February 1998 (P. von Hendy). This is also the northernmost winter record for the county. All winter records are of single birds except this and another of two at Lower Otay Lake (U13/U14) 5 January 1991 (K. A. Radamaker, AB 45:321, 1991).

Conservation: The historical record is meager, but clearly the Lesser Nighthawk is much scarcer than formerly. Emerson (1887), misidentifying it as the Common Nighthawk, reported it as "common" at Poway. Stephens (1919a) considered it a "rather common summer resident of the coast region and foothills." Egg collections attest to former nesting at Escondido, La Mesa, and National City. Nesting on the ground, the Lesser Nighthawk is highly susceptible to disturbance and predation. Most of the flat mesas and floodplains that constitute the best Lesser Nighthawk habitat have already been developed. Lovio (1996) identified the Lesser Nighthawk, along with the Sage Sparrow, as the species most sensitive to habitat fragmentation on the east edge of metropolitan San Diego. He found it remaining only in blocks of appropriate habitat greater than 100 hectares. Air Station Miramar is currently serving as a refuge for the species, but shifting military priorities could change this. The Lesser Nighthawk is under less pressure in the Anza-Borrego Desert, though off-road vehicles could pose a threat. Wildlife rehabilitators have encountered at least two instances of Lesser Nighthawks nesting in San Diego County on flat gravel-topped roofs, as the Common Nighthawk does commonly in parts of its range. But in the Lesser such a habit must be rare, because over most of the developed areas of San Diego County the Lesser Nighthawk is never seen.

Taxonomy: *Chordeiles a. texensis* Lawrence, 1858, is the only subspecies of Lesser Nighthawk occurring in California.