

WOODPECKERS — FAMILY PICIDAE

Lewis' Woodpecker *Melanerpes lewis*

Lewis' Woodpecker is an uncommon winter visitor to San Diego County. It occurs mainly in the mountains and foothills, seeking large trees at the edges of meadows or scattered in grassland. Its distribution is patchy, the birds often recurring year after year at favored spots while ignoring other habitat that looks similar. On the other hand, the numbers wintering in San Diego County vary greatly from year to year, and in irruption years occasional birds reach the coast or the desert floor.

Winter: Oak savanna and mountain meadows constitute the main habitats for Lewis' Woodpecker in San Diego County. The species occurs mainly above 1000 feet elevation, rarely within 20 miles of the coast. From 1997 through 2002, our highest counts were of eight at San Ignacio, Los Coyotes Indian Reservation (E21), 19 December 1999 (M. C. Jorgensen), seven at Lake Cuyamaca (M20) 11 February 1999 (D. Aklufi), and eight in upper McCain Valley (R26) 23 January 2000 (J. R. Barth). In irruption years, however, numbers can be much larger. Totals on the Lake Henshaw Christmas bird count vary from zero in 1991 and 1992 to 45 on 29 December 1981. On the Escondido count, Lewis' Woodpecker has been recorded on only three of 17 counts from 1986 to 2001, yet the count on 30 December 1989 yielded 36. The largest number ever reported in San Diego County was at least 60 on Palomar Mountain (D15) 26 October 1982 (R. Higson, AB 37:225, 1983).

During the atlas period our winter record nearest the coast was of one about 9 miles inland at Case



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Spring, Camp Pendleton (B4), 17 December 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg). Most of the few sightings along the coast are during migration periods. Lewis' Woodpeckers, single individuals in all cases, have been found just twice on the Oceanside Christmas bird count (1 January 1979, 21 December 2002), once on the Rancho Santa Fe count (16 December 1984), and once on the San Diego count (16 December 1989). The only records from the Anza-Borrego Desert are of one at Peña Spring and in Culp Valley (G23/H23) 26 September and 6 November 1991 (M. L. Gabel) and of up to three at Club Circle, Borrego Springs (G24), 31 October 1989–17 April 1990 (A. G. Morley et al.).

Migration: The arrival and departure of Lewis' Woodpecker in San Diego County vary greatly from year to year. Fall arrival is generally in late September or early October; 15 September (1950, one at Palomar Mountain, E. Beemer) is the earliest recorded date. In 1998 the latest report was on 8 February, in 1999 it was 24 April, in 2000 it was 1 June, and in 2001 it was 6 May. The occurrence on 1 June 2000 was the latest ever for San Diego County; on that date a Lewis' Woodpecker got trapped and died in the shed for donations to the Salvation Army in Descanso (P20; G. Wynn, SDNHM 50439).

