

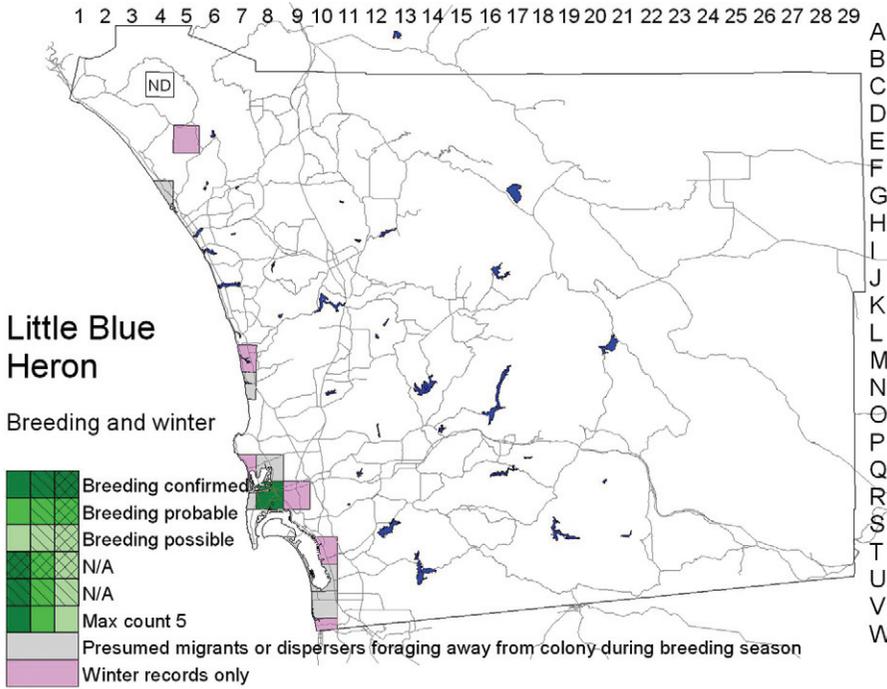
Little Blue Heron *Egretta caerulea*

The Little Blue Heron is a rather recent arrival in San Diego County, since the 1980s a rare but permanent resident of the coastal wetlands. It forages in shallow water and nests in colonies of its close relative, the Snowy Egret. Indeed, the egret's colonizing the county may have been a necessary precursor to the Little Blue Heron's colonizing. San Diego now represents the northwestern corner of the Little Blue Heron's usual range.

Breeding distribution: From 1997 to 2001 the Little Blue Heron was confirmed nesting only in the Snowy Egret colony at Sea World (R8), where one pair fledged one young



Photo by Anthony Mercieca



World is in a thick stand of tall bamboo (Black et al. 1997). The mixed heronry at North Island is spread among eucalyptus, pine, and fig trees. Information on the Little Blue Heron's nesting schedule in San Diego County is still rudimentary. In 1994, one nest at Sea World was occupied by 8 April; in 1997, the nest was occupied by 6 May and the young fledged between 21 June and 12 July. In the former colony in the Tijuana River valley, fledging was in July.

Winter: The Little Blue Heron's distribution and abundance in San Diego County in winter are much the same as at other seasons. An exceptional winter concentration, the largest yet reported, was of 14 in the San Diego River flood-control chan-

nel 23 December 1997 (C. G. Edwards). Winter records from northern San Diego County were of two at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon 5 December 1999 (D. K. Adams), one at the San Dieguito River estuary 11 December 1999 (D. R. Grine), and one immature 5.8 miles inland at a sewage pond in the Santa Margarita River valley, Camp Pendleton (E5), 25 December 1999 (B. E. Bell).

in 1997 (Black et al. 1997). In 1993 and 1994, however, three and four pairs of the Little Blue nested there, respectively. Also, at least one pair evidently nested in the heronry within North Island Naval Air Station (S8) in 1996, as a recently fledged juvenile was picked up moribund beneath the colony 20 August (SDNHM 49605). Surveys there in 1999 did not reveal the species (McDonald et al. 2000)

Nesting: The Snowy Egret/Little Blue Heron colony at Sea

Foraging Little Blue Herons are seen along the shores of Mission Bay, in the San Diego River flood-control channel (up to five on 29 July 2000, M. Billings), at Famosa Slough, in south San Diego Bay, and in the Tijuana River estuary. They have been seen repeatedly at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7) but are rare farther north. The species has been recorded at most of the coastal lagoons between Del Mar and Oceanside, but during the atlas period the only summer records north of Los Peñasquitos Lagoon were of one at the Santa Margarita River mouth (G4) 15 June 1997 (B. Peterson) and 3–5 July 1999 (P. A. Ginsburg).

Conservation: The Little Blue Heron was first recorded in San Diego County on 14 November 1967 (AFN 22:89, 1968) and remained a rare visitor until 1980. From then through 1993, one or two pairs nested in the multispecies heronry at the Dairy Mart pond, Tijuana River valley (V11). That colony disappeared, but the herons began nesting at Sea World in 1992. Since the mid 1980s the population of Little Blue Herons in the San Diego area seems to have been more or less stable at approximately 10–12 individuals. The close association in nesting between the Little Blue Heron and Snowy Egret suggests that the career of the former will follow in the steps of the latter.