

MacGillivray's Warbler *Oporornis tolmiei*

A bird of dense, low vegetation, MacGillivray's Warbler is easily overlooked. As a result, it appears to be the scarcest of the western warblers in San Diego County. Nevertheless, it is a regular if uncommon migrant in both spring and fall, best found in spring at oases along the east base of the mountains. Though San Diego County is apparently off the species' main migration route, some birds do follow the pattern of many other migrant landbirds, using the canyons on the county's desert slope as routes for breaching the barrier of the mountains on their journey northwest. MacGillivray's Warbler is expanding its breeding range south, but in San Diego County so far this expansion has generated but a single summer sighting from Palomar Mountain.

Migration: In spring, MacGillivray's Warbler is seen in San Diego County most numerous on the desert flank of the mountains, the birds pausing as they seek the routes of least resistance to the coastal slope. The high count during the atlas period exemplifies this pattern (nine in Oriflamme Canyon, L22, 23 April 2001, R. Thériault), as do other high counts (25 at Banner, K21, 15 April 1978, P. Unitt; 11 near the head of Rodriguez Canyon, K21, 26 April 2003, S. D. Cameron). The species' main spring migration period is mid April to mid May, but we recorded the species twice in late March. The earliest date, 23 March (1997, one at Mescal Bajada, J25, M. and B. McIntosh), appears to be the earliest ever for San Diego County and equals the earliest for the Salton Sink (Patten et al. 2003). The latest spring date is 28 May (2000, one near White Oak Spring, A3, L. J. Hargrove), except for a specimen (SDNHM 37194) from Mount Helix (R12) dated "June 1967" with no more exact information.

Fall migrants occur primarily from mid August through mid October, rarely as late as mid November.

Winter: MacGillivray's Warbler is very rare in winter in southern California, which is well north of the main winter range in western mainland Mexico. Eleven have been recorded around metropolitan San Diego at this season, most recently in 1992. Another was reported on the Anza-Borrego Christmas bird count 29 December 1985.

Breeding distribution: The Sierra Nevada was the southern end of MacGillivray's Warbler's traditional breeding range (Grinnell and Miller 1944). In the final third of the 20th century, small numbers colonized the higher elevations of the Transverse Ranges of southern California (Lentz 1993, Dunn and Garrett 1997). In 1987 two or three



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

summered on Black Mountain in the San Jacinto range of Riverside County (R. McKernan, AB 41:1489, 1987). In San Diego County there is only one summer record, of a singing male in Doane Valley, Palomar Mountain State Park (E14), 9 June 1994 (M. B. Stowe, NASFN 48:989, 1994). There was no suggestion of breeding.

Conservation: MacGillivray's Warbler is a bird of coniferous forest, but one of the understory, not the canopy. As a result, it capitalizes on the new low growth that follows logging. Data on the trends of the species as a whole are conflicting (Pitochelli 1995), but the number of migrants passing through San Diego may be on the increase. Though Stephens (1919a) called MacGillivray's Warbler "rather common," the same term he used for Townsend's, the San Diego Natural History Museum had no specimens from the county before 1963. Now these have swelled to 22. As an understory species, MacGillivray's Warbler is liable to collision with windows and capture by domestic cats, so the upsurge in specimens may be related more to the hazards of migrating through an increasingly urban environment than to an increase in the number of birds themselves.

Taxonomy: Most specimens of MacGillivray's Warbler from San Diego County are the more brightly colored subspecies of the Pacific coast region, *O. t. tolmiei* (Townsend, 1839). The one exception known was collected in Tubb Canyon (H23) 14 April 1938 (LACM 73980). Its dull grayish-olive upperparts and small size (tail 51 mm, wing chord 57 mm) match *O. t. monticola* Phillips, 1947, or *O. t. austinsmithi* Phillips, 1947, if the latter is separable (Patten et al. 2003). It is a surprise that the one specimen of the Rocky Mountain subspecies should be so early in the spring, for the typical pattern is that spring migration of Rocky Mountain subspecies lags that of their Pacific coast counterparts (compare Wilson's Warbler, for example).