

Mountain Bluebird *Sialia currucoides*

In winter, the season when it reaches San Diego County, the Mountain Bluebird contradicts its name, seeking flat valley floors. Extensive grasslands, plowed fields, and dry lake beds are the species' principal habitats in San Diego County. The Mountain Bluebird is highly irregular in southern California, usually localized and uncommon. But in rare invasion years it is seen in flocks of hundreds, an amazing sight of glittering blue against the plain brown earth. Unfortunately, the Mountain Bluebird cannot withstand urbanization—winter visitors as well as breeding birds can lose habitat to development.

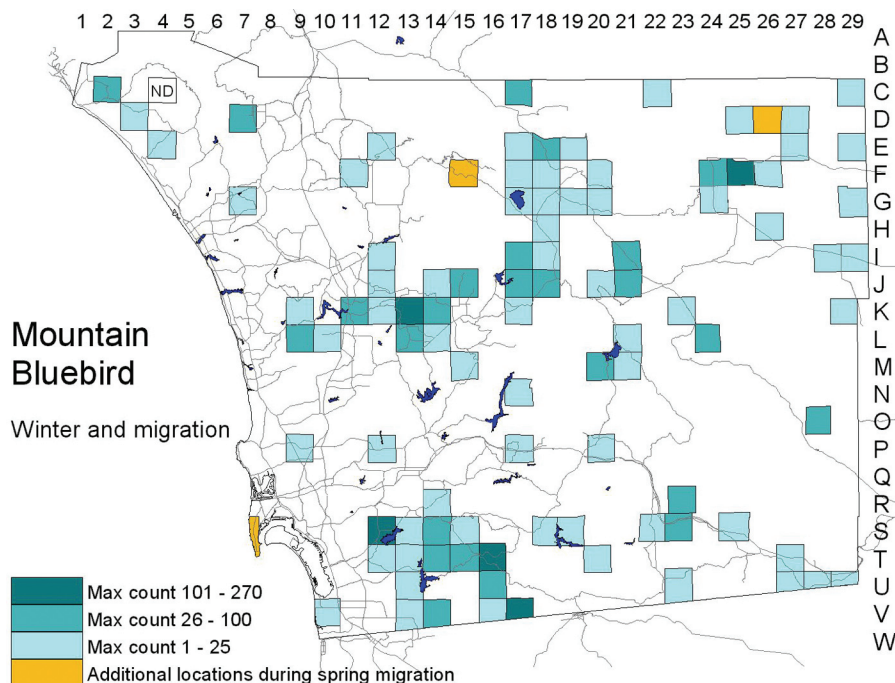
Winter: The Mountain Bluebird is quite localized in San Diego County, as tracts of grassland or bare dirt large enough to attract it are few and scattered. On the coastal slope, the bluebird's principal sites are Warner Valley, Santa Ysabel Valley, Santa Maria Valley (Ramona grasslands), Lake Cuyamaca, and an arc surrounding



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Otay Mountain, from Otay Mesa north to Sweetwater Reservoir, east to Jamul and Dulzura, and south to Marron Valley. On the desert side of the mountains, the main sites are the Borrego Valley, San Felipe Valley, Earthquake Valley, and Blair Valley.

The species' numbers are so irregular, however, that the birds may be rare or absent even at favored sites in some years. The Mountain Bluebird's irregularity was



on full display during the five years of field work for this atlas. In 1998–99 and 2001–02, scarcely 30 individuals were reported each winter. In 2000–01, however, San Diego County received perhaps the greatest invasion of Mountain Bluebirds ever recorded. Daily counts in a single atlas square that winter ranged as high as 160 near Peg Leg Road in the Borrego Valley (F25) 17 December (L. J. Hargrove, P. Unitt), 200 along Rangeland Road, Ramona (K13), 16 January (L. and M. Polinsky), 150 at Sweetwater Reservoir (S12) 22 February (P. Famolaro), 240 between Dulzura and Sycamore Canyon (T16) 13 January (L. J. Hargrove), and 270 in Marron Valley (V17) the same day (E. C. Hall). That winter, Mountain Bluebirds ranged practically to the coast, where they are rare, with three at the Tijuana River estuary (V10) 29 January (T. Stands, S. Yamagata), seven at the mouth of

Las Pulgas Canyon (E4) 11 and 17 February (P. A. Ginsburg), and 70 about 3.5 miles inland near San Mateo Creek (C2) 19 February (J. R. Barth).

Migration: The Mountain Bluebird occurs in San Diego mainly from November to mid March. Early dates are 18 October 1998 (one in Blair Valley, L24, R. Thériault) and 25 October 1984 (one at Point Loma, S7, R. E. Webster, AB 39:104, 1985). Late dates are 2 April 2001 (six in Borrego Springs, F24, M. L. Gabel), 3 April 1998 (one in Blair Valley, R. Thériault), and 4 April (1884, one at San Diego, Belding 1890).

Conservation: One would hardly think that a bird that seeks areas with as little vegetation as possible could suffer

habitat loss, but this is what has happened in San Diego County. In the 1960s and 1970s the Mountain Bluebird was found annually for the San Diego Christmas bird count in Rancho Otay (U12). Since then urban sprawl has spread past the eastern edge of the count circle and is eating away at much of the bluebird's traditional habitat from Otay Mesa north to San Miguel Mountain. Since 1980 the Mountain Bluebird has been found on only two San Diego counts. Elsewhere in the county, the Ramona grasslands are also prime Mountain Bluebird habitat threatened by urban encroachment. Keeping to grassland, sparse sage scrub, and agriculture, the bluebirds retreat from the urban growth front. The response of wintering birds to habitat fragmentation is poorly studied, but the Mountain Bluebird is a prime subject with which this topic could be addressed.