

Nashville Warbler *Vermivora ruficapilla*

In spring, if the rains have been good, the desert blooms, insects proliferate, and warblers like the Nashville can stop to refuel on their way from western Mexico to the Pacific Northwest. The Nashville Warbler is primarily a spring migrant through San Diego County, most numerous on the desert slope. It is uncommon as a fall migrant and rare as a winter visitor. Our atlas effort revealed the species for the first time in summer in San Diego County, with three records of apparently unmated males on Palomar Mountain—the first summer sightings of the Nashville south of the San Bernardino Mountains.

Breeding distribution: The Sierra Nevada represents the southern end of the Nashville Warbler's traditional breeding range. It has been only since 1970 that small numbers have been found summering in the Transverse Ranges, with breeding confirmed at least in the San Gabriel Mountains (AB 37:1028, 1983) and on Big Pine Mountain, Santa Barbara County (Lentz 1993). Field work for this atlas yielded three observations on Palomar Mountain,



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

the first summer records of the Nashville Warbler for San Diego County. Two were from the confluence of Doane and Pauma creeks, elevation 4475 feet (D14), where males sang at length 24 June 1997 and 18 June 1998 (P. D. Jorgensen). The third record was of a male at Sourdough Spring, at 5725 feet 0.25 mile northeast of High Point,

Palomar Mountain (D15), 12 July 2000 (K. L. Weaver). In no case did the birds appear paired, and nesting of the Nashville Warbler as far south as San Diego County is still unconfirmed. These are the only summer records south of the San Bernardino Mountains, as no definite records for the San Jacinto Mountains have been published; “Mill Creek, San Jacinto Mountains” (AB 41:1488, 1987) is an error for the San Bernardino Mountains.

Migration: Nashville Warblers arrive in spring at the end of March or beginning of April. During the atlas period first reports ranged from 27 March (1997, two at Agua Caliente Springs, M26, E. C. Hall) to 1 April. The earliest spring date ever is 21 March (1970, Valley Center, G11, AFN 24:673, 1970). Spring migration peaks in late April. Numbers are higher in the Anza–Borrego Desert and on the east slope of the mountains than on the coastal slope, though the species is seen throughout the county. The highest count in a day during the atlas period, 20 near San Felipe (H20) 24 April 1999 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan), was from the San Felipe Valley corridor traveled by many birds following the lowest routes from the desert to the coast. By mid May most Nashville Warblers have finished passing through, and the latest spring date is 25 May (1998, one at Tamarisk Grove Campground, I24, P. D. Jorgensen).

In fall, the Nashville Warbler is uncommon in San Diego County, as it is one of those species whose primary migration route swings east, the birds avoiding Baja California and a crossing of the Gulf of California on their way to a winter range in western mainland Mexico. Fall migrants may appear as early as 29 July (2000, one along Agua Dulce Creek, Laguna Mountains, O23, J. R. Barth).

Winter: The Nashville Warbler is a rare but annual visitor along the coast. One to five individuals were reported during each winter of the atlas’ five-year term, for a total of 12. The species was found on 22 of 34 San Diego Christmas bird counts 1968–2002, with up to three noted

on three counts in the 1970s. In the north county wintering Nashville Warblers are much rarer than around metropolitan San Diego, with no reports on Rancho Santa Fe Christmas bird counts and only one on an Oceanside Count (two on 23 December 1980). Other reports along the north coast are of one at San Onofre (C1) 20 January 2001 (J. M. and B. Hargrove) and one in Vista (G7) 4 January 2002 (C. Andregg). There are two winter reports from farther inland, of one in Carney Canyon (H15) 2 January 1999 (M. Dudley) and two in Ballena Valley (K17) 25 February 2002 (D. C. Seals).

Conservation: Breeding in the undergrowth of coniferous forests, the Nashville Warbler may be taking advantage of the second growth that follows logging. Results of both the Breeding Bird Survey (Sauer et al. 2003) and counts of migrants on Southeast Farallon Island (Pyle et al. 1994) imply that the western subspecies *ridgwayi* is increasing on a broad scale. Numbers of Nashville Warblers observed in San Diego County 1997–2001, however, were less than could be found in the 1970s, though our protocol for this atlas did not emphasize migrants.

Taxonomy: The western subspecies, the Calaveras Warbler, has been known as *V. r. ridgwayi* since van Rossem (1929) proposed this as a substitute name. The Calaveras Warbler’s original name, *V. r. gutturalis* (Ridgway, 1874), was preoccupied by *Vermivora gutturalis* (Cabanis, 1860), when the Flame-throated Warbler of Costa Rica and Panama was placed in the same genus with the Nashville. If the Flame-throated Warbler is transferred to the genus *Parula*, as in the 7th edition of the A. O. U. checklist, van Rossem’s substitution is unnecessary but retained because of the provision in the latest version of the code of scientific nomenclature that conserves such changes if they happened before 1961. The eastern subspecies of the Nashville, *V. r. ruficapilla* (Wilson, 1811), is still unconfirmed in California, though all other warblers with similar ranges reach the state regularly.