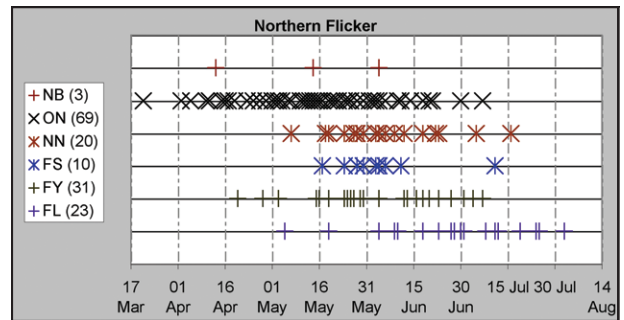


### Northern Flicker *Colaptes auratus*

San Diego County's largest woodpecker is a fairly common resident in coniferous forest, oak woodland and sycamore groves. Though it nests in tree cavities like other woodpeckers, it feeds largely on the ground, specializing on ants. The local population is much augmented in winter by migrants from the north, which occur in the same habitats as the residents, as well as invading grassland, desert, and developed areas where breeding flickers are few or none.

**Breeding distribution:** The pattern of flicker abundance in San Diego County resembles that of many other oak woodland birds: the birds are most numerous in the mountains and foothills, and they extend toward the coast more commonly in the north than in the south. In the core range, daily counts in the breeding season range up to 15 at Mount Laguna (O23) 24 July 1998 (E. C. Hall), 15 at Wynola (J19) 22 May 1999 (S. E. Smith), and 17 at De Luz (B6) 20 June 2000 (K. L. Weaver). An area outside the core where flickers are especially common, with its abundant oaks and sycamores, is Los Peñasquitos Canyon (N8/N9), with up to 18 on 1 April 2001 (N8; B. Siegel). In south-coastal San Diego County breeding flickers are uncommon to rare, with no count of over three per day from mid April through August. On the east slope of the mountains, the edge of the flicker's range follows the edge of the oaks closely, though the birds occur also in riparian woodland at Scissors Crossing (J22; courting pair 13 April 1998, E. C. Hall), in planted cottonwoods at Butterfield Ranch (M23; occupied nest hole 17 April 1999, P. K. Nelson; pair with fledgling 18 June 1999, H. and K. Williams), and along Carrizo Creek north of Jacumba (T28; one on 3 May 1998 and 11 May 2001, F. L. Unmack).

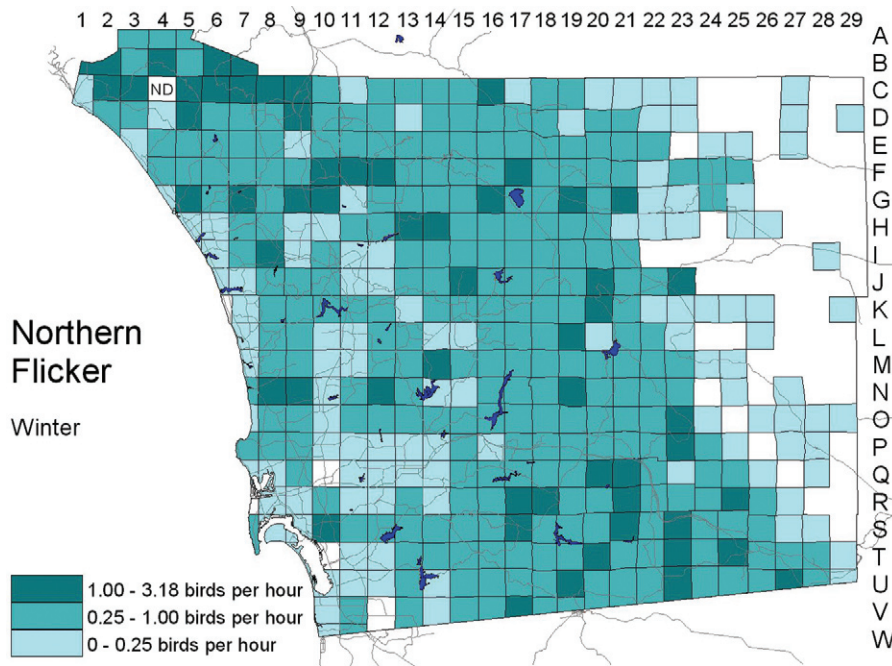
Photo by Anthony Mercieca



**Nesting:** Flickers excavate their nest holes typically in dead trees or dead snags of living trees but sometimes in live trunks or branches. The most frequent nest site described by atlas observers was coast live oak; willows, cottonwoods, and sycamores were also mentioned. A flicker in Johnson Canyon on the north slope of Otay Mesa (V13) 1 April 2000 was attending a hole in a dead eucalyptus (P. Unitt); no suitable native trees were in the area. Another nest was in a telephone pole along the Santa Margarita River at De Luz Road (C7) 11 April 1998 (K. L. Weaver).

The nesting schedule we observed from 1997 to 2001 was largely consistent with the 9 April–20 June range of 33 egg sets collected in San Diego County 1894–1945. A fledgling near Dyche Valley (F15) 5 May 1997 (M. Dougan) suggests egg laying about 1 April.

**Migration:** Migrant flickers occur in San Diego County mainly from October through March. Specimens attest to dates from 2 October to 2 April (see under Taxonomy). The earliest date of a sight report away from a breeding locality is 15 September (1973, one in Tubb Canyon, H23; one at Borrego Palm Canyon campground, F23), except for one at Tamarisk Grove (I24) 20 August 1984 (B.



Tijuana River valley, where it was not known in the breeding season before 2000 (one in Goat Canyon, W10, 13 and 23 May 2000, W. E. Haas). The number of flickers using these novel habitats, however, is very small. On the negative side, the proliferation of the European Starling has been blamed for a decline of flickers over much of North America. Cities offer little opportunity for foraging to a bird like the flicker that feeds primarily in the dirt. From 1997 to 2001, the number of flickers on the San Diego and Oceanside Christmas bird counts was barely over half what it was from the mid 1960s through 1970s, probably as a result of the urbanization of the count circles.

Knaak, ABDSP database). Probably sightings before the last week of September represent short-distance dispersal of the local population, not the arrival of migrants from farther north. In spring, records after the first week of April are few. The only reports later than 24 April are of one at Angelina Spring (I22) 2 May 1997 (P. K. Nelson) and one at Agua Caliente Springs (M26) 4 June 1998 (E. C. Hall).

**Winter:** In winter, the flicker is more common than in the breeding season, with daily counts up to 30 near the Pine Hills Fire Station (L19) 6 February 1999 and 35 in the Wooded Hill/Morris Ranch area of the Laguna Mountains (P23) 19 February 1999 (E. C. Hall). Winter visitors spread over the whole coastal slope, including areas where the species does not breed (up to nine in the southeast quadrant of the Tijuana River valley, W11, 5 December 2000, P. Unitt). Wintering flickers also reach the Anza-Borrego Desert, occurring mainly at oases and around the trees planted in Borrego Springs (F24; up to 17 on 20 December 1998, R. Thériault et al.).

**Conservation:** The Northern Flicker both benefits and suffers from man-made changes in the environment. The planting of trees in what was once treeless scrub has enabled the species to colonize areas like Point Loma and Chula Vista, where it was doubtless absent as a breeding bird before urbanization. The regeneration of riparian woodland may be allowing the flicker to colonize the

**Taxonomy:** The subspecies of flicker resident in San Diego County is *C. a. collaris* Vigors, 1829, a Red-shafted Flicker with the nape and crown the same dark brown color as the back. It breeds along the Pacific coast from northern California to northern Baja California. In winter *collaris* is outnumbered by *C. a. canescens* Brodtkorb, 1935, which is often paler on the back than *collaris* and has the nape and crown grayer. It breeds inland from the Sierra Nevada to the Rocky Mountains and occurs in San Diego County as a winter visitor at least from 2 October (1981, Clairemont area of San Diego, P8, SDNHM 41613) to 2 April (1988, Chula Vista, U11, SDNHM 47783).

The Yellow-shafted Flicker is a rare winter visitor to San Diego County. Three were reported during the atlas period (one along the Sweetwater River near Highway 94, R13, 3 January 2000, M. and D. Hastings; one in Mission Gorge, P11, 8 January 2000, D. Kisner; one in Thing Valley, Q24, 25 December 2001, J. R. Barth), and other flickers with some but possibly not all of the characters of the Yellow-shafted were also noted. One specimen (Point Loma, S7, 15 February 1954, SDNHM 30001) shows all the features of a Yellow-shafted; it is of the large northern subspecies *C. a. luteus* Ridgway, 1911. Several specimens of *canescens* have just one feature of the Yellow-shafted, either yellowish shafts or red in the nape. Sight records of Yellow-shafted Flickers extend from 4 October (1973, Point Loma, G. McCaskie) to 4 April (1978, Point Loma, AB 32:1056, 1978).