

### Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

The Northern Pintail was once the county's most abundant dabbling duck, but its numbers have dropped behind those of the American Wigeon and Northern Shoveler, while those of the Mallard have surged past it. But the pintail is still a locally common winter visitor to shallow water both inland and along the coast. In late spring and early summer it is uncommon. San Diego represents the southern tip of its breeding range, but it has been confirmed nesting in the county only a few times, none during the five-year atlas period.

**Winter:** Pintails are widespread in San Diego County but concentrate at rather few places. These include some of the north county lagoons, especially Batiquitos (J6/J7; 660 on 6 January 1997, Merkel and Associates 1997; 352 on 2 January 1998, C. C. Gorman). In the southern half of the county the principal sites are northeastern Mission Bay (Q8; up to 165 on 21 December 1998, J. C. Worley), the San Diego River flood-control channel (R8; up to 500 on 24 December 1997, P. Unitt), south San Diego Bay (U10; 467 on 16 December 2000, D. G. Seay; V10; 400 on 18 December 1999, J. L. Coatsworth), and the Tijuana River estuary (V10/W10; 350 on 20 December 1997, S. Walens).

Major inland sites are the Wild Animal Park (J12; up to 582 on 2 January 1999, K. L. Weaver), Lake Hodges (K10/K11; up to 300 on 5 and 11 February 1998, R. L. Barber), Sweetwater Reservoir (S12/S13; up to 150 on 2 January 2002, P. Famolaro), and Sweetwater County Park, Bonita (T11; up to 150 on 19 December 1998, L. D. and R. Johnson). Pintails occur in smaller numbers at other lakes, provided their shores are not so steep as to minimize aquatic vegetation. We found no pintails in reservoirs installed in deep canyons, such as San Vicente



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

and Loveland. The pintail winters at elevations as high as 5400 feet at Big Laguna Lake (O23; up to 30 on 23 February 2002, K. J. Winter) but is one of the scarcer ducks in the Anza–Borrego Desert. Christmas bird count, state park, and atlas databases contain only 10 records, all of single individuals except for an incongruous flock of 100 flying over the Carrizo Badlands 15 January 1971 (M. C. Jorgensen).

**Migration:** At north San Diego County's coastal lagoons, pintails arrive in August and depart largely in March (King et al. 1987). In 1978, Batiquitos Lagoon was a major migration stop, with numbers reaching 2000 on 26 August (P. Unitt). In 1993, however, in the south San Diego Bay salt works, Stadlander and Konecny (1994) found none before October and few before November. Dates for the Anza–Borrego Desert range from 5 August (1973; one at Pena Spring, G23, ABDSP database) to 5 March (1991; one at the Borrego sewage pond, H25, A. G. Morley). On the coastal slope enough pintails summer that the schedule cannot be defined exactly, but atlas data

suggest that few wintering birds remain after 1 April.

**Breeding distribution:** The Northern Pintail summers in San Diego County in small numbers. From 1997 to 2001 we noted it on 21 occasions between 15 April and 10 July. Some of these summering pintails were in coastal lagoons, up to two at San Elijo Lagoon (L7) 3 May 1999 (A. Mauro). On their monthly counts at San Elijo 1973–83, King et al. (1987) had a May–August average of 4.1 pintails. Other summering birds were at inland lakes, up to six in the southeast corner of the Lake Cuyamaca basin (M21) 16 June 1998 (P. D. Jorgensen). Though we saw pairs at Lake Cuyamaca (M20) 8 July 1998 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan), at the northeast corner of Lake Morena (S22) 31 May 1998 (R. Breisch), and at Sweetwater Reservoir repeatedly (P. Famolaro), during the atlas period we found no nests or chicks. The only published records of actual nesting in San Diego County are from Lake Henshaw (G17; “many hundred” young raised in 1926, fewer in 1927, Abbott 1928a), the Santa Margarita River mouth (G4; broods of chicks 16 June 1973 and 28 June 1974, A. Fries, AB 28:948, 1974), and the south San Diego Bay salt works (nest with eggs 9–29 May 1978, Unitt 1984).

**Conservation:** From the 1970s to the early 1990s the North American population of the Northern Pintail fell by over 50% (Austin and Miller 1995). There is evidence for change in San Diego County as well. The numbers King et al. (1987) recorded at San Elijo Lagoon from 1973 to 1983 (fall/winter average of 470) were not matched from 1997 to 2002 (maximum count 141 on 26 December

1999, R. T. Patton). The Rancho Santa Fe Christmas bird count, which includes San Elijo Lagoon, averaged 1300 pintails from 1983 to 1988 but 197 from 1997 to 2002. Numbers on the Oceanside count dropped precipitously with the new millennium. They averaged 538 from 1975 to 1993 but only 17 from 2000 to 2002. Some of this change, however, may be due to the birds shifting to a new wintering site. Numbers on the Escondido Christmas bird count have increased almost continuously since that count was established in 1986, as a result of pintails adopting the Wild Animal Park as winter habitat. Although the birds use these artificial ponds, conservation of natural shallow wetlands is as critical to the pintail as to many other water birds. Note the pintail’s absence from Agua Hedionda Lagoon (I6), which differs from the north county’s other lagoons by having been dredged.

