

**Northern Saw-whet Owl *Aegolius acadicus***

In San Diego County the Northern Saw-whet Owl occurs in coniferous woodland almost exclusively, spilling over into pure oak woodland around Palomar Mountain. A year-round resident, it is largely nocturnal and difficult to see, generally detected only by its monotonous hooting. One surprise coming from the atlas study was that the owl often calls in the evening before sunset and rarely even at midday. Until 1994, when the species was first reported in Baja California, San Diego County was thought to represent the southern tip of its range along the Pacific coast.

**Breeding distribution:** The Saw-whet Owl is found in all of San Diego County’s mountains with coniferous woodland but is more common on Palomar and Hot Springs mountains than farther south. Indeed, in the coniferous forest on these mountains, it is the most numerous owl. Nightly counts within a single atlas square in the breeding season range up to six calling territorially near the Palomar Observatory (D15) 13 May 1999 (K. L. Weaver) and eight near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain (E20) 18 May 2001 (K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt). The owl is particularly widespread on Palomar Mountain, extending into oak woodland with few or no conifers, on the north slope down to at least 3400 feet elevation in Cutca Valley (C14; up to four on 24 June 2000, J. M. and B. Hargrove), on the south slope down to about 3200 feet along South Grade Road (F14; one on 20 March 1999, K. L. Weaver, R. Wissa) and to 2550 feet along the San Luis Rey River near Wigham Creek (F16; male calling sporadically but apparently unmated, W. E. Haas).

Elsewhere the Saw-whet Owl is uncommon but occurs on Bucksnot Mountain (C20; one on 26 June 1999, L. J. Hargrove), in the Cuyamaca Mountains (one at Pine



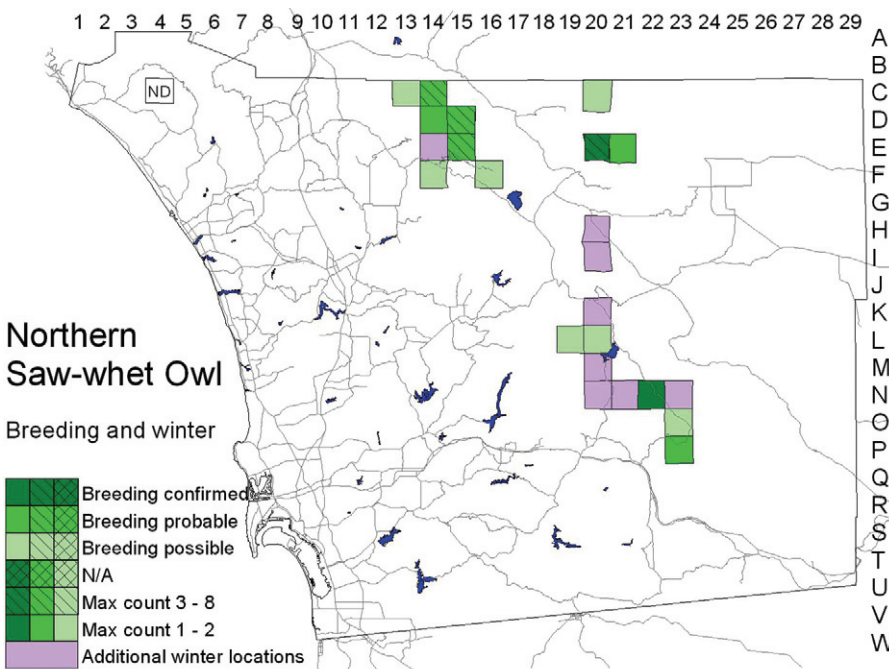
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Hills Fire Station, L19, 22 May 1999, R. Breisch et al.; one on North Peak, L20, 31 March 2001, G. L. Rogers), and in the Laguna Mountains (up to two near Morris Ranch, P23, 27 March 2001, E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer). The species is undoubtedly resident as well on Volcan Mountain (H20/I20), where we found it in winter but missed it in the breeding season.

**Nesting:** Very little information is available on Saw-whet Owl nesting in San Diego County. From 1997 to 2001, our only breeding confirmations were of a family of two adults and two fledglings near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain 15 August 2000 (W. E. Haas) and a fledgling just south of Filaree Flat, Laguna Mountains (N22), 7 July 2001 (G. L. Rogers). The only previous records are of young seen in Cuyamaca Rancho State Park 4 July 1939 (Grinnell and Miller 1944), on Middle Peak, Cuyamaca Mountains (M20), 19 July 1987 (R. E. Webster, AB 41:1488, 1987), and on Hot Springs Mountain 21 June 1986 (C. G. Edwards, AB 40:1256, 1986). The species nests in tree cavities and uses nest boxes; one calling from a nest box along the San

Luis Rey River at Wigham Creek was apparently advertising an available nest site (W. E. Haas).

**Winter:** San Diego County’s Saw-whet Owls are sedentary; the sites where we noted the species in winter but not spring or summer do not represent any dispersal. Late February, the time of many of our winter records, begins the season of the species’ peak in calling. Winter counts range up to 10 near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain 15–16 February 2002, when the birds called most of the night (K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt). Numbers on Volcan Mountain in winter, where we missed the species during the breeding season, ranged up to three on 17 December 2001 (R. T. Patton).



**Migration:** The Saw-whet Owl is partly migratory in the northern part of its range and a casual winter visitor to the deserts of southeastern California. There are no records of migrants, however, from San Diego County.

**Conservation:** During the atlas period we found the Saw-whet Owl more often than expected on the basis of the meager previously published records, but this apparent increase probably reflects only better nocturnal coverage of the spe-

cies' habitat. Roger Higson observed the species regularly around the Palomar Observatory through the early 1980s.

**Taxonomy:** The Northern Saw-whet Owl consists of two subspecies, the dark *A. a. brooksi* (Fleming, 1916), endemic to the Queen Charlotte Islands, and *A. a. acadicus* (Gmelin, 1789), extending over the remainder of the species' transcontinental range.