

Nuttall's Woodpecker *Picoides nuttallii*

Nuttall's is San Diego County's most widespread woodpecker, a common permanent resident in riparian, oak, and coniferous woodland. And it is spreading farther, colonizing formerly treeless scrub now replaced by urban landscaping. For reasons still not clear, numbers of Nuttall's Woodpeckers began increasing throughout San Diego County in the late 1980s, and that increase continued through the five-year atlas period.

Breeding distribution: Nuttall's Woodpecker inhabits almost the entire coastal slope of San Diego County. The population is most concentrated in inland canyons and foothills where the coast live oak is most numerous. The species breeds at all elevations within the county, nearly to the summit of Hot Springs Mountain (E20; up to six, including adults feeding young, 9 June 2001, K. L. Weaver). Otay Mesa, Otay Mountain, and Tecate Peak, along the Mexican border, now form the only extensive area on the coastal slope where Nuttall's Woodpecker is absent as a breeding bird.

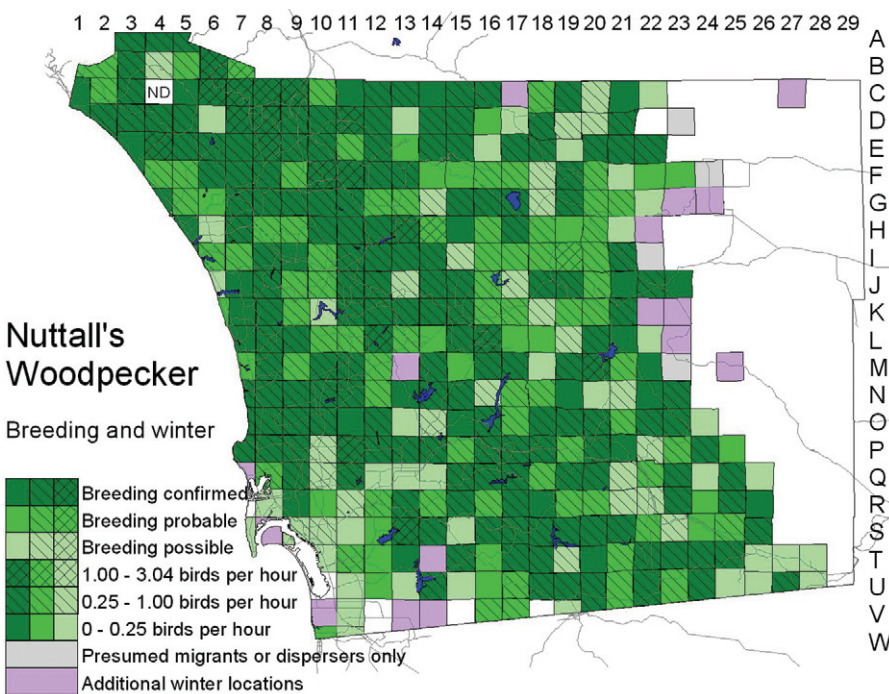
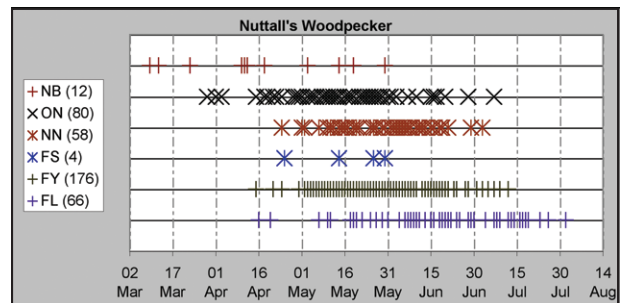
On the desert slope of the mountains, for the most part, the east edge of Nuttall's Woodpecker range tracks the east edge of the oaks. The birds extend a short distance down slope in canyons with willows. Along Coyote Creek they occur in the breeding season only at Middle Willows on the Riverside County line (C22; three sightings of single birds in April and May, P. D. Jorgensen). They occur also in Borrego Palm Canyon and along San Felipe Creek downstream to the head of Sentenac Canyon (J23; nest with nestlings 2 May 1998, R. Thériault). In southern San Diego County Nuttall's Woodpecker ranges beyond the oaks to Jacumba (U28) and the mesquite-dominated thicket along Carrizo Creek 2 miles north of



Photo by Jack C. Daynes

Jacumba near Arsenic Springs (T28; one on 30 April and 24 June 1999, J. K. Wilson).

Nesting: Nuttall's Woodpeckers excavate their nest cavities in dead branches or snags of various trees, preferring the underside of a slanting trunk, a site that enhances protection from predators. Native trees were the most frequently described sites, with willow, sycamore, and oak



(both coast live and black) being mentioned six to eight times each, elderberry once. Nonnative vegetation in which atlas observers described Nuttall's Woodpecker nests included elm (one nest), eucalyptus (two), and, most interestingly, the flowering stalks of the non-native Americana agave (three).

The schedule of nesting activity we observed from 1997 to 2001 was consistent with a range of California egg dates of 25 March–18 June (Bent 1939, Sharp 1907). Two early reports of fledglings however, suggest occasional laying as early as mid March (earliest at Oak Hill Cemetery, I12, 16 April 2001, J. O. Zimmer).

Migration: Nuttall's Woodpecker is nonmigratory, dispersing little

outside its breeding range, normally for short distances only. Dates for such dispersers in the Anza–Borrego Desert range from 10 August (2000, one at Lower Willows along Coyote Creek, D23, P. D. Jorgensen) to 20 February (1978, one at the same location, B. Cord).

Winter: We noted Nuttall's Woodpecker in winter in 17 atlas squares where it probably does not breed. Almost all of these, however, were adjacent to squares where it probably does. Farthest afield were one in upper Barton Canyon, Santa Rosa Mountains (C27), 9 January 2002 (P. Unitt), three on the floor of the Borrego Valley in Borrego Springs (F24/G24; two on 19 December 1999, P. K. Nelson, P. D. Ache; one on 16 December 2001, R. Thériault), and two at Vallecito County Park (M25; 2 December 2000, P. Unitt; 25 February 2001, J. R. Barth).

Conservation: Before the mid 1980s Nuttall's Woodpecker was confined in San Diego County to native woodlands almost exclusively. Even in well-wooded Balboa Park it was a only rare winter visitor. Since then, however, it has spread widely into cities, taking advantage of woodpecker-friendly trees like liquidambar, birch, white alder, and

even agaves. The average on San Diego Christmas bird counts has increased tenfold from 2.9 from 1953 to 1988 to 29.6 from 1997 to 2001 (maximum 48 in 2001).

The maturation of large numbers of urban trees is an attractive hypothesis that may help explain Nuttall's Woodpecker increase and spread. Nevertheless, some other forces still to be identified must be operating as well. Numbers on the Oceanside, Rancho Santa Fe, Escondido, and Lake Henshaw Christmas bird counts have all increased as well, if not so dramatically as at San Diego. On the Escondido count, for example, well within the woodpecker's traditional range, the average per count increased by a factor of 2.6 from 1985–89 to 1997–2001. Even when corrected by number of party-hours the factor of increase was 2.3. The Breeding Bird Survey (Sauer et al. 2003) has not revealed any such increase covering the species' range in general.

Whatever the reason for Nuttall's Woodpecker increase, it opens an opportunity for increases in other small birds that nest in its used holes, such as the House Wren, Western Bluebird, and White-breasted Nuthatch.