

**TYRANT FLYCATCHERS — FAMILY TYRANNIDAE**

**Olive-sided Flycatcher *Contopus cooperi***

Quick, THREE beers! Delivered from the tops of tall Jeffrey pines or big-cone Douglas firs, the far-carrying song of the Olive-sided Flycatcher is unforgettable. The bird is only an uncommon summer visitor in the coniferous woodland of San Diego County's mountains, but it is easily located. It occurs widely though still uncommonly at lower elevations during migration (mainly May and September). Even in migration it has the same habit, seeking out the tops of the highest trees for its lookout perch. The promise of the Olive-sided Flycatcher's incipient adaptation to lowland eucalyptus groves is offset by serious population decline over parts of its range—the bird is considered a species of special concern by the California Department of Fish and Game.

**Breeding distribution:** The Olive-sided Flycatcher occurs in all of San Diego County's mountains supporting extensive stands of conifers: Palomar, Hot Springs, Volcan, Cuyamaca, and Laguna. Even isolated Bucksnort Mountain (C20) has a few (up to six, including four singing males, on 24 June 2000 (L. J. Hargrove). In most of these ranges the species occurs primarily at elevations over 4500 feet, rarely down to 3500 feet. On the steep southwest face of Palomar Mountain, though, where the big-cone Douglas fir descends into the deep canyons of Marion, Agua Tibia, and Pauma creeks, the Olive-sided Flycatcher follows it, down to 1500 feet in Marion Canyon (D12; one singing male on 17 July 2001, K. L. Weaver).

The Olive-sided Flycatcher's population density is naturally low. The entire county population is probably only a few hundred birds. Seldom does one encounter

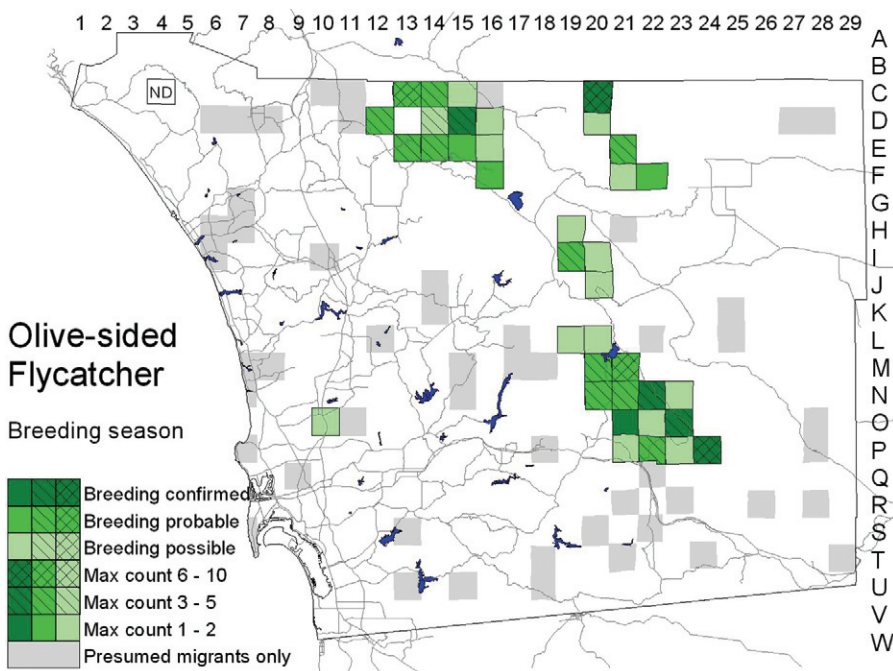


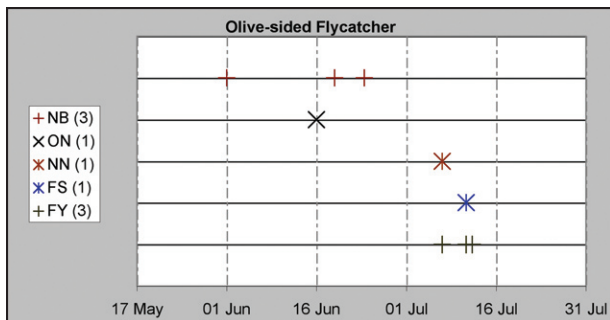
Photo by Jack C. Daynes

more than two or three singing males in a day. The highest counts are ten along upper La Posta Creek, Cuyapaipa Indian Reservation (P24), 28 June 1999 (D. C. Seals), eight in the Agua Tibia Wilderness (C13) 18 May 2001 (K. J. Winter), and eight along upper Nate Harrison Grade (E13) 16 May 1999 (C. Sankpill).

The Olive-sided Flycatcher is known to have bred once in San Diego County along the coast. From 2 May through 5 July 1982, a pair nested in a cypress tree at San Elijo Lagoon (L7) and fledged one young (King et al. 1987). Recalling this event were single singing birds at an elevation of only about 600 feet in eucalyptus trees around Alliant International University (O10) 24 June 1998 (G. L. Rogers) and 19 and 23 June 2001 (G. Grantham). Eucalyptus groves, with bare snags frequently emerging above their crowns, mimic the open woodland of tall conifers sought by the Olive-sided Flycatcher, especially when the trees have been partially defoliated by lerp psyllids. A single silent individual about 3200 feet elevation between Lake Morena and Hauser Canyon (T21) 5 July 1997 (R. and S. L. Breisch) was also outside the usual range, though there are a few tall pines in the area.

**Nesting:** The Olive-sided Flycatcher builds its shallow cup nest in the clusters of needles toward the outer ends of conifer





branches, at the middle levels of tall trees. Atlas observers estimated the heights of the two nests at 25 and 40 feet. The dates of breeding confirmations we recorded are consistent with the 5 June–4 July spread of three collected egg sets. Spending fewer than four months in their breeding range, even, as in San Diego County, near that range's southern tip, Olive-sided Flycatchers have time to raise only a single brood per season (Altman and Sallabanks 2000).

**Migration:** The earliest six spring dates recorded 1997–2001, 15–23 April, are all at or near sites where the Olive-sided Flycatcher nests. Thus, as in so many other species, the locally breeding population evidently arrives before migrants headed farther north. The Olive-sided Flycatcher is not regular at low elevations until the last week of April, though some sightings there are earlier, as early as 6 April (Unitt 1984). Migrants peak in early May, then decrease through the third week of June. The latest spring migrant was one in Tecolote Canyon (Q9) on 15 June 2000 (T. Plunkett), unless it too was summering.

In fall, migrants are encountered even less frequently than in spring, although a maximum of six was noted at Point Loma (S7) 8 September 1998 (P. A. Ginsburg). Almost all reports are from September; dates range from 29 August (2000, one at Point Loma, J. C. Worley) to 25 October (1972, one in the Tijuana River valley, G. McCaskie).

**Winter:** Accidental, with one good sight record, of one at Vista (H8) 8 January 1983 (R. E. Webster, AB 27:339, 1983).

**Conservation:** Several independent sources of evidence point to a significant decline in the Olive-sided Flycatcher's

population over much of its range (Altman and Sallabanks 2000). But in San Diego County, even though there is no quantitative study, no decline is obvious. Our atlas results show the species still present throughout its historic range in numbers no lower than reported in the past. Local increases in logged areas, in the context of broader-scale decline, led Altman and Sallabanks (2000) to hypothesize that logged forests are an “ecological trap,” for the Olive-sided Flycatcher. Despite the lack of obvious change in San Diego County, the Olive-sided Flycatcher's breeding range here is so limited and the numbers are so small that forest fire, prolonged drought, or runaway infestation of bark beetles could destroy enough old trees that the flycatcher population could fall below a sustainable threshold. Warming of the climate could lead to conifers—and the many organisms dependent on them—being unable to recover from such calamities.

The species' disappearance, between 1938 and 1986, from a seemingly unchanged tract of giant sequoia forest in the Sierra Nevada led Marshall (1988) to postulate that the decline was due to habitat loss in the winter range. The Olive-sided Flycatcher winters in mature forest at middle altitudes, the most threatened zone, in a range centering on the seriously deforested Andes of Colombia (Altman and Sallabanks 2000).

**Taxonomy:** Todd (1963) supported the division of the Olive-sided Flycatcher into two subspecies on the basis of size: larger *C. c. majorinus* (Bangs and Penard, 1921), breeding in the mountains of southern California and northern Baja California, and smaller nominate *C. c. cooperi* (Nuttall, 1832), breeding in boreal forests elsewhere in North America. Among specimens in the San Diego Natural History Museum, one male from Mount Pinos, Ventura County, one male from the Sierra Juárez, and two males from the Sierra San Pedro Mártir are indeed large (wings 112.5–114.5 mm). Three breeding females from San Diego County are also large (wings 104.5–106.0 mm). But one male from San Diego County, from Julian (K20) 15 June 1915 (SDNHM 31919) is smaller, in line with *cooperi* (wing 109.5 mm). So the validity of the distinction between the two subspecies could still use further testing. Three of four specimens of migrants from San Diego County are relatively small, matching *cooperi*.