

Pine Siskin *Carduelis pinus*

In its breeding range, the Pine Siskin is indeed a bird of pines, as well as other conifers. But in San Diego County, where it occurs primarily as a winter visitor, the siskin is just as likely to be seen in riparian woodland, where it feeds on the catkins of willows and alders. Its abundance varies enormously from year to year. In some winters flocks are common; in other years there are hardly any. Though the Pine Siskin breeds regularly south to the San Jacinto Mountains, Riverside County, in San Diego County's mountains there are only five summer records, one of a juvenile with a flock of adults.

Winter: In general, the Pine Siskin is most numerous in the mountains, becoming less so at lower elevations toward the coast. Nevertheless, variation from year to year is much greater than that from site to site. There was a substantial irruption in 1996–97, so that the first spring of the five-year atlas period yielded fair numbers of siskins, but in the next five winters the numbers were average to low. In the winter of 2001–02 the species was almost absent, with only three individuals reported. By far the largest count made during the atlas period was of 235 around North Peak, Cuyamaca Mountains (L20) 6 February 1999 (R. Breisch), but this could have been equaled easily in years of big invasions, such as 1975–76, 1981–82, 1984–85, 1987–88, and 1992–93. The highest number on any of the county's Christmas bird counts was 553 on the Lake Henshaw count 29 December 1981.

At lower elevations, during the atlas period, no Christmas bird count yielded more than 29, and high numbers in one atlas square were of 49 at Oak Hill Cemetery (I12) 16 March 2001 (C. Rideout) and 30 at Guajome Lake (G7) 8 December 2000 (G. C. Hazard).



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

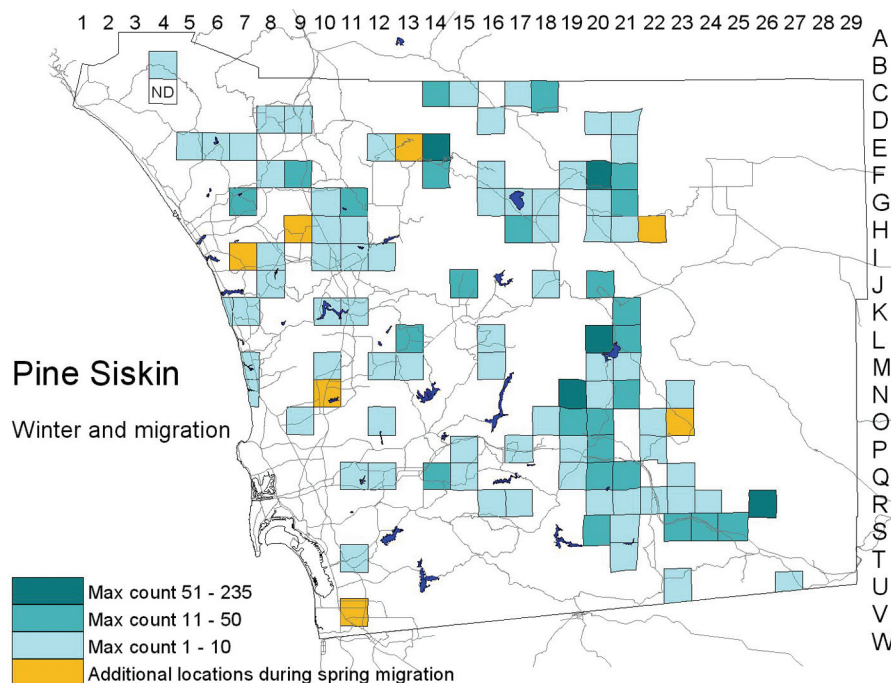
But totals of lowland Christmas bird counts during irruptions are as high as 182 in Oceanside 27 December 1981, and G. McCaskie noted 800 in Presidio Park (R8) 17 November 1963.

No siskins were found in the Anza–Borrego Desert during the atlas period, but small numbers reach there during major irruptions, with up to 20 at Lower Willows (D23) 20 December 1987 (A. G. Morley) and 29 in the north Borrego Valley (F24) 2 January 1993 (Christmas bird count).

Migration: Like other erratic winter visitors, the Pine Siskin has no regular migration schedule. Early November to mid April is its principal season, but it has been noted in fall as early as 9 September (1963, Tijuana River valley, G. McCaskie; 1992, Borrego Palm Canyon, F23, R. Thériault). During the atlas period, our latest spring date was 10 May (1999, 10 in Lost Valley, D20, J. M. and B. Hargrove), except for a remarkably late straggler, the latest

ever in southern California's lowlands, at the Dairy Mart pond, Tijuana River valley (V11), 6 June 1999 (G. McCaskie).

Breeding distribution: No nests of the Pine Siskin have ever been found in San Diego County, and there are only five records in the county's mountains from late spring and summer. One of these, however, was of a juvenile, probably raised locally, with four adults on Middle Peak, Cuyamaca Mountains (M20), 19 July 1987 (R. E. Webster, AB 41:1489, 1987). Of the other records, two are from Palomar Mountain [one on 19 July 1966, AFN 20:600, 1966; one at Bailey's Meadow (E14) 28 May 1999, C. R. Mahrtdt, E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer], one from the Cuyamaca Mountains (one on 9 July 1967, G. McCaskie),



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Winter and migration

- Max count 51 - 235
- Max count 11 - 50
- Max count 1 - 10
- Additional locations during spring migration

and one from the Laguna Mountains (one near Laguna Campground, O23, 13 June 1998, C. G. Edwards).

Conservation: Pine Siskins feed on the seeds of some common ornamental trees and so take advantage of areas that once had little to offer them. The white alder, a native riparian tree used frequently in landscaping, is one of the

siskins' favorite seed sources. Gander (1929) commented on their feeding on eucalyptus seeds in Balboa Park.

Taxonomy: Pine Siskins in San Diego County, like those throughout the United States, are of the small subspecies *C. p. pinus* (Wilson, 1810).