

Pinyon Jay *Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*

Although Pinyon Jays are common in Garner Valley of the San Jacinto Mountains only 10 miles north of the county line, and are common in the Sierra Juárez an equally short distance south of the border, they occur in San Diego County only as rare vagrants at long intervals. The stands of pinyons in the Santa Rosa and Vallecito mountains are evidently too small to support a resident population.

Winter: Of the montane birds prone to sporadic irruptions, the Pinyon Jay is one of the least frequent in San Diego County, recorded in only 10 seasons since 1877. In 1973 only a single individual was noted, but on other occasions the birds have been in flocks. Sometimes multiple flocks occur in a single year, as in 1987, when 25 were in Cuyamaca Rancho State Park (M20) 19 September (S. Mlodinow, AB 42:137, 1988) and 10 were on Volcan Mountain (J20) 28 October (P. Unitt). Some of the early records that lack good detail may also represent large flocks, but the largest with estimates of their size are of about 75 near San Onofre (C1) in March 1915 (year implied; W. M. Pierce in Willett 1933), up to 200 in the Laguna Mountains (O23) 6–12 January 1990 (D. and M. Hastings et al., AB 44:330, 1990), and the single record during the atlas period, of up to 55 at Stonewall Mine, Cuyamaca Mountains (M20), 28 December 2000–2 May 2001 (K. Satterfield, NAB 55:357, 2001). Most Pinyon Jays in San Diego County have been in the mountains or foothills; only those at San Onofre reached the coast. On the desert side, F. Stephens collected two at Vallecito (M25) 27 November 1891 (SDNHM 757–8), and L. M. Huey collected two 3 miles east of Jacumba (U29) 11 March 1945 (SDNHM 19150–1).



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Migration: As expected with such an irregular species, records of the Pinyon Jay are scattered seasonally. The extreme dates are 19 September and 2 May, both records cited above. In general, Pinyon Jay irruptions start in late August or early September and continue through early January (Balda 2002).

Conservation: Pinyon Jays appear no more frequent than they did a century ago, despite the far greater number of observers, suggesting they may actually be on the decrease. The long-term trend toward a drier climate, since the end of the Pleistocene, disfavors trees like pinyons that grow in arid regions and could be a bad sign for birds like the jay that depend on them.