

Red-naped Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus nuchalis*

Coming from a breeding range in the Great Basin and Rocky Mountain region, the Red-naped Sapsucker reaches San Diego County as an uncommon winter visitor. It occurs most often in oak woodland but shows up occasionally throughout the county. There is no difference in habitat and behavior between the Red-naped and Red-breasted Sapsuckers here, and the former is only slightly less numerous than the latter. In the lack of previous summer records from southern California, one of the greatest surprises of the atlas field work was three summer observations of the Red-naped Sapsucker from Palomar Mountain, including one of hybridization with the Red-breasted.

Winter: Though the ranges of the Red-naped and Red-breasted Sapsuckers, winter as well as breeding, are largely complementary, in San Diego County both are found in similar numbers in similar areas. The county lies at the northwestern corner of the Red-naped's main winter range. In the five winters from 1997 to 2002 we



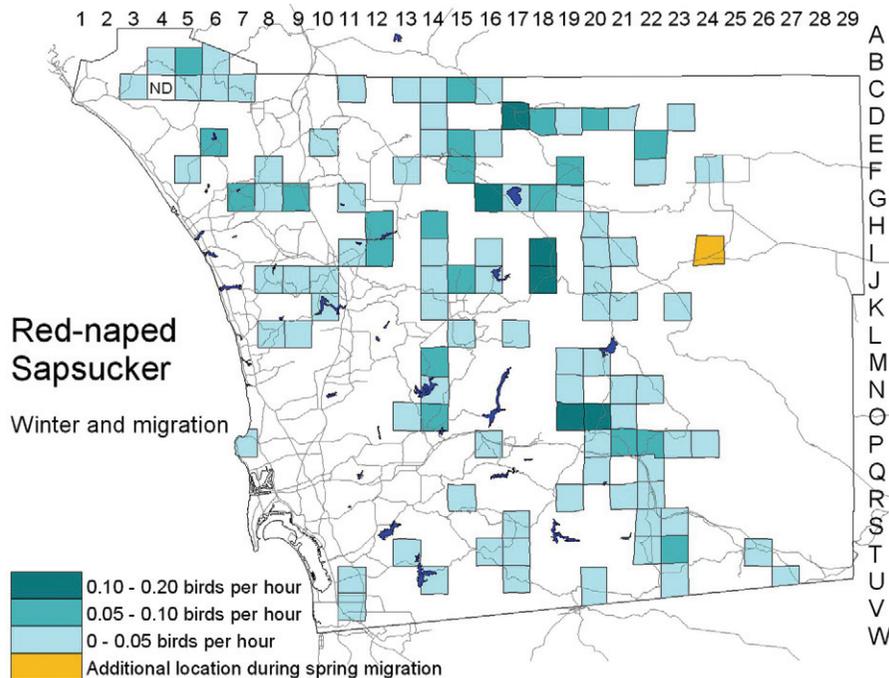
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

recorded the Red-breasted 165 times (183 individuals); we recorded the Red-naped 149 times (180 individuals). Like the Red-breasted, the Red-naped is most frequent in the mountains and wooded canyons in the foothills, as well as in the coastal lowland of northern San Diego

County. Our highest daily counts were of four around Sunshine Summit (D17) 23 January 1999 (J. K. Wilson) and four around Santa Ysabel (J18) 14 December 1997 (S. E. Smith). In the south coastal area the species is rare.

With only three, our records of the Red-naped in the Anza-Borrego Desert during the atlas period were even fewer than those of the Red-breasted Sapsucker. Earlier records (Massey 1998, ABDSP database), like these three, are largely from developed areas and oases like Lower Willows.

Migration: The Red-naped Sapsucker occurs in San Diego County mainly from October through March. One in the Borrego Palm Canyon campground (F23) 18 September 1992



(R. Thériault) was early; one at Banner (K19) 18 April 1999 (P. K. Nelson) and one near Jewell Valley (U27) 25 April 1999 (F. L. Unmack) were unusually late.

Breeding distribution: Completely unexpected were three records of the Red-naped Sapsucker from Palomar Mountain in summer. The first was of one paired with a Red-breasted Sapsucker and accompanied by a fledgling just east of Doane Pond (E14) 19 July 1998 (D. S. Cooper). Another, or perhaps the same individual, was in the same area 17 July 1999 (J. R. Barth). Yet another was about 3.4 miles to the southeast in Bull Pasture (E15) 18 June 1999 (C. R. Mahrtdt, E. C. Hall). All the birds were observed carefully by participants aware that the species was unexpected for the season. There are no previous records of the Red-naped Sapsucker summering, much less hybridizing with the Red-breasted Sapsucker, in southern California. The mountains of southern Nevada are the nearest point of the species' traditional breeding range.

Conservation: Numbers of the Red-naped Sapsucker on San Diego Christmas bird counts show a pattern of decrease similar to that of the Red-breasted. The average per count of the Red-naped was 1.4 from 1975 (the first year figures for the two species were consistently listed separately) to 1988 but 0.8 from 1989 to 2001. On counts elsewhere in San Diego County the trend is slight or none. Thus it seems that in spite of the sapsuckers' feeding on exotic trees, especially the Peruvian pepper, increasing urbanization discourages them.

Taxonomy: The Red-naped, Red-breasted, and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers were long classified as a single species. Various sources of evidence, however, suggest that they have crossed the threshold of speciation, though the Red-naped hybridizes with both other species along much of the line where their breeding ranges abut (Johnson and Zink 1983, Johnson and Johnson 1985, Cicero and Johnson 1995).