

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*

Probably no bird is more common in freshwater marshes across North America than the Red-winged Blackbird. Even San Diego County, in spite of the aridity of its climate, has enough wetlands to support the Red-winged as a common if localized permanent resident. Creation of reservoirs has created new blackbird habitat, and the birds' gathering in large flocks in winter gives the impression that they are doing well. But breeding Redwings need open uplands for foraging as well as marshes for nesting. Urbanization eliminates this habitat, and the blackbirds' retreat from development is already evident in San Diego.

Breeding distribution: Though most characteristic of freshwater marshes, the Red-winged Blackbird takes advantage of small isolated creeks, scattered ranch ponds, and thick stands of mustard. As a result, it is widely distributed over San Diego County's coastal slope, recorded as at least a possibly breeding species in 78% of atlas squares outside the Anza-Borrego Desert and confirmed nesting in 58% of them. Gaps correspond mainly to rugged terrain covered largely by chaparral, such as Aguanga Ridge (D15/D16/E16) and Otay Mountain (U15/V15). The intensively developed area of metropolitan San Diego is a conspicuous gap. Larger concentrations correspond to marshes near grassland or pastures where large numbers of blackbirds can forage. Such sites lie in Warner Valley (up to 350 in the east arm of the valley, G19, 25 June 2000, P. Unitt), the Mesa Grande area (up to 275 southeast of Mesa Grande, I17, 5 May 1999, D. C. Seals), Santa Maria Valley (up to 300 northeast of Ramona, K15, 25 May 1998, M. and B. McIntosh), Los Peñasquitos Lagoon and lower canyon (up to 260 at the lagoon, N7, 2 May 1999, D. K. Adams), and from Sweetwater Reservoir



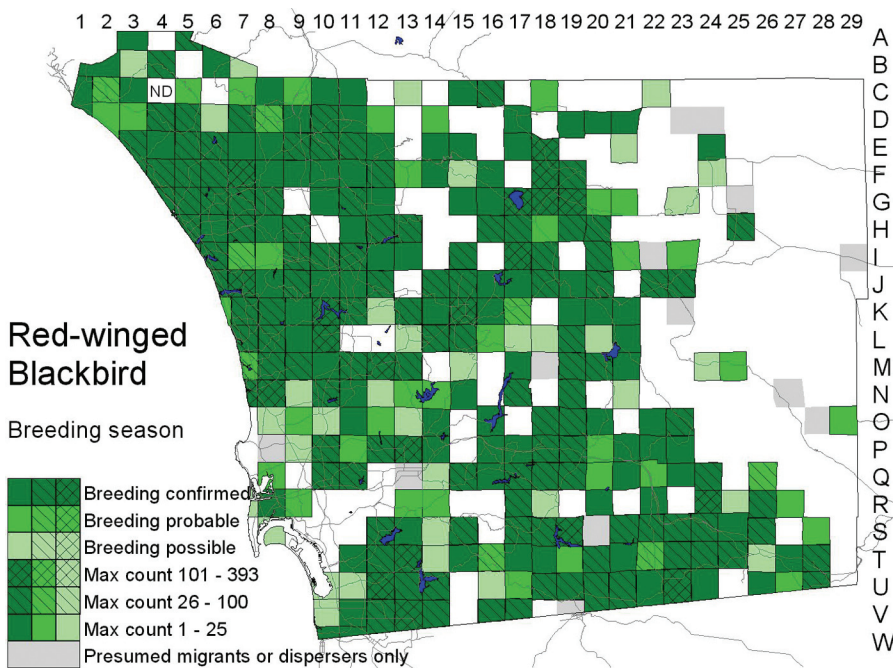
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

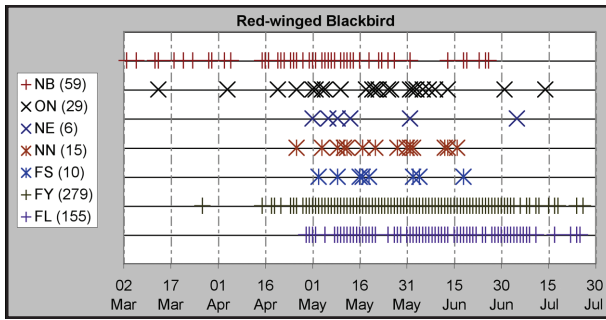
south to Otay Mesa (up to 375 at Upper Otay Lake and north end of Lower Otay Lake, T13, 14 April 2000, T. W. Dorman).

As long as habitat is available, the Red-winged Blackbird does not appear limited in San Diego County by elevation; it nests up to 5400 feet in Laguna Meadow (O23; 60, including fledglings being fed by adults, 24 July 1998, E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer). In the Anza-Borrego Desert the Red-winged Blackbird breeds along San Felipe Creek east to Sentenac Ciénaga (J23; up to 83 on 14 June 1998, R. Thériault), in some years probably down to the mouth of Sentenac Canyon (I23; three on 23 May 1997, P. K. Nelson). Other desert sites of confirmed or probable Red-winged Blackbird nesting are in the agricultural area of the northern Borrego Valley (E24; 16, with adults feeding young, 15 April 2001, P. D. Ache), at the Borrego sewage ponds (H25; 12, with adults building nests and feeding young, 25 May 1998, P. D. Jorgensen), Vallecito (M25; up to eight, including pairs, 27 April 1998, M. C. Jorgensen), Carrizo Marsh (O29; four, including pairs, 25 April 2001,

M. C. Jorgensen), and springs in Carrizo Gorge (R27; six, with up to three singing males, 29 April and 14 May 2000, G. Rebstock, L. J. Hargrove; S28; 12, with four singing males, 6 May 2001, R. Breisch). Nesting at most desert locations is probably irregular; Massey (1998) reported a fledgling at Lower Willows (D23) in 1994, but from 1997 to 2001 we had only a single record there (two on 25 April 1998, B. L. Peterson). The birds in Carrizo Gorge may need to commute out of the gorge to McCain and Jacumba valleys to feed.

Nesting: In San Diego County Red-winged Blackbirds nest usually in marshes of cattail or bulrush, anchoring the nest to





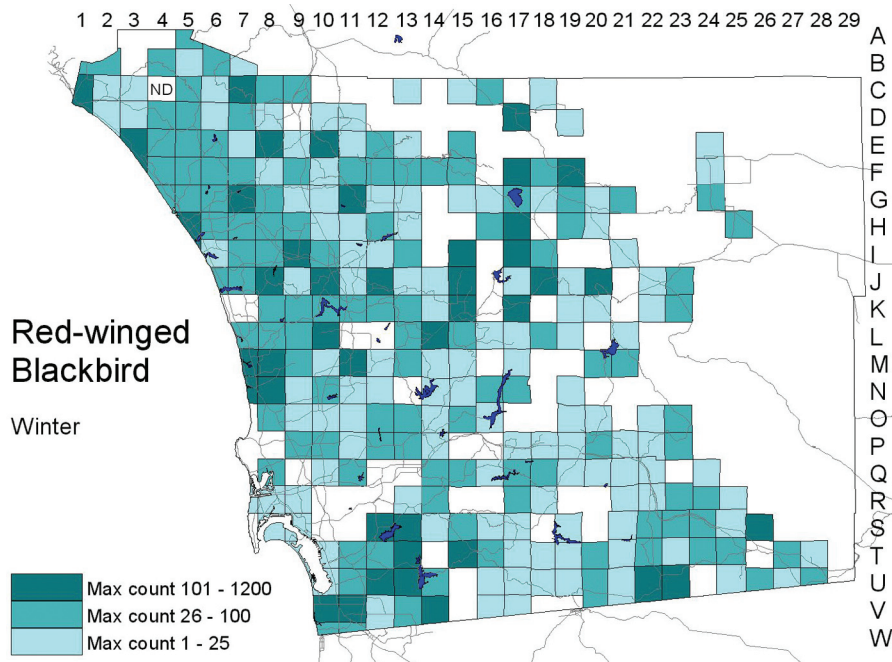
several vertical leaves. Other substrates are common too, including black mustard over dry ground. Atlas records indicate that most Red-winged Blackbirds begin laying in the first week of April. A few lay earlier, as early as mid March, as implied by observations of nest building as early as 3 March 1997 at Scissors Crossing (J22; L. Allen), an occupied nest 13 March 2001 at Rancho Santa Fe (L8; A. Mauro), and adults feeding young 27 March 1998 in Dameron Valley (C15; K. L. Weaver). Egg laying probably continues to the end of June, as implied by observations of nest building as late as 26 June 1999 at Potrero (U20; R. and S. L. Breisch), a nest with eggs 5 July 1997 near San Luis Rey (G6; M. R. Smith), and an occupied nest 14 July 1997 at Sweetwater Reservoir (S13; P. Famolaro). Thus the season is slightly longer than implied by the 20 March–18 June spread of 38 egg sets collected 1911–36.

Migration: There is evidence for only occasional long-distance movement of Red-winged Blackbirds in and out of San Diego County (see Taxonomy). Rather, most of the birds appearing away from breeding locations are making short-distance movements. Our only spring records of Red-winged Blackbirds more than one atlas square away from where the species likely breeds were from the Anza–Borrego Desert, of one at Canebrake (N27) 18

April 1999 (R. and S. L. Breisch) and one at Ocotillo Wells (I29) 1 May 2000 (P. Unitt).

Winter: The Red-winged Blackbird appears more abundant in winter than during the breeding season because many birds then gather into large flocks (up to 1200 in San Marcos, J8, 26 December 1998, D. and C. Batzler; 840 in Escondido, J10, 22 December 2000, W. E. Haas; 620 in the Tijuana River valley, V10, 18 December 1999, W. E. Haas). But the winter distribution of the Red-winged Blackbird in San Diego County differs little from the breeding distribution. Only sporadically do small flocks invade the urban area of San Diego at any distance from where the birds breed (up to 13 at Seaport Village in downtown San Diego, S9, 13 December 1998, Y. Ikegaya). Large numbers may remain as high as 5400 feet elevation at Big Laguna Lake (O23; up to 62 on 21 January 2002; E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer). In the Anza–Borrego Desert the species leaves the more isolated oases, becoming localized in winter to San Felipe, Earthquake, and Borrego valleys (up to 68 at Ram’s Hill, H25, 20 December 1998, R. Halford; 75 at Sentenac Ciénaga, J23, 11 January 1998, P. Unitt).

Conservation: The Red-winged Blackbird has proven more adaptable than many marsh birds. Its ability to nest as scattered pairs has saved it from the fate of the colonial Tricolored Blackbird. The installation of reservoirs and ponds has been a positive factor that has compensated in part for loss of habitat to stream channelization and urbanization. It can take quick advantage of changes in its favor: in 1984, when the mouth of the Tijuana River estuary was blocked, hundreds colonized and nested, departing again once the estuary mouth was open and the tides returned (P. D. Jorgensen). But the Red-winged Blackbird’s adaptability has its limits, as can be seen in the species’ absence over most of central San Diego. Over this area the blackbirds nest only along the San Diego River in Mission Valley (R8, R9, Q10) and at the mouth of Rose



Canyon at the northeast corner of Mission Bay (Q8; up to 20, nests probable, 15–30 May 1999, E. Wallace). Even if marshes suitable for nesting remain within the city, surrounding developed uplands do not offer the abundance of insects needed for the blackbirds to raise their young.

Taxonomy: The resident subspecies of the Red-winged Blackbird in southwestern California is *A. p. neutralis* Ridgway 1901 (type locality Jacumba, U28). It has the bill thick, the female’s underparts wholly and heavily streaked with dark, her upperpart feathers edged with pale chestnut and yellow-buff, and the male’s epaulet broadly edged with buff. Only four of the 76 San Diego County Red-winged Blackbird

specimens in the San Diego Natural History Museum demonstrate migration from outside the range of *neutralis*. These four females are *A. p. nevadensis* Grinnell, 1914, from the Great Basin/intermountain region, as indicated by their more rusty, fewer buff fringes on the upperpart feathers: National City (T10) 4 January 1914 (SDNHM 33498) and 28 January 1921 (SDNHM 33545), Jamacha (R14) 4 January 1924 (SDNHM 2783), and Bonita (T11) 6 January 1929 (SDNHM 12328). *Agelaius p. nevadensis* is partially migratory and has been reported previously as close to San Diego County as San Timoteo Canyon, Riverside County (Grinnell and Miller 1944) and Bard, Imperial County (Patten et al. 2003).

Van Rossem (1926) reported a male collected at Witch Creek (J18) 13 April 1904 as *A. p. californicus* Nelson, 1897, breeding in the Central Valley, in which the female has the belly blacker than in *neutralis* and the male has less or no buff edge on the epaulet. Two females collected 15 October 1923 at Jamacha (SDNHM 2801, 2806; van Rossem 1926) have the more narrowly streaked underparts of *A. p. sonoriensis* Ridgway, 1887, from the desert Southwest, but they have the thicker bill of *neutralis*. No specimens from the Anza–Borrego Desert are available to test whether the Red-winged Blackbirds in this area could be *sonoriensis*, which breeds commonly in the Salton Sink.