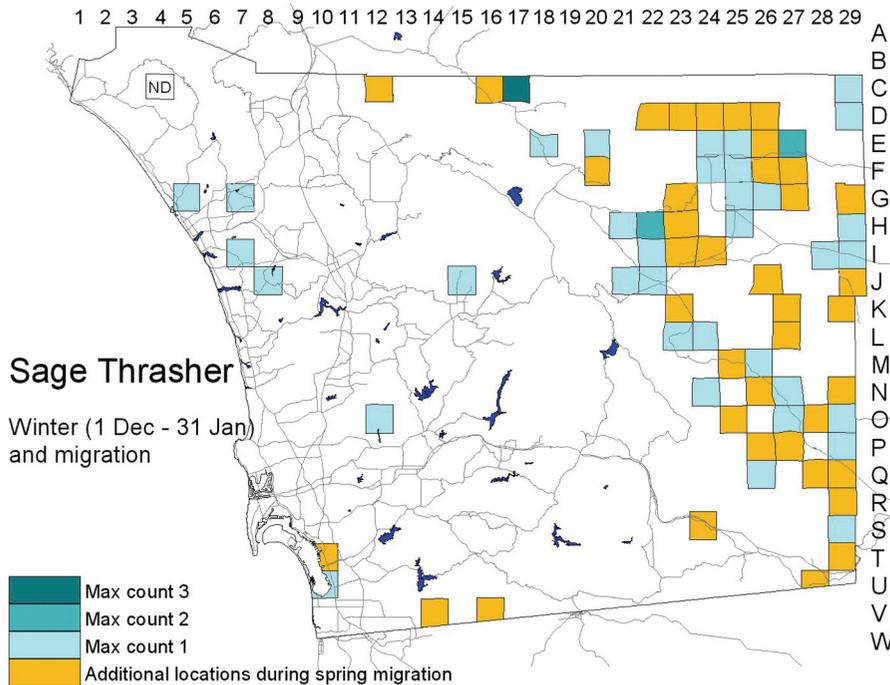


Sage Thrasher *Oreoscoptes montanus*

The Sage Thrasher is a migrant and winter visitor in San Diego County, rare from September to mid January, uncommon from late January through March. It occurs mainly in and near the Anza-Borrego Desert, frequenting scrub like saltbush and mesquite, as well as stands of the big sagebrush at higher elevations that resemble its breeding habitat in the Great Basin. Near the coast the Sage Thrasher is rare—the sage scrub that it once visited more numerous now being largely converted to cities.



Photo by Anthony Mercieca



Migration: Sage Thrashers may arrive in San Diego County as early as 18 September (1974, one in the Tijuana River valley, G. McCaskie) but remain rare through mid January. By the end of January their numbers increase gradually, to reach a peak in late February and March. Patten et al. (2003) reported spring migration in the Salton Sink beginning as early as 17 January, but in San Diego County establishing an exact date for spring arrival is impossible. The highest count ever reported in the Anza-Borrego Desert, of 20 in Little Blair Valley (L24) 2 February 1991 (B. Cord), was presumably of migrants. The highest count during the atlas period was of seven east of the Borrego Sink (G26) 17 February 2000 (M. B. Mulrooney). The species is rare by early April, and the latest dates are 16 April (1999; one in the Borrego Valley east of Peg Leg Road, F26, M. B. Stowe; 1999, three near In-Ko-Pah, T29, D. C. Seals), 25 April (1999, four in the Borrego Valley, F25, P. D. Ache), “May” (1881, two specimens collected at San Diego, Belding 1890), and 4 June (1970, one at Agua Caliente Springs, M26, A. Fries, AFN 24:718, 1970). G. Holterhoff (in Belding 1890) reported the Sage Thrasher as “common” near National City in the summer of 1883 but apparently collected no specimen and the record has not been repeated since.

Winter: Because of the Sage Thrasher’s migration schedule, the map shows only records for December and January in blue for winter. The species is widely but thinly scattered through the Anza-Borrego Desert, all records before February being of just one or two birds. A few apparently wintering Sage Thrashers turned up

during the atlas field work in high, dry valleys in north-central San Diego County: three in Oak Grove Valley (C17) 23 January 1999, one at Puerta La Cruz (E18) 23 January 1999 (R. and S. L. Breisch), one about 3700 feet elevation along Agua Caliente Creek at the west base of Hot Springs Mountain (E20) 26 January 2002 (K. L. Weaver), and three in big sagebrush at Ranchita (H21/H22) 14–15 January 1999 (P. Unitt).

Lower on the coastal slope we encountered the Sage Thrasher only eight times from 1997 to 2002, generally in sage scrub or cactus thickets, as in Pamo Valley (J15; one on 2 and 30 January 2000, W. E. Haas, L. E. Taylor). The Sage Thrasher formerly occurred with some regularity in

halophytic scrub along the coast, but our only sightings from this habitat, of which hardly any remains, were of one at the south end of Ysidora Basin (G5) 26 December 1998 (P. Unitt) and another at the south end of San Diego Bay (U10) 16 December 2000 (P. R. Pryde).

The abundance of the Sage Thrasher varied greatly over the atlas period. Figures for winter and the following spring combined, the number reported varied from 7 in 1997–98 to 90 in 1998–99 to 55 in 1999–2000 to 20 in 2000–01. Possibly the birds enjoyed an exceptionally productive breeding season following the wet winter of 1998, leading to a population spike, then the numbers declined steadily over the following dry years.

Conservation: Though the Sage Thrasher was never common in coastal San Diego County, it was once considerably more frequent than it is now, though still irregular. Heermann (1859) “remarked it on several occasions in the environs of San Diego,” and Baird (1858) listed two specimens collected there. Huey (1924) listed several specimens collected around San Diego; on 15 March 1923, 5 miles east of National City, “Sage Thrashers were abundant on the mesa, and a great many could have been collected” (four actually were: SDNHM 8545–48). Single birds were noted on five San Diego Christmas bird counts from 1966 to 1974 but on only one from 1975 through 2002. Apparently a bird whose winter habitat around San Diego is the same as that of the San Diego Cactus Wren and California Gnatcatcher declined with the loss of that habitat. The lack of early data from the Anza-Borrego Desert precludes assessment of any trend there.