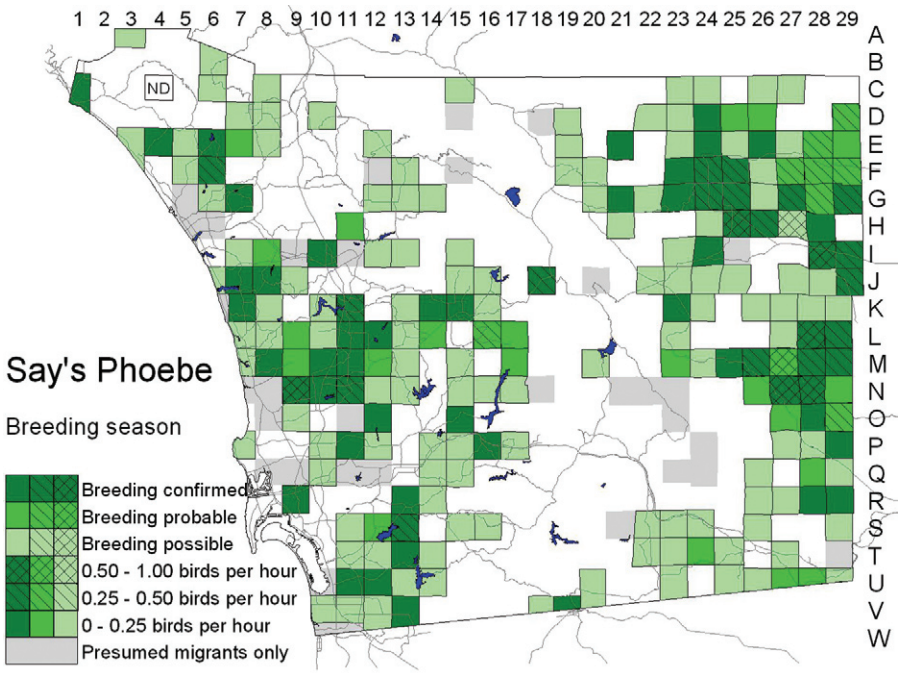
Say's Phoebe *Sayornis saya*

Expanses of bare earth, often disturbed, or areas of sparse grass or weeds, with only scattered shrubs, Say's Phoebe's habitat hardly meets most people's expectations for "habitat." Yet this bird specializes in such places, scanning the ground for insects that can be hover-gleaned, as well as foraging for aerial insects in typical flycatcher fashion. Say's Phoebe is primarily a winter visitor to San Diego County, uncommon to fairly common. But it is also widespread as an uncommon breeding species in the Anza–Borrego Desert, on the Campo Plateau, and, increasingly, in the inland valleys of the coastal slope.

Photo by Anthony Mercieca

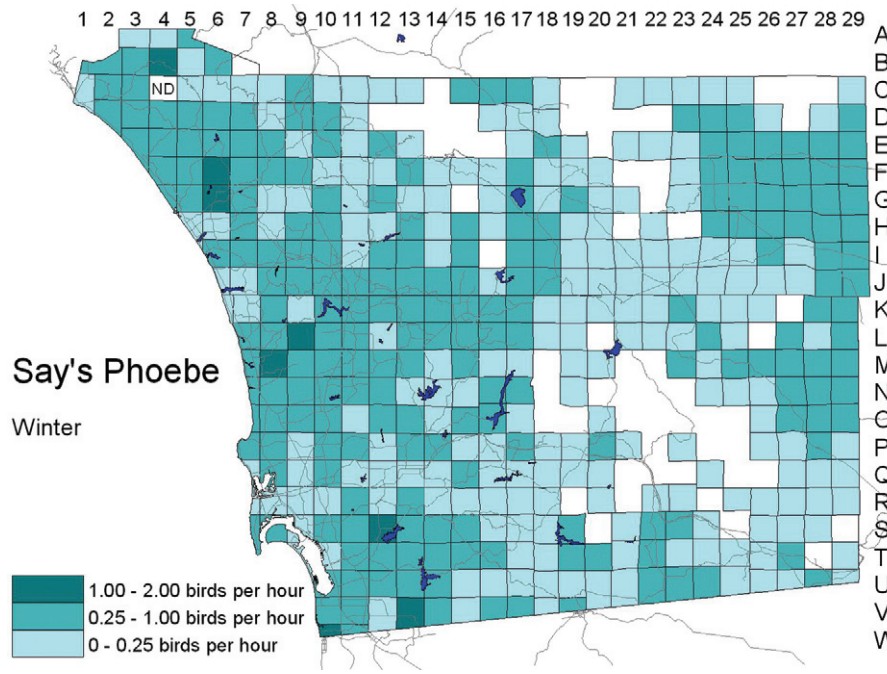
Breeding distribution: The Say's Phoebe's distribution is complex and dynamic. The species is widespread in the Anza–Borrego Desert, where most atlas squares contain some of the canyons, bluffs, or buildings offering the shaded niches it needs for nesting. Over most of the desert, breeding Say's Phoebes are uncommon and scattered, but, as around Canebrake (N27) 30 April 2000 (R. and S. L. Breisch), counts per day range up to 14, where scattered houses or eroded gorges winding through badlands offer more nest sites. The desert distribution extends up to Scissors Crossing (J22) and over the divide to Ranchita (G21/G22) and Warner Valley. A pair nesting in a drain pipe at 4900 feet elevation on the east side of Hot Springs Mountain (E21) 19 June 1999 (K. L. Weaver) was the highest known in San Diego County. Yet Say's Phoebe appears absent from the higher elevations of the Santa Rosa and Vallecito mountains, enclosed within the Anza–Borrego Desert. A few Say's Phoebes also extend up onto the Campo plateau. Though we did not confirm breeding in this area, we recorded the species through the spring and early summer and noted a few pairs.

In the coastal half of the county, Say's Phoebe has become widespread in the inland valleys. The numbers are still small, with rarely more than a single family encountered in a day. The maximum count per day in this region during the breeding season is six, as at Lake Hodges (K10) 23 June 1998 (R. L. Barber). A few pairs are nesting practically along the coast, illustrated most notably by a fledgling 0.5 mile from the beach near San Onofre (C1) 2 June 2000 (C. Reynolds), another at La Costa (J7) 24 June 1998 (M. Baumgartel), two in Gonzalez Canyon (M8) 17 June 2001 (S. E. Smith), and one picked up injured at Mar Vista High School in Imperial Beach (V10) 26 June 1998 (SDNHM 50127). A nest on a building at the naval radio station at the south end of the Silver Strand (U10/V10) in 2003 and 3 March 2004 was only 1000 feet from the beach (D. M. Parker). Some interchange between the coastal and desert populations is likely, with pairs nesting as far inland as Santa Ysabel (J18; under the porch of Don's Market, both 1998 and 1999, J. R. Barth, S. E. Smith) and Tecate (V19; pair



feeding young 10 June 2000, M. and B. McIntosh).

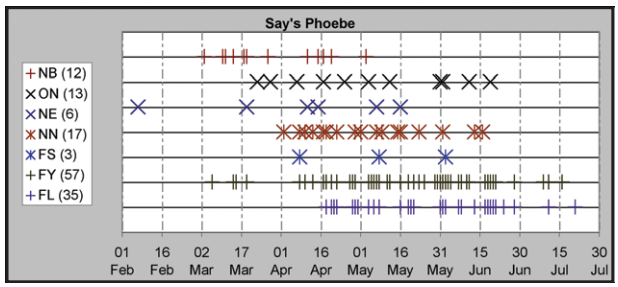
Complicating the distribution are scattered individuals, including independent juveniles, seen in the foothills and mountains at times when Say's Phoebes could be nesting. Nevertheless, only one of these falls between 8 April and 6 June, one at Cuyamaca Lake (M20) 28 May 1999 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan). Only this record is mapped as in suitable habitat; the birds seen from June onward may be postbreeding dispersers from the desert.



Nesting: Say's Phoebes rely heavily on man-made structures for nest sites, and all nests reported from the coastal slope were in such situations. We noted four nests on sheltered ledges inside crevasses eroded into desert badlands, but the 14 other nests whose placement our observers described were on such things as houses, outbuildings, carports, restrooms, a metal stairway, a bridge over Poway Creek, and the Anza–Borrego Desert State Park headquarters office.

Our observations of Say's Phoebe nesting imply that the species usually begins laying in the third week of March, with little difference between the coastal slope and the desert. A nest begun in Mira Mesa (N9) 3 March 2000 took two weeks to complete (S. L. Breisch). An exceptionally early nest with two eggs at the Anza–Borrego Desert State Park headquarters 7 February 2000 was abandoned shortly thereafter; the pair renested at a more usual time (P. D. Jorgensen). In the wet spring of 1998, though, the birds nested early, with adults carrying insects to young apparently still in the nest as early as 6 March in north Borrego Springs (F24; P. D. Jorgensen), implying laying no later than 18–20 February. Our five earliest records of Say's Phoebe feeding young, in fact, are from 1998. Second or replacement clutches may be laid as late as mid June, as demonstrated by an ill-fated pair at Mira Mesa, which still had young in an replacement nest 16 July 1999, fledging by 21 July (S. L. Breisch).

Migration: Say's Phoebes wintering in San Diego County depart primarily in March and arrive in September. But exact dates of migrants can no longer be picked out because of the local breeding population is increasing, apparently shifts over short distances, and the locally breeding subspecies, at least along the coast, is the same as that farther north. Some desert breeders vacate their range from June through August (Rea 1983, Patten et al. 2003) and may disperse west into the foothills and mountains of San Diego County, as implied by scattered summer observations.



Winter: Say's Phoebe is widespread in San Diego County as a winter visitor, but it is scarce above 4000 feet elevation and lacking from unbroken forest, chaparral, or urban development, though it uses small areas of open ground within these habitats. Thus the distribution is patchier than evident on the scale of our atlas grid. The species is most numerous in the inland valleys of the coastal lowland, with up to 35 in a day around Sweetwater Reservoir (S12) 20 December 1997 (P. Famolaro), and on the floor of the Borrego Valley, with up to 35 in north Borrego Springs 20 December 1998 (R. Thériault). Over most of the county, though, the species has to be rated as uncommon, with five or fewer individuals detected per day.

Conservation: No change in the Say's Phoebe's status in the Anza–Borrego Desert is known, but on the coastal slope the species decreased, then increased, for reasons still obscure. Until 1939, nesting of Say's Phoebes was noted occasionally, with records for Escondido, 3 to 6 miles east of Encinitas, Sorrento, San Diego, and Chula Vista. Then 40 years followed in which the species was known in the coastal lowland as a winter visitor only. Following a report from the Tijuana River valley 9 June 1979 (AB 33:898, 1979), scattered observations cropped up in the inland valleys in the 1980s, and their rate accelerated in the 1990s. Nesting Say's Phoebes in this area were a novelty to our atlas observers, many of whom commented on them with surprise. Why should Say's Phoebe

have disappeared, and why should it have returned? The disappearance coincided with a period in which much former Say's Phoebe habitat was converted, with irrigation and landscaping, into Black Phoebe habitat. Though much suitable habitat remained, from Pauma Valley to Ramona to Jamul, perhaps the small population dropped below a sustainable threshold. The accelerating return suggests that Say's Phoebe is adapting anew, perhaps aided by a long-term trend toward a warmer, drier climate. Clearing of scrub and erection of buildings create new Say's Phoebe habitat, but landscaping and paving remove it. The bird's need for open ground for foraging suggests its potential as an urban adapter is limited. But further increase is likely with further adaptation to low-density suburban development. Urban nesting of Say's Phoebes may expose the birds to unaccustomed threats: one pair that nested repeatedly atop a bell at a Mira Mesa school (N9) suffered losses to both clean-up by maintenance workers and predation by European Starlings (S. L. Breisch).

Taxonomy: Winter visitors are the dark *S. s. saya* (Bonaparte, 1825), widespread in western North America north of San Diego. The coastal population, judged from the quite dark juvenile specimen from Imperial Beach, is this subspecies too. This identification also implies that the recent increase in breeding Say's Phoebes on the coastal slope is the result of colonization from the north. Breeding Say's Phoebes in eastern San Diego County are more likely *S. s. quiescens* Grinnell, 1926, paler than nominate *saya*, especially on the crown, which is practically the same color as the back. The only specimen so far from the Anza–Borrego Desert is *quiescens*, though it was collected in winter, in Mason Valley (M23) 15 January 1925 (SDNHM 2915). Two juveniles from Laguna Hanson in the Sierra Juárez are *quiescens*, as are several specimens from the Colorado Desert (Rea 1983, Patten et al. 2003).