

Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus griseus*

The Short-billed Dowitcher is a major constituent of the shorebird flocks on the tidal flats around San Diego. The winter population is around 2000, and even larger numbers are seen in migration. Migrants use freshwater ponds, lakeshores, and brackish lagoons as well as tidal mudflats, but wintering birds are rare in northern San Diego County's lagoons and absent from fresh water, making the two dowitchers' winter distributions somewhat complementary. The difficulty in distinguishing the two species in the field, however, still clouds our understanding of their relative status.

Winter: The mudflats of south San Diego Bay are the Short-billed Dowitcher's center in San Diego County. Macdonald et al. (1990) counted up to 431 along the Chula Vista bayfront (T10/U10) 29 November 1988, while Stadtlander and Konecny (1994), on weekly surveys in and near the salt works (U10/V10), recorded a December–February maximum of about 700 and averages of 200 to 450. Large numbers also winter in the Tijuana River estuary (V10), with up to 670 on 19 December 1998 (R. B. Riggan), and northeastern Mission Bay (Q8), with up to 300 on 18 December 1998 (J. C. Worley).

At northern San Diego County's lagoons the Short-billed Dowitcher is rare in winter. Some may be overlooked, but the Long-billed Dowitcher outnumbers it greatly. On the basis of monthly counts 1973–83, King et al. (1987) reported an average of 3.7 from November to April at San Elijo Lagoon (L7). Numbers as high as 25 (possibly including some Long-billed) at Agua Hedionda Lagoon (I6) 24 January 1999 (P. A. Ginsburg), 24 at Batiquitos Lagoon (J6/J7) 7 January 1997 (Merkel and Associates 1997), and 13 at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7) 7 January



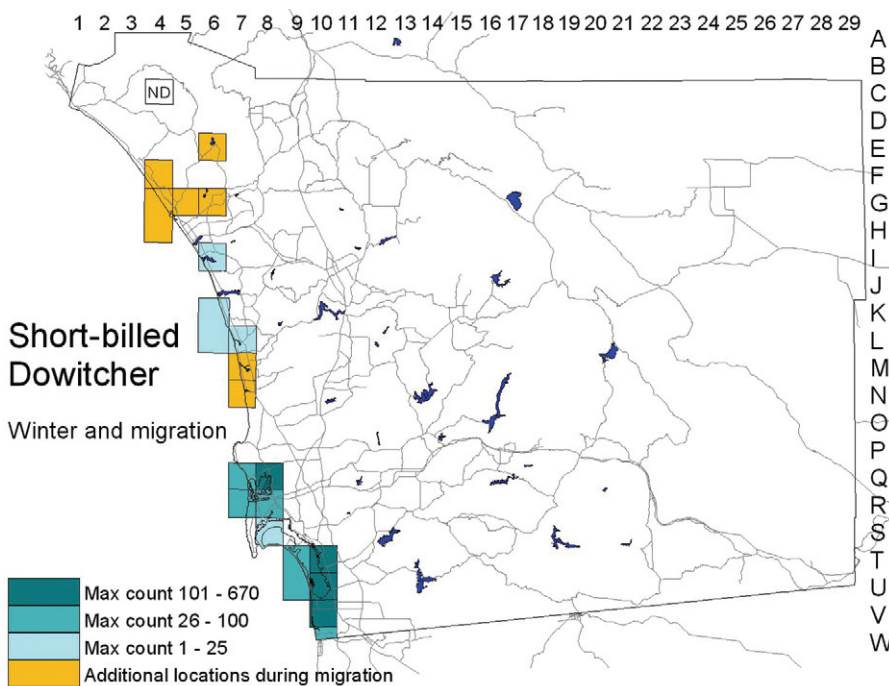
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

2001 (D. K. Adams) were unusually large for winter in this area. Agua Hedionda is more attractive than the other lagoons because, being dredged, it resembles the bays. The deepening and opening of Batiquitos Lagoon in the mid 1990s converted that previously unsuitable site into possible winter habitat for the Short-billed Dowitcher.

Migration: Adult Short-billed Dowitchers begin arriving in the last week of June and are common by the first week of July. Juveniles beginning arriving in late July. Macdonald et al. (1990) recorded a fall peak of 1194 around south San Diego Bay on 27 August 1988, while Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) found dowitchers' peak abundance at the salt works in October, with up to 1156 on 27 October 1993. The latter study found the peak of spring migrants to be smaller (maximum about 470 in April 1993), but Macdonald et al. (1990) counted 3376, most along the Chula Vista bayfront, on 10 April 1989. Nearly all Short-billed Dowitchers depart by early May. Some nonbreeding birds remain through the summer,

mainly on south San Diego Bay (250 through June 1987, AB 41:1487, 1987; 84 on 24 June 1988, Macdonald et al. 1990), at the Tijuana River estuary, and irregularly in the north county. The only records of summering Short-billed Dowitchers in the north county 1997–2001 were of four at the Santa Margarita River mouth (G4) 15 June 1997 (B. L. Peterson) and two at the San Dieguito River mouth (M7) 5 June 2000 (D. R. Grine).

In contrast to winter, during migration the Short-billed Dowitcher is common at the north county lagoons and regular at freshwater ponds in the coastal lowland. King et al. (1987) reported an average of 18 at San Elijo Lagoon in September and October; Merkel and Associates (1997) reported 126 at Batiquitos



Lagoon 3 April 1997. The only record for the Anza-Borrego Desert is of one at the Borrego sewage ponds (H25) 30 September 1992 (A. G. Morley).

Conservation: Kjelson et al. (1991) listed San Diego Bay as one of six coastal estuaries in California with 1000 or more wintering dowitchers. Before so much of the tidal mudflats of Mission and San Diego bays were filled, the area's importance to the Short-billed Dowitcher was probably even greater.

Taxonomy: *Limnodromus g. caurinus* Pitelka, 1950, which breeds in southern Alaska, is the subspecies wintering commonly along the California coast. On the basis of its smaller size, a juvenile from Whelan Lake (G6) 24 September 1961 (A. M. Rea, SDNHM 3098) is *L. g. hendersoni* Rowan, 1932, breeding in central Canada. In breeding plumage *hendersoni* has more rufous and less spotting on the underparts, but in juvenile plumage it differs only in size.