

Surfbird *Aphriza virgata*

The Surfbird is one of the characteristic birds of rocky shorelines, taking advantage of jetties and breakwaters at least as much as natural rock formations. Occasionally it visits sandy beaches, mainly during migration. In San Diego County, it is a locally common migrant and winter visitor, most abundant during spring migration.

Winter: Primitively, the rocky shores of La Jolla (P7) and Point Loma (S7) were the Surfbird’s main habitat in San Diego County. From 1997 to 2001, our winter numbers in these habitats were up to eight at La Jolla 15 December 1999 (L. Polinsky) and seven at Point Loma 20 December 1997 (M. W. Klein). We found even greater numbers, however, on breakwaters of riprap: 45 at the entrance to Mission Bay (R7) 1 January 1999 (P. Unitt), 19 on Zuñiga Jetty at the entrance to San Diego Bay (S8) 15 December 2001 (D. W. Povey). Unexpected were 21 feeding with turnstones on mudflats at the southeast corner of Mission Bay (R8) 24 December 1997 (P. Unitt). The jetties for the harbors at Camp Del Mar (G4) and Oceanside (H5) give the Surfbird its only winter habitat in northern San Diego



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Migration: During the atlas period our dates for the Surfbird ranged from 31 July (2001; two at Camp Del Mar, P. A. Ginsburg) to 28 April (2001; 15 at La Jolla, L. and M. Polinsky), the expected spread. No peak of fall migrants is known, but the Surfbird is considerably more numerous as a spring migrant than in winter, beginning in late March (100 at La Jolla 25 March 2000, L. and M. Polinsky). Our highest count was of 130 at La Jolla 15 April 1999 (J. R.

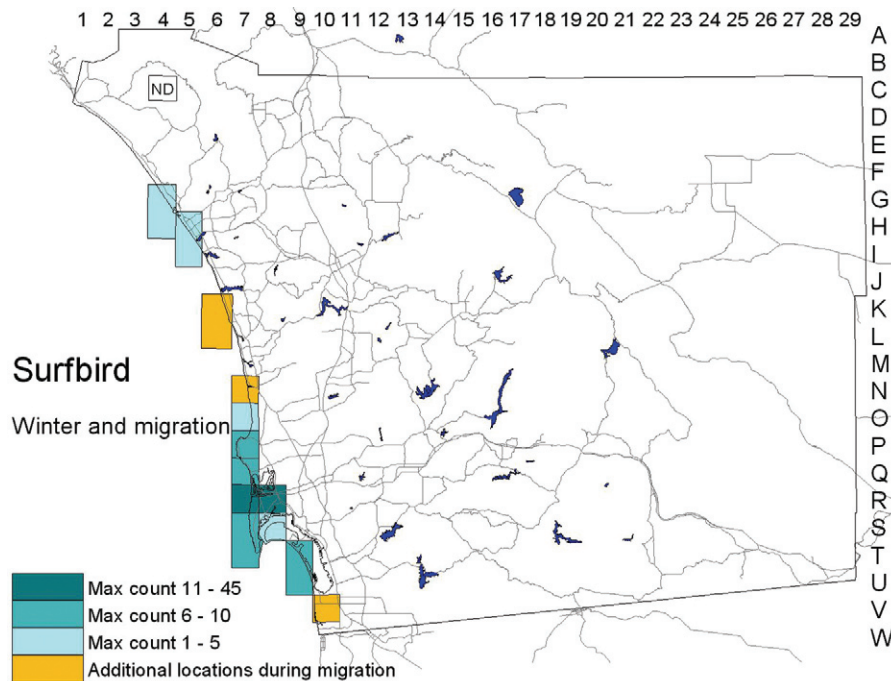
Barth). Spring migrants show up occasionally at sites where the species does not winter, as did eight on the jetty at Camp Surf near Imperial Beach (V10) 24 March 2001 (T. Stands) and six on the beach at Encinitas (K6) 15 April 2001 (E. Garnica).

Though the Surfbird migrates overland from the Gulf of California to the Pacific coast, this migration apparently takes place largely over northern Baja California. There are no inland records for San Diego County, and the Surfbird is rare at the Salton Sea (Patten et al. 2003).

There are six records of summering Surfbirds in San Diego County, of one near Imperial Beach (V10) 26 June–16 July 1983 (R. E. Webster, AB 37:1027, 1983), one on San Diego Bay 12 June 1985 (R. E. Webster,

AB 39:962, 1985), and three on south San Diego Bay 24 June–3 July 1988 (J. O’Brien, AB 42:1340, 1988), plus three listed by Unitt (1984).

Conservation: The installation of breakwaters gave the Surfbird additional habitat in San Diego County. The species’ frequency on the Oceanside Christmas bird count is on the increase, perhaps the result of invertebrates colonizing the breakwaters.



County. Our maximum here during the atlas period was five at Camp Del Mar 20 January 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg). On Oceanside Christmas bird counts 1976–2002, where the count of Surfbirds on the jetties is exhaustive, the average is 0.9 and the maximum is six on 21 December 2002. Wintering Surfbirds are irregular on the beach at Coronado (T9) with up to nine on 16 December 2000 (N. Osborn).