

Swainson's Thrush *Catharus ustulatus*

San Diego County straddles Swainson's Thrush's main migration route along the Pacific coast of North America, so the species passes through in large numbers, however inconspicuously. The average San Diegan is more likely to find the low-flying Swainson's Thrush dead—killed by a cat or having flown into a window—than to see the bird alive. The county lies at the southern tip of the species' breeding range, so Swainson's Thrush is rare here as a breeding bird, confined to a few stands of riparian woodland.

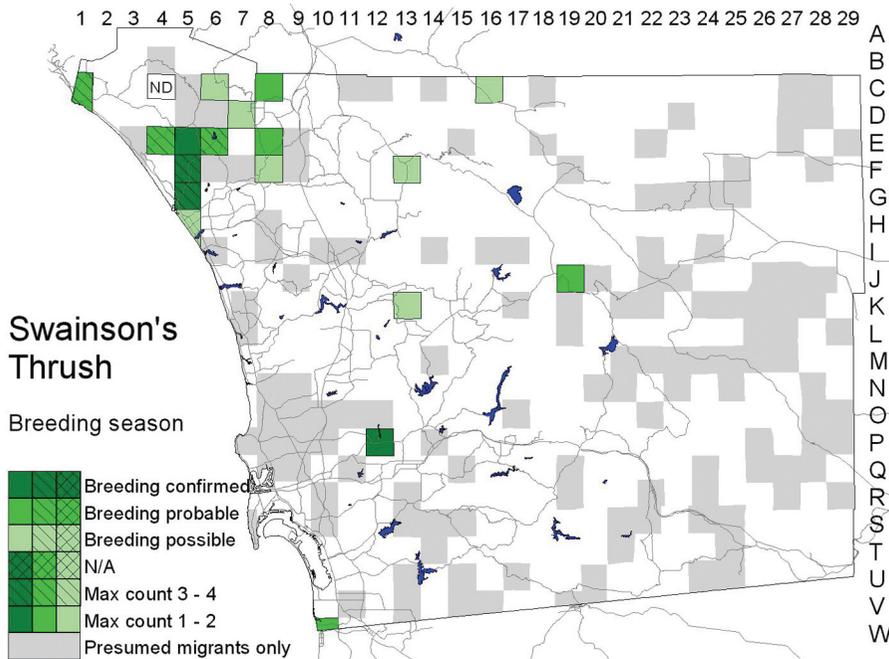
Breeding distribution: San Diego County's small breeding population of Swainson's Thrush centers on the lower Santa Margarita River in Camp Pendleton. From O'Neill Lake (E6) downstream to Stuart Mesa Road (G5), there may be as few as seven pairs. After spring migrants have departed, the highest counts in single atlas squares were of four birds near O'Neill Lake 2 July 1998, two, including a fledgling, near the base airfield (E5) 28 June and 22 July 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg), three, including a pair, between Rifle Range Road and the north end of Ysidora Basin (F5) on 28 June 1998, and two in Ysidora Gorge (G5) 19 June 1998 (R. E. Fischer). Breeding was confirmed along the Santa Margarita by a nest with nestlings near Rifle Range Road (F5) 28 June 2000 (J. M. Wells) and a fledgling being fed a short distance farther upstream, just north of the base airfield, 28 June–22 July 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg). Swainson's Thrush also breeds along the lower San Luis Rey River in Oceanside, with one near Lawrence Canyon (H5) 11 July 1999 (J. Determan) and up to four, including a nest, about 0.5 mile downstream of the Oceanside airport (G5) 2–14 June 2000 (J. M. Wells). It is likely that a few other Swainson's Thrushes breed elsewhere in northwestern San Diego County, along the Santa



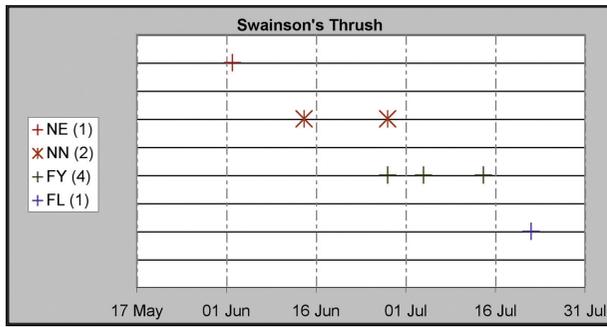
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Margarita and San Luis Rey rivers, San Mateo Creek, Las Pulgas Creek, and De Luz Creek, though the only other records during the atlas period after migration were of up to four singing males along San Mateo Creek, San Onofre State Beach (C1), 14 June–7 July 1997 (L. Ellis), three birds (two singing males) along Las Pulgas Creek (E4) 27 June 2001 (P. A. Ginsburg), and up to three birds (two singing males) along the San Luis Rey River near Gird Road, Bonsall (E8), as on 23 July 1999 and 27 June 2001 (P. A. Ginsburg). Records before 1997 attest to Swainson's Thrushes summering along the Santa Margarita River north of Fallbrook (C8).

Elsewhere in San Diego County there are only a few scattered records of Swainson's Thrushes summering. A single singing male was along Temecula Creek near Oak Grove (C16) 20 June 1998 (K. L. Weaver). A single singing male along the San Luis Rey River near Rincon (F13) 12 June 1999 (E. Wallace) could have been an exceptionally late migrant. A single bird was along Santa Maria Creek in Bandy Canyon (K13) 25 June 1999 (P. von Hendy, B. Hendricks). Two singing males about 3800 feet elevation



in Juch Canyon along Wynola Road (J19) 12 July 1999 (S. E. Smith) furnished the only summer record for Swainson's Thrush in San Diego County's mountains. One singing male summered along the San Diego River near Santee Lakes (P12) in 1999 and 2001; on 4 July 2001 it was carrying berries from an ornamental tree into a dense riparian thicket, apparently feeding young (M. B. Mulrooney). Up to two singing males along the Tijuana River near Saturn Blvd. (W10) 30 June–2 July 2001 (M. B. Mulrooney) were the southernmost summering Swainson's Thrushes ever found; the previous southernmost record was based on an egg set collected at Bonita (T11) 10 June 1914 (WVZ 65276).



Nesting: In California, Swainson's Thrush typically nests at heights under 2 meters in riparian woodland with a rather closed canopy (T. Gardali unpubl. data). Little is known of the species' nesting in San Diego County, however. The nest found by J. M. Wells along the San Luis Rey River was about 2.25 meters up in a giant reed—an invasive pest plant that hardly constitutes a traditional nest site. This nest had four eggs on 2 June 2000 and nestlings about four days old on 14 June, suggesting the clutch had been completed around 30 May. The nest along the Santa Margarita River had nestlings about eight or nine days old on 28 June 2000, suggesting that clutch was completed around 8 June. The three egg sets collected in San Diego County 1914–20 are dated 31 May, 10 June, and 26 June.

Migration: In spring, Swainson's Thrush is a rather late migrant through San Diego County, with peak numbers in May. From 1997 through 2001, our dates for spring migrants ranged from 11 April (1998, one in Arroyo Seco del Diablo, N28, R. and S. L. Breisch) to 11 June (1999, one in Black Canyon, I16, K. J. Winter) and 12 June (1999, one in Oceanside, H5, J. Determan). Over the five years, the early dates ranged from 11 to 28 April, but the earliest date ever reported for the species is 1 April (1996, San Mateo Creek mouth, C1, L. J. Edson, NASFN 50:333, 1996), from a site where it is known to summer. Thus, as for many other species with a wide range on the Pacific coast, it appears that the local population arrives earlier than migrants headed farther north. Migrant Swainson's Thrushes are usually seen in small numbers, seldom more than six per day. The species' secretive habits mean that many birds are overlooked. But occasional larger concentrations are noted, up to 30 on 14 May 1998 at Scissors Crossing (J22; E. C. Hall), a riparian oasis along the primary corridor for migrants crossing from the desert to the coast. One found near Tecolote Canyon (Q9) 15 May 2002 (S. K. Niemann, SDNHM 50638) had been banded as a juvenile at the Wright Wildlife Refuge just north of Eureka, California, 17 August 2001 (T. L. George pers. comm.).

Fall migrants occur mainly from September to mid October; dates range from 26 August (1972, San Marcos,

19, AMR 4094) to 8 November (1981, Point Loma, S7, J. L. Dunn, AB 36:218, 1982), exceptionally 1 December (1964, San Diego, SDNHM 35141).

Winter: A Swainson's Thrush in Coronado (S9) 15–16 December 1979 (G. McCaskie) had an injured wing, probably accounting for its remaining so late. All other winter reports from California presumably are of misidentified Hermit Thrushes; Swainson's has been collected in winter no nearer than Nayarit in western Mexico.

Conservation: As a species restricted for breeding to riparian woodland, Swainson's Thrush has suffered from the removal and degradation of most of this habitat in southern California. Stephens (1919a) called it a "rather common summer resident," but by the 1970s it was rare in this role. From 1997 to 2001 we did not find the species at several locations from which Unitt (1984) reported it in the 1970s. Perhaps the most serious current threat to Swainson's Thrush habitat in San Diego County is the proliferation of the giant reed, which was accelerated along the lower Santa Margarita River by the floods of 1993. Along the coast of northern California, Swainson's Thrush's reproductive success appears insufficient to sustain the population, for unknown reasons (T. Gardali unpubl. data). Loss of wintering habitat in southern Mexico and Central America may account for the species' disappearance from seemingly unaltered breeding habitat in the Sierra Nevada (Marshall 1988).

Taxonomy: Swainson's Thrushes occurring in San Diego County are Russet-backed Thrushes, the *ustulatus* subspecies group breeding along the Pacific coast from southeastern Alaska to San Diego County. Within this group, three subspecies have been described, the paler, grayer *C. u. oedicus* (Oberholser, 1899), breeding from southern California north to the inner Coast Ranges and Sierra Nevada of northern California, the darker, more rufous *C. u. ustulatus* (Nuttall, 1840), breeding from northwestern California north through the Pacific Northwest, and the very rufous *C. u. phillipsi* Ramos, 1991, breeding on the Queen Charlotte Islands of British Columbia. No specimens of San Diego County's breeding population have yet been collected. Among migrants, *ustulatus* is by far the most abundant. Of 44 spring specimens, collected from 29 April to 10 June, apparently only two are drab enough to qualify as *oedicus*: one from Borrego Springs (G24) 10 May 2000 (P. D. Jorgensen, SDNHM 50462) and one from Chula Vista (U11) 19 May 1990 (S. Kingswood, SDNHM 46849). Of 19 fall specimens, collected from 7 September to 1 December, only one, from San Diego 25 October 1981 (J. Shrawder, SDNHM 41615), even approaches *oedicus*. I have not seen specimens that would allow me to distinguish *phillipsi* from *ustulatus*, but the former may pass through San Diego County as well.