

Tree Swallow *Tachycineta bicolor*

The Tree Swallow is primarily a migrant through San Diego County, seen by the hundreds especially in early spring. In winter it is our most common swallow but still localized and only irregularly numerous then. San Diego County lies at the southern tip of the Tree Swallow's breeding range. Until 1980 it was rare here as a breeding species but since then it has increased, colonizing holes in snags around lakes and in riparian woodland.

Breeding distribution: As might be expected at the edge of a range, as a breeding bird in San Diego County the Tree Swallow is only locally common. It is most widespread in the lower valleys of the Santa Margarita and San Luis Rey rivers in northwestern San Diego County, more local farther south and east. Many nesting sites are at or near lakes, and most of the remainder are in riparian woodland. Breeding Tree Swallows are rare in the mountains, where we have only five records, none of more than two individuals. Nesting is confirmed south to the east end of Lower Otay Lake (U14), with a pair occupying a nest hole 20 May 2001 (O. Osborn), and likely in



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Marron Valley (V17), with two on 16 May and 12 June 2000 (P. Beck). Thus, even though the Tree Swallow is still unknown as a breeding species in Mexico, its spreading there now seems likely.

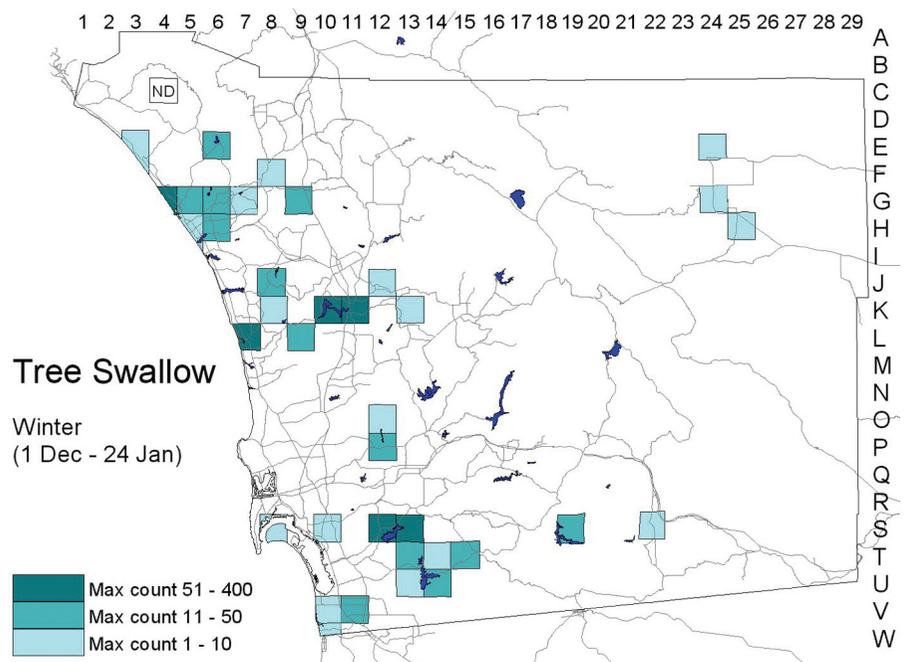
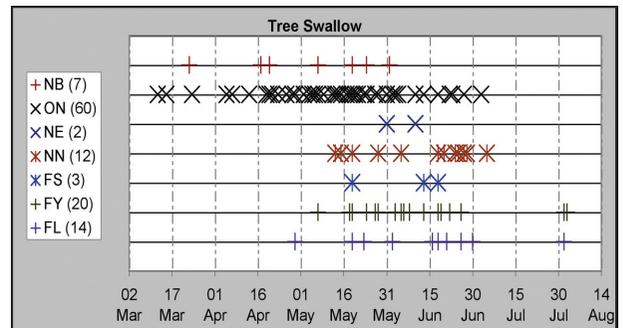
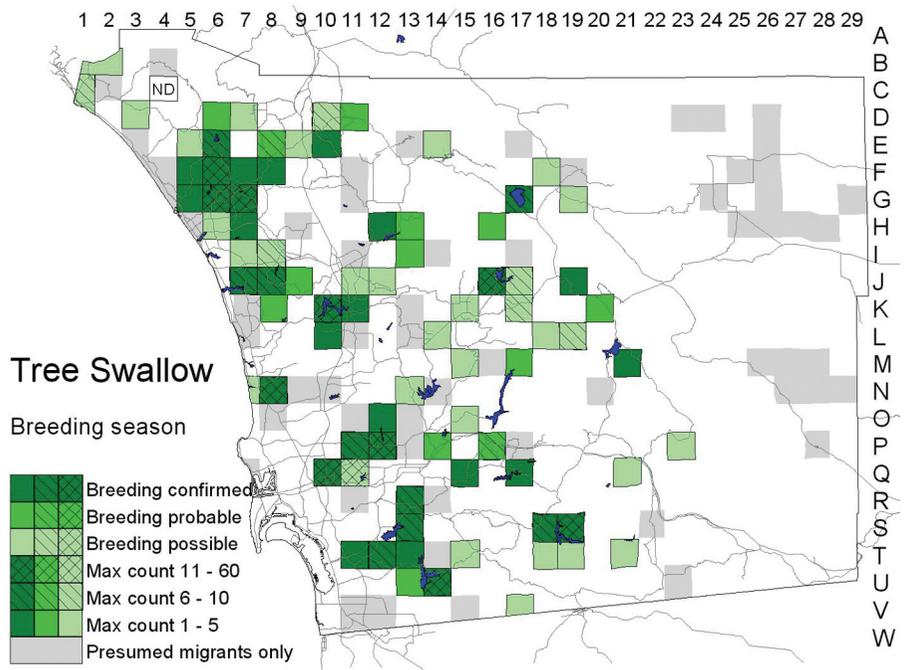
The species is not colonial, but the population is nevertheless clumped. The largest concentrations of breeding birds reported 1997–2001 were at Barrett Lake (S19, up to 60 on 18 June 2000, R. and S. L. Breisch), Sutherland

Reservoir (J16, up to 40 on 26 May and 22 June 1998, B. Travis), Lower Otay Lake (U14, up to 30 on 4 July 1999, S. Buchanan), Guajome Lake (G7, up to 30 on 11 May 1999, S. Grain), and Santee Lakes (P12, up to 28 on 5 May 1997, E. Post).

Nesting: Tree Swallows nest in tree cavities, usually old woodpecker holes. Drowned trees in reservoirs are especially attractive, though the birds nest also in snags at the edge of small openings in the middle of riparian woodland. At Whalen (G6) and Guajome lakes Tree Swallows used cavities in the flowering stalk of agaves (J. Smith, S. Grain). At Wynola (J19) one used a nest box (A. Mercieca), a common site elsewhere in the Tree Swallow's range.

Because of the dearth of collected eggs of the Tree Swallow, our atlas data add considerably to knowledge of the species' nesting in San Diego County. Tree Swallows claim nest holes as soon as they return in the spring, leading to reports of "occupied nests" as early as 14 February, before actual nesting begins. Fledglings as early as 29 April (2001, Barrett Lake, S18, R. and S. L. Breisch) imply that the adults may lay as early as late March, much earlier than the 18–28 May of three egg sets collected in the early 20th century. Similarly, fledglings along the lower San Luis Rey River (G5) 1 August 1999 (R. E. Fischer) must have come from eggs laid in late June and imply that Tree Swallows could easily raise two successive broods in San Diego County. Over most of the species' range, second broods are rare (Robertson et al. 1992).

Migration: Spring return of the Tree Swallow is usually in the first week of February, occasionally the last week of January (one flying northwest at Ocotillo Wells, I28, 25 January 2001, J. R. Barth). Thus the Tree Swallow is one of our earliest spring migrants. The birds quickly become common, reaching peak abundance in March. By the end of April they are rare away from breeding locations, and two northeast of Borrego Springs (F25) 7 May 1998 (P. D. Ache) were the latest that were clearly migrants. A few birds in unsuitable habitat on the coastal slope through May and June may have been



unable to find nest sites. One at Agua Caliente County Park (M26) 4 June 1998 (E. C. Hall) made the only such record for the Anza–Borrego Desert.

Fall migration begins by 13 July (1999, one in the Tijuana R. valley, W11, P. Unitt), possibly as early as 3 July (1999, 30 at Turner Lake—a nesting location?—G11, S. L. and S. J. Farrow), but is often not noticeable until August. In fall, migrating Tree Swallows are less numerous than in spring, and the main migration route at that season is apparently more across the Salton Sea than along the coast (cf. Patten et al. 2003).

Winter: The Tree is by far the most numerous swallow in southern California in winter, but its distribution then is still quite patchy. The birds occur usually around lakes, lagoons, and ponds at low elevations. In San Diego County, winter records are concentrated in the lower Santa Margarita and San Luis Rey valleys, along Escondido Creek from San Elijo Lagoon to Lake Hodges, Sweetwater Reservoir, at Santee Lakes, Lower Otay Lake, and the Tijuana River valley, especially in the first three areas: up to 100 at the Santa Margarita River mouth (G4) 22 January 1999 and 15 January 2001 (P. A. Ginsburg), 177 at Lake Hodges (K10) 23 December 2001 (R. L. Barber), 500 at Sweetwater Reservoir (S12/13) 22 December 1998 (P. Famolaro). Nevertheless, the Tree Swallow is irregular

even at these spots of concentration. Above 1000 feet elevation, atlas observers encountered the species only twice, at Barrett Lake (S19; 50 on 26 December 1999, R. and S. L. Breisch) and at the upper end of Lake Morena (S22; five on 20 December 1998; R. and S. L. Breisch). Over 21 years of Lake Henshaw Christmas bird counts, the Tree Swallow was recorded only twice, with no more than three individuals. In the Borrego Valley the Tree Swallow is rare. Two of the four records between 1997 and 2002 were on 23 January so possibly of very early spring migrants; the others are of one on 19 December 1999 (E24, P. R. Pryde) and three on 16 January 2000 (G24, P. D. Jorgensen). There is only one earlier record of a single Tree Swallow on an Anza–Borrego Christmas bird count.

Conservation: As a breeding species, the Tree Swallow increased dramatically in San Diego County over the last two decades of the 20th century. Before 1980, it bred here only “very rarely and sporadically” (Unitt 1984). Because many of the new sites are around reservoirs, it seems reasonable to infer that the building of these reservoirs, which drowned trees, allowed the Tree Swallow to spread its breeding range south. Yet there must be other factors too—most of the reservoirs were there decades before the spread began.