

Vermilion Flycatcher *Pyrocephalus rubinus*

Spectacular, tame, and easy to see, habitually perching on the lowest branches of isolated trees, the Vermilion Flycatcher is a birder's favorite. One would think such a species a perfect poster child for promoting conservation of its desert riparian habitat. Yet its decline in its historic California range continues unabated. The Vermilion Flycatcher was always rare in San Diego County, but since the mid 1980s it has become even more so. It survives precariously in five areas and seldom pioneers far from these.

Breeding distribution: Here at the northwestern corner of its usual breeding distribution along the Pacific coast, the Vermilion Flycatcher is rare and scattered in San Diego County. Its characteristic habitat of open riparian woodland and mesquite bosques on desert floodplains is barely represented in San Diego County, though the birds and their habitat occur in the drainage basin of the Tijuana River at Valle de las Palmas in northwestern Baja California. The most regular site for the species in San Diego County is the private Butterfield Ranch campground in Mason Valley (M23), with up to four individuals, as on 16 April 1999 (M. B. Stowe) and 21 March 2001 (P. K. Nelson). The Vermilion Flycatcher was first reported from this site in summer 1984 (C. G. Edwards; AB 38:1062, 1984) and has remained more or less continuously ever since. The "population" in this region extends also to adjacent Vallecito Valley (M24), with one pair, the female building a nest, at a private ranch house 21 March 2001 (P. K. Nelson). The Vermilion Flycatcher is irregular in the Borrego Valley. At De Anza Country Club (F24), one pair nested in March 1993 (Massey 1998); one was at a nest with eggs 2 May 1997, and a single individual was noted 5 April and 27 May 2001 (M. L. Gabel). A pair was at Whitaker Horse Camp (D24) 13–14 May 2001 (R. and



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

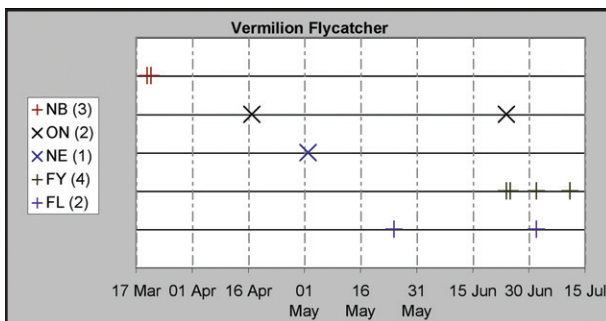
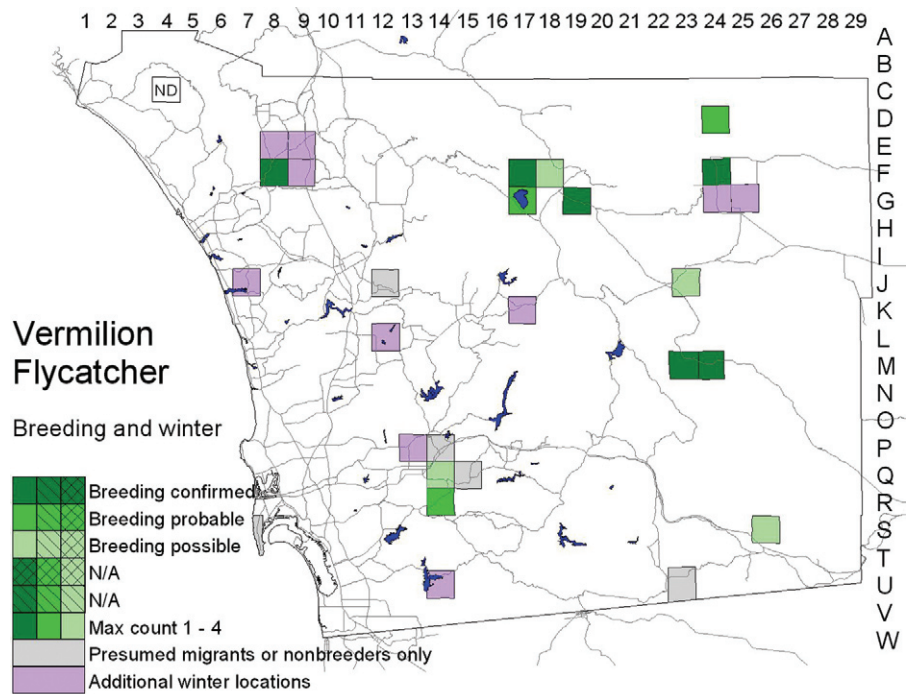
S. L. Breisch), the male in courtship display, but the birds did not remain to nest.

One surprise of our atlas effort was the occurrence of the Vermilion Flycatcher in Warner Valley. One pair nested north of Lake Henshaw (F17) 27 May–11 July 1997 (P. P. Beck), another near the old Warner Ranch house (G19) 17–25 June 2000 (J. D. Barr, E. C. Hall, M. U. Evans). Another pair was at Lake Henshaw (G17) 12 May 2001 (R. and S. L. Breisch); single males were west of Warner Springs (F18) 28 May 1997 (P. P. Beck). Elsewhere in eastern San Diego County, single males were at an old corral near Sentenac Ciénaga (J23) 14 June 1998 (R. Thériault), in McCain Valley (S26) 19 April 1999 (G. L. Rogers), and at Cameron Corners (U23) 1 April 2001 (L. and A. Johnson, *vide* D. S. and A. W. Hester).

Nearer the coast, the Vermilion Flycatcher appears regular at only two sites. At Bonsall (F8), there was one 9 July 1997 (L. Gammie) and an adult with two fledglings 25 May 2000 (J. Evans). Along the Sweetwater River, a singing male was at the Singing Hills golf course (Q14) 30 April 2000 (J., E., and K. Berndes) and a pair was a short distance downstream at the Rancho San Diego golf course in Jamacha Valley (R14) 11 April 1999

(N. Perretta, P. Nance), with a single male noted there 19 July 1999 (D. Stokes). The Vermilion Flycatcher has been reported from this area sporadically for years. Not far away was one at the end of Eula Lane 3.6 miles east-northeast of downtown El Cajon (Q14) 1 May 1999 (J., E., and K. Berndes). The only other report of a possibly breeding Vermilion Flycatcher 1997–2001 was at the Eagle Crest golf course, east Escondido (J12), 31 May 1998 (C. Rideout).

Nesting: The Vermilion Flycatcher typically places its shallow nest in a horizontal fork in the middle level of trees (Wolf and Jones 2000). Because the fork selected is free of leaves and the habitat itself is semiopen, the nests are not difficult



to find—possibly making the Vermilion Flycatcher especially vulnerable to predators and cowbirds. Because of the species’ rarity in San Diego County, our records, encompassing only eight pairs, do not define its breeding season well. But the spread of dates, ranging from nest building on 20 March to fledglings on 11 July, implies the Vermilion Flycatcher may raise two broods, as elsewhere in the southwestern United States (Wolf and Jones 2000).

Migration: The Vermilion Flycatcher no longer has a clear-cut migration in California; the former pattern of largely summer residency has now changed to irregular dispersal. The only record of a spring migrant 1997–2001, of a female at Point Loma (S7) 22 May 1999 (P. A. Ginsburg), was exceptionally late. Previous records from nonbreeding localities run no later than 28 April (1990, San Diego River mouth, R7, R. E. Webster, AB 44:497, 1990). The Vermilion Flycatcher is most widespread during fall dispersal, beginning by 16 September (1983, Tijuana River valley, E. Copper, AB 38:247, 1984) and extending through October.

Winter: At this season, the Vermilion Flycatcher is little more widespread than during spring and summer. Most

records 1997–2002 were at or near locations where it was noted also during the breeding season: Bonsall, Lake Henshaw, Borrego Valley, San Pasqual Valley, Butterfield Ranch, Lakeside, Singing Hills. Only a few records were more than 7 miles from breeding-season locations: one at La Costa (J7) 13 December 1997 (M. Baumgartel), one on the east edge of Poway (L12) 1 February 2001 (K. J. Winter), and one in Ballena Valley (K17) 25 February 2000 (D. C. Seals) and 16 February 2001 (O. Carter). Winter numbers were also similar to those during the breeding season, with a maximum of five in the San Luis Rey River valley 1–2 miles northeast of Bonsall (E8) 14 December 1999 (P. A. Ginsburg).

Conservation: Though the Vermilion Flycatcher has colonized several new locations in the Mojave Desert, its career through the history of California as a whole has been one of calamitous decline. This decline is reflected in San Diego County as well, however marginal the region is to the flycatcher’s main range. Results of Christmas bird counts reflect the decline most clearly. From 1960 through 1974 the Vermilion Flycatcher was annual on the San Diego count, with a maximum of eight in 1968. From 1975 through 1986, it occurred in only five of 12 years, with no more than one individual. Since 1986 the species has gone unrecorded. Likewise, on the Oceanside count, the Vermilion Flycatcher was noted in 10 of the 18 years from 1970 to 1987, with a maximum of three on 22 December 1979, but not since 1987. The areas around Bonsall where the species occurs are largely outside the count circle and within private ranches. Nesting of Vermilion Flycatchers at Santee in 1958, Balboa Park from 1958 to 1960 (Crouch 1959), Bonita in 1968 (G. McCaskie), and Jacumba in 1986 (AB 40:1256, 1986) proved ephemeral.

Degradation of riparian woodland is probably the factor affecting the Vermilion Flycatcher most strongly.

Because San Diego County is marginal to the flycatcher's range, it may be even more susceptible to environmental change here than closer to the core. Population collapse in the Coachella, Imperial, and Colorado River valleys decimated a source of immigrants. The Vermilion Flycatcher occurs most often now in parks, campgrounds, and golf courses, which have proliferated with development. Yet the flycatcher's continuing decline suggests that these habitats are poor substitutes for natural riparian woodland. Recent riparian restoration, along with flood con-

trol, favors dense woodland in narrow strips, rather than broad open woodland more suitable to the Vermilion Flycatcher. Meanwhile, pumping of groundwater desiccates the remaining habitat.

Taxonomy: However brilliant the male Vermilion Flycatcher appears to those of us who are familiar only with *P. r. flammeus* van Rossem 1934, this subspecies, the only one in California, is actually paler, less intensely colored than others farther south.