

### Vesper Sparrow *Poocetes gramineus*

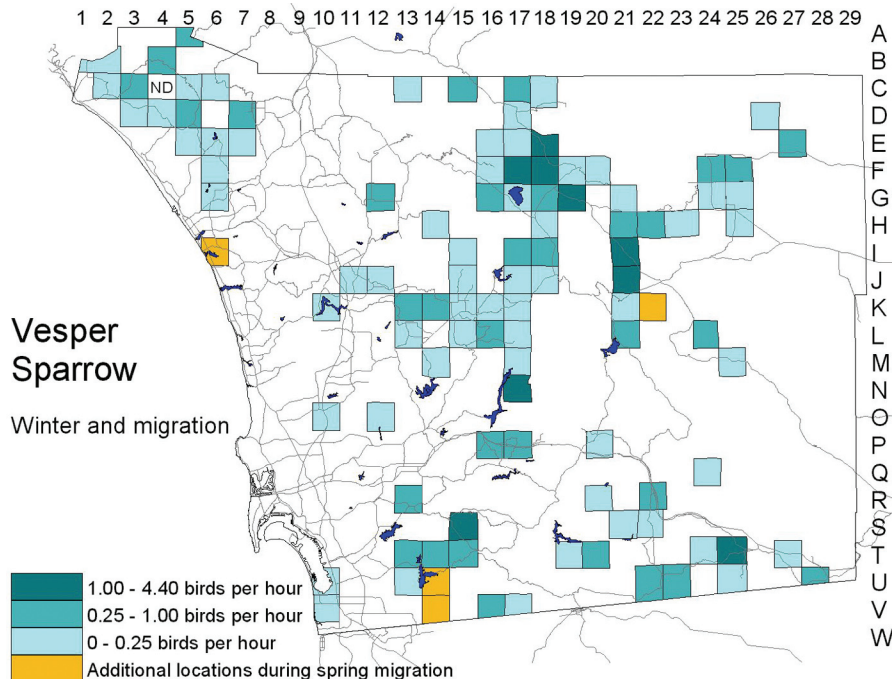
Open grassland and sparse scrub in the inland valleys and desert sinks are home to the Vesper Sparrow during its winter stay in San Diego County. Generally uncommon, the Vesper Sparrow can be overlooked among the Savannah Sparrows that often outnumber it, but it is locally common in the most favorable places, Warner and San Felipe valleys. The Vesper Sparrow's restriction to only large tracts of its habitat suggests that birds can suffer the effects of habitat fragmentation in their winter range as well as their breeding range.

**Winter:** The Vesper Sparrow avoids a narrow strip along the coast but otherwise occurs widely in the largest tracts of its habitats: grassland, stands of the big sagebrush, and halophytic scrub on valley floors in the Anza-Borrego



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Desert. In San Diego County these habitats are patchy, giving the Vesper Sparrow a patchy distribution. Sparse semidesert sage scrub was once also Vesper Sparrow habitat, but stands of this large enough to attract the birds



remain only in Dameron Valley (C15; up to 10 on 6 February 1999, K. L. Weaver) and around the upper end of El Capitan Reservoir (M17/N17; up to 25 on 16 January 2002, J. R. Barth). Warner Valley and San Felipe Valley (I21/J21) offer the most Vesper Sparrow habitat, and the birds are most numerous there, with up to 35 north of Lake Henshaw (F17) 8 December 2001 (P. Unitt), 27 in the east arm of Warner Valley (G19) 10 December 2000 (R. and S. L. Breisch), and 79 in San Felipe Valley 18 December 2000 (W. E. Haas).

In the northwestern part of the county Camp Pendleton (up to 12 in San Onofre Canyon, C3, 19 January 2002, J. R. Barth), the Fallbrook Naval Weapons Station (E6, up to 12 on 11 December

1998, P. A. Ginsburg), and grassland around Willow Spring (A5, up to 20 on 12 December 2001, K. J. Winter) are the only areas where the Vesper Sparrow occurs currently. Other places where Vesper Sparrows concentrate are broad inland valleys like Oak Grove (C17; 15 on 9 December 2001, J. M. and B. Hargrove), Montezuma (Ranchita; H21/H22; 20 on 15 January 1999, P. Unitt), Santa Maria (Ramona; K13–15; 10 on 3 January 1998, E. C. Hall), Proctor (T13/T14; 30 on 5 December 1999, S. Buchanan), Rancho Jamul (S15/T15; 21 on 14 January 2001, P. Unitt), Marron (V16/V17; 15 on 22 January 2001, D. C. Seals), Campo (U22/U23; 16 on 3 February 1999, D. C. Seals), Hill (T25; 36 on 10 February 2001, E. C. Hall), and Jacumba (U28; 20 on 23 January 2001, F. L. Unmack). Another noteworthy site is the native grassland at Wright's Field, Alpine (P17; 20 on 9 December 2001, K. J. Winter).

In the Anza–Borrego Desert the Vesper Sparrow is usually uncommon, though the Anza–Borrego Christmas bird count on 20 December 1998 produced 48 in north Borrego Springs (F24) and 56 in the entire count circle, the only record of more than eight individuals since the count's inception in 1984. Recorded during the atlas period in the Borrego Valley and at Clark Dry Lake (D26), Little Clark Dry Lake (E27), Blair Valley (L24), and Vallecito Valley (M25), the species is localized in the Anza–Borrego Desert to poorly drained valley floors and sinks with scattered shrubs, especially saltbush.

**Migration:** The Vesper Sparrow begins arriving in late September and departs largely by early April. Interestingly, the six records later than 15 April are from elevations between 2500 and 4200 feet, most from stands of big sagebrush recalling the species' breeding habitat in the Great Basin. The Vesper Sparrow breeds around Baldwin Lake in the San Bernardino Mountains, 60 miles north of San Diego County, but this is an isolated colony separated by over 100 miles from the species' main breeding range still farther north. The latest San Diego County records are of three between Ranchita and Camel Rock (H22) 27 April 1999 and one near Adobe Springs, Chihuahua Valley (C18), 2 May 1999 (P. Unitt).

**Conservation:** The Vesper Sparrow's absence from small patches of grassland suggests it is susceptible to habitat loss through fragmentation. Specimens and published reports confirm it at places where it no longer occurs, such as National City (T10), Lake Murray (Q11; SDNHM), Poway (M11), and El Cajon (Q13; Belding 1890). Most grassland in the coastal lowland has already been urbanized, and what remains is fragmented and degraded by the proliferation of nonnative grasses and weeds. Heavy grazing and groundwater pumping affect the Warner Valley, but fortunately two other important Vesper Sparrow sites, San Felipe Valley and Rancho Jamul, have been acquired by the California Department of Fish and Game. Field work for the atlas revealed the Vesper Sparrow to be more common in San Diego County than I reported in 1984, but this is a result of better surveys of areas formerly poorly known. Christmas bird counts show no clear trend in Vesper Sparrow numbers, though this may be an artifact of coverage. In the San Diego count circle, the best habitat, in Rancho Otay (U12), was not consistently accessible before it was eliminated. The decline of the Oregon Vesper Sparrow, *P. g. affinis*, may also have contributed to a decline of the Vesper Sparrow as a whole in San Diego County (see Taxonomy).

**Taxonomy:** The subspecies of the Vesper Sparrow dominant in San Diego County is the pale grayish *P. g. confinis* Baird, 1858, which breeds widely in western North America east of the Cascade Range. The smaller, buffier *P. g. affinis* is known in San Diego County from two specimens from Jamacha (R14) 23 February and 1 March 1924 (SDNHM 9266 and 9270) and one from El Cajon (Belding 1890). *Poocetes g. affinis* breeds largely in western Washington and western Oregon, where it has gone from "abundant" in the Willamette Valley (Gabrielson and Jewett 1940) to "locally uncommon to rare" (Gilligan et al. 1994). It is recognized as a bird of special concern by the California Department of Fish and Game. Though *affinis* has been collected as far south as Santo Domingo in northwestern Baja California, the San Joaquin Valley was apparently the core of its winter range (R. A. Erickson unpubl. data).