

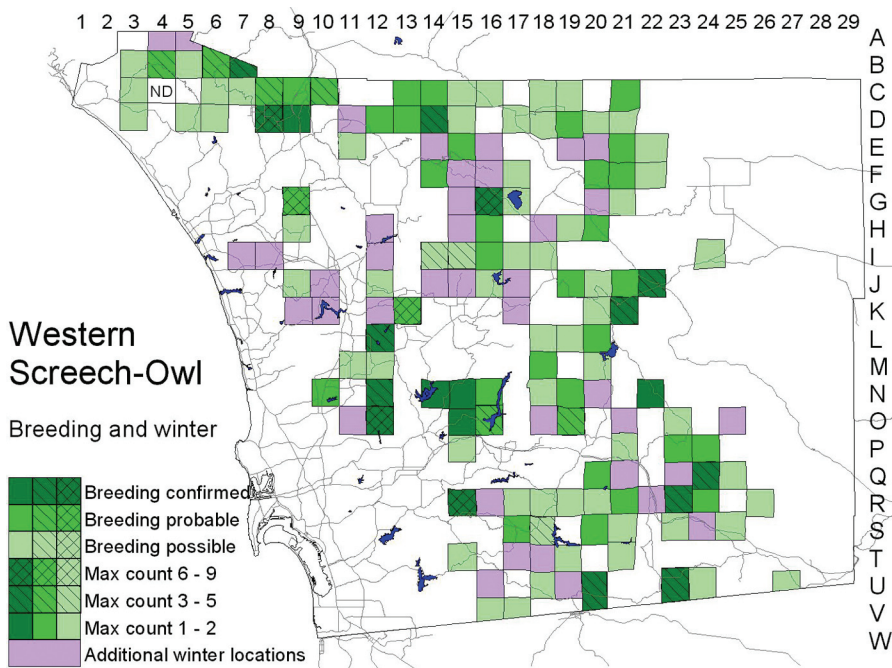
Western Screech-Owl *Megascops kennicottii*

The Western Screech-Owl is seldom seen without a special search, but it is a fairly common permanent resident in San Diego County's oak and coniferous woodlands. Its ideal habitat is a grove of mature coast live oaks with an ample supply of rotted-out cavities. The screech-owl is active only at night so is normally found by call, a series of 7 to 15 soft hoots that accelerates over about 2 seconds.

Breeding distribution: Because of spotty nocturnal effort, our results for the Western Screech-Owl are less complete than for those of most birds. But they show that the owl's distribution follows the pattern set by other birds of oak woodland. That is, the species ranges



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

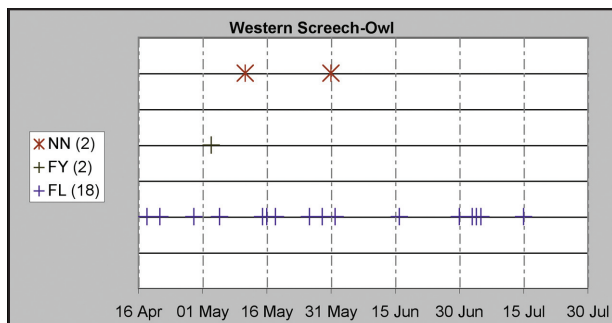


from the mountains west toward the coast but does not touch the coast, approaching it toward the north and retreating inland ever farther toward the south. In Camp Pendleton we found the screech-owl about 3 miles from the coast along the south fork of San Onofre Creek (D3; one on 25 June 1999, D. C. Seals), whereas along the Mexican border our most coastal locality was 20 miles inland in Marron Valley (V16; one on 31 May 2000, D. C. Seals). Numbers are greatest in foothill canyons, with up to nine per night along the San Luis Rey River near the Forest Service picnic area (G16) 3 July 1999, in Bandy Canyon (K13) 6 May 2001, and in Sloan Canyon (R15) 5 May 1999 (all W. E. Haas). In

conifer-dominated woodland in the higher mountains the screech-owl is widespread but less common.

On the east slope of the mountains the Western Screech-Owl extends beyond the oaks along Banner and San Felipe creeks as far as the riparian woodland at Scissors Crossing (J22; two adults with fledglings 4–5 July 2001, T. Gallion). At lower elevations in the Anza-Borrego Desert it is rare, probably irregular, and has never been confirmed breeding. There are few nest sites, though the birds might use the skirts of California fan palms (G. L. Rogers in Cannings and Angell 2001). From 1997 to 2001 our only record in this region was of one calling territorially at Yaqui Well (I24) 18 March 1998 (P. K. Nelson), and the only previous records in the breeding season are of five (one family?) in Hellhole Canyon (G23) 9 June 1973 (M. C. Jorgensen), one at Palm Spring (N27) 2 April 1978 (P. Unitt), and one at Lower Willows (D23) 30 April 1995 (L. Clark, C. Sankpill).

Nesting: The Western Screech-Owl nests in tree cavities, either the result of decay or excavated by the Northern Flicker—San Diego County's only woodpecker whose caliber equals the screech-owl's. The nests are difficult to locate; only two certain nests in natural sites came to light during the atlas study, both in coast live oaks. The owls also take readily to nest boxes designed to their needs. Almost all our confirmations of screech-owl breeding were sightings of fledglings. Dates of these ranged from 15 April (1999 at Banner, K21, P. K. Nelson) to 15 July (1999, Palomar Mountain State Park, D14, P. D. Jorgensen), translating to egg laying from mid February to about early May. The breeding season we observed from 1997 to 2001 was thus



somewhat earlier than that reported previously, on the basis of egg sets collected from 1897 to 1939, which extend from 11 March to 31 May (Sharp 1907, Unitt 1984).

Migration: The Western Screech-Owl is nonmigratory, but the young disperse short distances. Such dispersal may be responsible for about 12 records for the Anza-Borrego Desert extending from 12 August (1992, one along Pinyon Mountain Road, K24/K25, R. Thériault) to 12 February (1990, one in Cougar Canyon, D23, D. Minock, ABSDP database).

Winter: The differences between the distribution we recorded in winter and that in spring and summer are probably due to sampling error only. Because males call most actively in winter, as they advertise their territories in preparation for breeding, the screech-owl is noted in largest numbers at this season, up to 16 near De Luz (B6) 25 January 1998 and 11 in Corte Madera Valley (R21) 20 February 1999 (both W. E. Haas).

Conservation: No changes in the Western Screech-Owl's abundance in San Diego County have been reported; if any, they have been slight. Egg sets collected in 1916 and 1923, respectively, in Rose Canyon (P8) and Oceanside (H5), outside the range where we found the species 1997–2002, suggest retreat from urbanization. Like other nocturnal birds, screech-owls are especially susceptible to being struck by moving vehicles. Human population growth brings increased road traffic to the foothills where screech-owls are concentrated, but the owls still survive in good numbers in the canyon of the upper San Luis Rey River along Highway 76, where traffic is heavy and growing. Extended droughts disfavor the screech-owl, like most other birds; Hardy et al. (1999) reported a 70% decline in southwestern Arizona over three years of drought.

Taxonomy: Marshall (1967) reported Western Screech-Owls from San Diego County to be closest to the finely barred subspecies of northern Baja California, *M. k. cardonensis* (Huey, 1926a). But the barring on the underparts on all 12 skins of adults in the San Diego Natural History Museum is coarser than in *cardonensis*, matching instead *M. k. bendirei* (Brewster, 1882), which ranges throughout cismontane Alta California.