

### Western Kingbird *Tyrannus verticalis*

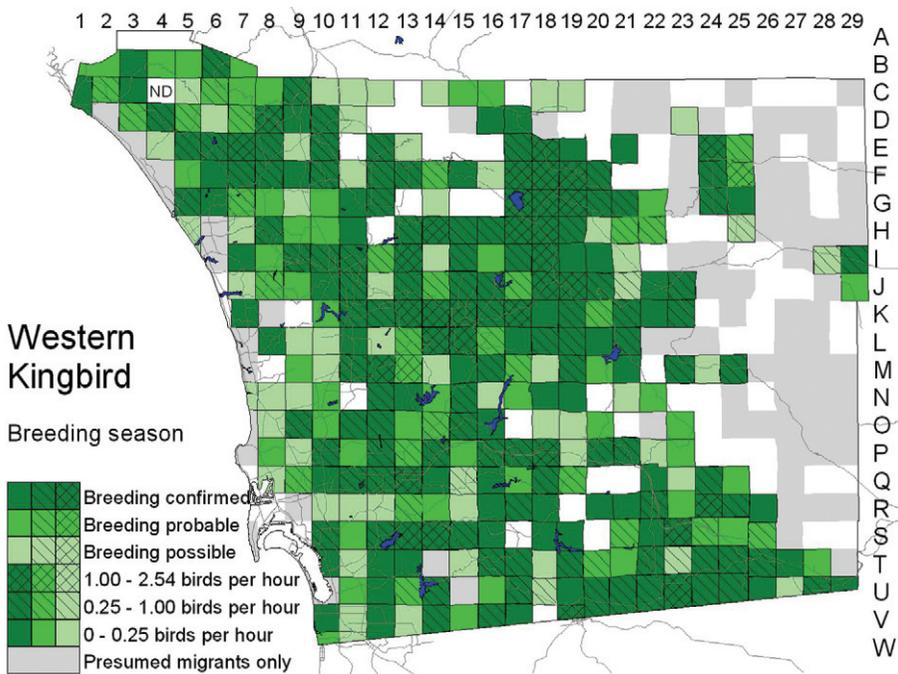
The Western Kingbird is a common migrant throughout San Diego County and a common summer visitor in the inland valleys. Like Cassin's it nests in tall trees next to grassland and clearings. The Western also takes advantage of man-made structures, especially utility poles. Despite its abundance in spring and summer, it is extremely rare in winter, less frequent even than the Tropical Kingbird at that season.

**Breeding distribution:** The Western Kingbird breeds widely on the coastal slope of San Diego County where tall trees or telephone poles for nest sites are near open grassland, pastures, or clearings for foraging. Thus its habitat is the same as the Cassin's Kingbird's, but the Western's distribution is centered at higher elevations. The Western is most common between 1500 and 4000 feet elevation, in broad valleys. Areas of concentration are in Warner Valley (up to 55 at Lake Henshaw, G17, 17 July 1998, C. G. Edwards), Santa Ysabel Valley (up to 25 north of Santa Ysabel, I18, 20 May 2000, S. E. Smith), Santa Maria Valley (up to 36 northeast of Ramona, K15, 18 June 1999, M. and B. McIntosh), and Campo Valley (U23, up to 30 on 20 April 1997, D. S. and A. W. Hester). The Western Kingbird shares the inland valleys at lower elevations with Cassin's but drops out along the coast. Within 5 miles of the coast we confirmed nesting only a few times, e.g. in the Wire Mountain area of Camp Pendleton (G5; pair nest building 20 June 1999, R. E. Fischer) and on the campus of the Educational Cultural Complex in

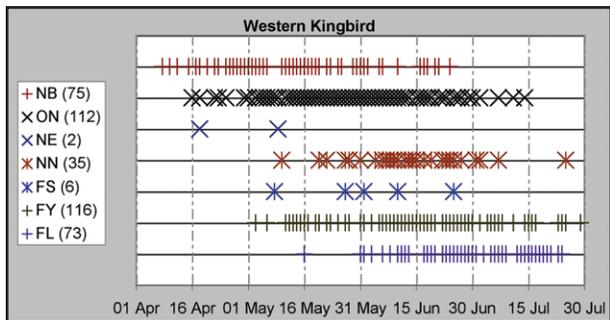


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

southeast San Diego (S10; active nest 11 May 1997, P. Unitt). At the higher elevations the Western Kingbird is fairly common around Lake Cuyamaca (M20) but absent from Palomar Mountain and scarce on Hot Springs (E21; pair on 18 June 1999, K. L. Weaver) and Laguna (O23; one from 6 to 14 June 1999, C. G. Edwards). On the east slope of the mountains, the Western Kingbird breeds down to Earthquake Valley (K23), but on the floor of the Anza-Borrego Desert it is uncommon as a breeding species (maximum eight in the northern Borrego Valley, E24, 8 June 2001, P. D. Jorgensen) and apparently confined to developed oases: the Borrego Valley, Ocotillo Wells (I28, I29, J29), Butterfield Ranch in Mason Valley (M23), and Vallecito Stage Station (M25).



**Nesting:** The Western Kingbird usually builds its nest in the upper levels of open-foiled trees. Atlas observers reported six nests in sycamores, five in eucalyptus, four in oaks (both coast live and Engelmann), and one each in a palm, poplar, pine, avocado, and desert ironwood. The nests are typically on the larger branches, so they have a solid support from below. The nest at Ocotillo Wells in an ironwood was atop an old House Sparrow nest. Another very common site is the bracket holding an electrical transformer to a utility pole; the five nests specifically described in such stations are certainly an underestimate.



Though the Western Kingbird begins arriving in early March, it does not begin nest building until the second week of April or laying until the third week of April. The schedule we observed is consistent with the 17 April–9 July spread of 106 California egg dates given by Bent (1942), though the fledglings at Vallecito 16 May 2001 (M. C. Jorgensen) may have hatched from eggs laid a day or two before 17 April.

**Migration:** After the hummingbirds and the swallows, the Western Kingbird is one of our earliest spring migrants, and one of the most punctual. From 1997 to 2001, the earliest spring report varied only from 11 to 14 March. The earliest date ever reported is 6 March (1982, Anza–Borrego Desert State Park, AB 36:893, 1982). The Western Kingbird migrates by day, often in flocks, and most of the population breeds north of San Diego County, so migrants are often conspicuous. A concentration of 150 atop Spooner Mesa (W10) 15 May 1999

(P. Unitt) was extraordinary. Numbers drop rapidly in mid May; late dates of birds away from breeding habitat are 27 May (1999, one in La Jolla, P7, L. Polinsky) and 3 June (2001, one in extensive treeless chaparral 3.1 miles east-northeast of Sunshine Summit, D18, P. Unitt). In fall, migrants are seen from 12 July (2000, one on Palomar Mountain, D15, K. L. Weaver) through late September or early October, exceptionally to 3 November (1963, one in the Tijuana River valley, G. McCaskie).

**Winter:** Only four well-supported records ever, of single individuals at Oceanside (H5) 28 January 1962 (G. McCaskie), Lake Hodges (K10) 5 December 1995 (photographed; M. B. Stowe, G. L. Rogers, NASFN 49:199, 1995), near San Elijo Lagoon (L7) 26 December 1999 (R. T. Patton), and in Greenwood Cemetery (S10) 16 December 2001–7 February 2002 (G. McCaskie et al.). Other winter reports, some in Christmas bird counts, more likely represent misidentified Cassin's or Tropical Kingbirds.

**Conservation:** The advent of eucalyptus trees and utility poles gave the Western Kingbird many new nest sites, but in San Diego County these factors did not lead clearly to population increase and range expansion, as tree planting has in the Great Plains (Gamble and Bergin 1996) or utility poles have in the Imperial Valley. The Western has always been considered common here. Its habitat was converted entirely to cattle grazing, but this evidently does not affect a bird that comes to the ground only to gather nest material.