

Western Wood-Pewee *Contopus sordidulus*

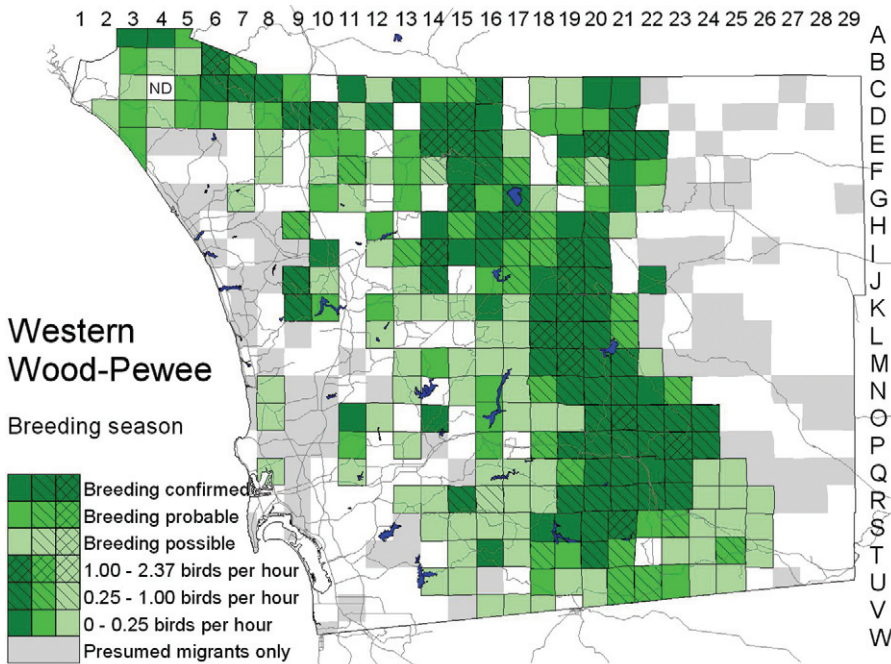
The Western Wood-Pewee’s monotonous drawled song, “rrreea-ear” or “dear me,” lulls the ear on hot summer days in San Diego County’s foothills and mountains. The species is common in coniferous and oak woodland, especially at openings and edges. As a breeding bird it is uncommon in riparian woodland of the inland valleys but as a migrant it occurs in trees throughout the county. Strictly a summer visitor to California, the Western Wood-Pewee is unknown here from November through March.

Breeding distribution: The Western Wood-Pewee has a breeding distribution typical of that of several species of oak woodland. It approaches the coast in Camp Pendleton, along San Onofre Creek (D2), then swings inland, keeping at least 8 to 10 miles from the coast through most of the county; along the Mexican border it breeds no farther west than Marron Valley (V16/17). Along the crest of the mountains the pewee’s distribution tracks the eastern edge of the oaks almost precisely. The one outlying site of nesting on the desert slope is along San Felipe Creek near Scissors Crossing (J22), where perhaps there is no more than one pair (fledgling on 18 June 2001, P. D. Jorgensen).



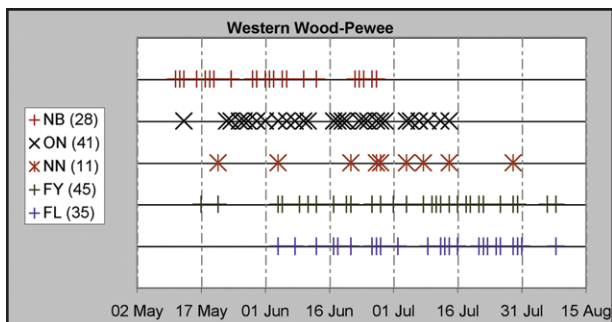
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Western Wood-Pewees are most numerous in open pine-oak woodland in the mountains: highest counts are 35 in the Edwards Ranch on the west flank of Volcan Mountain (I19) on 21 July 2001 (D. W. Au, S. E. Smith) and 30 around Johnson and Boulder creeks on the west flank of the Cuyamaca Mountains (M19) on 22 May 1999 (K. J. Winter, S. McKelvey). Below 3000 feet elevation, as woodland becomes more confined in canyons, the pewee population becomes sparser and patchier. At low elevations, the greatest concentration is in the De Luz area of northwestern San Diego, with up to 15, including 12 singing males, around Sandia Canyon (C7) 18 July 1998 (K. L. Weaver).



Nesting: Western Wood-Pewee nests are rather easy to find, placed on horizontal or slanting branches of large trees, usually at a fork, sometimes saddled atop a branch wide enough to support the nest completely. The degree of openness of the surrounding vegetation appears to be more important to the suitability of a nest site than the exact type of woodland or tree. The nests are rather shaded but readily open to long foraging flights and view of possible predators. Atlas observers reported nests in sycamore, coast live oak, black oak (in one case burned), willow, Jeffrey pine, and incense cedar.

The Western Wood-Pewee is one of San Diego County’s later



nesting species, with nesting activity seen commonly through the end of July. Several records, though, suggest the birds can lay as early as the first few days of May, earlier than the 19 May–7 July spread of 25 collected egg sets and the 10 May reported by Sharp (1907) at Escondido. For example, Karen Messer and Robert Turner noted a pewee carrying insects at Palomar Mountain State Park (E14) 17 May 1997, and Lori Hargrove noted one feeding fledglings near Shingle Spring (D21) 4 June 2001.

Migration: As a migrant the Western Wood-Pewee occurs throughout San Diego County, though it attempts to overfly treeless desert and heavily developed areas. Spring arrival of the Western Wood-Pewee is usually about 20 April, rarely as early as 10 April (1999, one along the Santa Margarita near the Riverside County line, C8, K. J. Burns). A bird banded by A. M. Craig at Point Loma (S7) 4 April 1969 (AFN 23:624, 1969) was exceptional. Even at the peak of spring migration in early to mid May migrants are less concentrated than the breeding population in prime habitat, with a maximum of 12 around Scissors Crossing (J22) 14 May 1998 (E. C. Hall). Spring migration continues commonly through the first week of June, occasionally as late as 13 June (1999, one at Oceanside, H5, J. Determan) and 17 June (2002, one at Point Loma, S7, J. C. Worley). Atlas observers noted two midsummer stragglers well outside the breeding range

along the coast, one at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7) 4 July 1999 (C. Sankpill), the other near Villa La Jolla Park (P8) 11 July 1998 (M. B. Mosher). Fall migration takes place largely in August and September, adults preceding juveniles. One at Upper Otay Lake (T13) on 27 July 2001 (T. W. Dorman) was exceptionally early. By mid October pewees are very rare, and the latest dates are 21 October (2003, Rancho Santa Fe, L8, SDNHM 50837), 22–24 October (1988, one at Point Loma, G. McCaskie, AB 43:169, 1989) and 30 October (1971, one in the Tijuana River valley, G. McCaskie).

Winter: Unrecorded, and hardly expected even as an accidental, given that the northern limit of the species' winter range is Costa Rica.

Conservation: Results of the Breeding Bird Survey suggest the Western Wood-Pewee is declining over a significant portion of its range, including California (Sauer et al. 2003). But no decrease is obvious in San Diego County, and most of the species' breeding habitat is not heavily disturbed. Even campgrounds and moderate cattle grazing seem unlikely to affect a bird whose stratum of activity is in the middle level of trees and descends to the ground only to pick up nest material. Loss of winter habitat—mature montane tropical forest (Bemis and Rising 1999)—may be a greater issue for the Western Wood-Pewee than changes within the breeding range.

Taxonomy: The birds nesting in San Diego County, as well as most migrants, are the comparatively pale *C. s. veliei* Coues, 1866. A darker subspecies, *C. s. saturatus* Bishop, 1900, breeds in the Pacific Northwest and migrates through San Diego County to some extent. A nonbreeding specimen from the San Diego River at Cedar Creek (M17) 20 April 1985 (SDNHM 43845) and a juvenile from Pine Valley Creek at Horsethief Canyon (R19) 2 October 1992 (SDNHM 48173) are at the dark extreme for the species and thus apparently *saturatus*.