

### Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

The Whimbrel can be seen along San Diego County's coastline year round but is by far most common in fall migration, July through September. The number remaining through the winter is on the order of 100 to 200. The Whimbrel prefers tidal mudflats but also uses salt marshes, sandy beaches, and rocky shorelines. More than 5 miles inland the species is rare and seen only during migration.

**Winter:** Wintering Whimbrels are generally uncommon in San Diego County, though widespread along the coast. Kjølmyr et al. (1991) estimated the number wintering as high as 10–100 only in the Tijuana River estuary (V10/W10); at other sites they estimated fewer than 10. On counts of south San Diego Bay in November 1988 and February 1989 Macdonald et al. (1990) found no more than four, whereas monthly averages of weekly counts of the salt works (U10/V10) 1993–94 were never more than 10 (Stadtlander and Konecny 1994). Nevertheless, larger concentrations are occasional: 50 along the Silver Strand

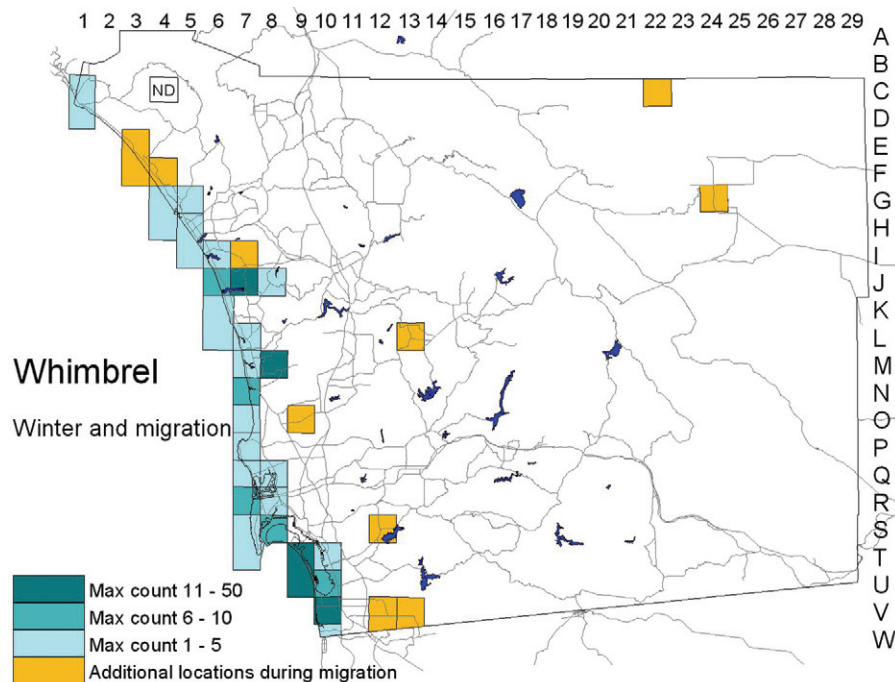


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

(T9) 30 January 2000 (Y. Ikegaya), 31 in the salt works 15 December 1993 (Stadtlander and Konecny 1994), and 30 in the Tijuana River estuary (V10) 20 December 1997 (W. Mittendorff). From 1953 to 2002 the San Diego Christmas bird count averaged 21, with a range from 3 to 85.

In the north county wintering Whimbrels are even less numerous. The Rancho Santa Fe and Oceanside Christmas bird counts both average seven to eight. Monthly surveys of San Elijo Lagoon (L7) 1973–83 yielded a November–January average of only 0.3 (King et al. 1987). With the restoration of tidal flow to Batiquitos Lagoon (J6/J7) the Whimbrel has become more frequent there with up to 20 on 9 February 1998 (B. C. Moore).

The Whimbrel's only regular winter site inland is the San Dieguito Valley (M8), with up to 20 on 22 December 2000 (P. Unitt). One flying over eastern Carlsbad (J8) 7 December 1999 (J. O. Zimmer) was exceptional.



**Migration:** On their journey south, Whimbrels arrive in San Diego County in the first week of July and build to a peak in late July and early August. Concentrations of over 50 are unusual, though the Whimbrel is most common as a fall migrant. King et al. (1987) reported a maximum at San Elijo Lagoon of 230 on 6 August 1978; Macdonald et al. (1990) found up to 151 around south San Diego Bay 27 August 1988. In spring, the main migration route passes east of San Diego County, through the Salton Sea, so not much of a peak is evident at that season.

Migrating Whimbrels are rarely seen inland. In fall, all records are still in the coastal lowland, e. g., three at Sweetwater Reservoir (S12) 27 July 2001 (P. Famolaro). In spring, there are records for the coastal lowland, inland as far as the southwest corner of Santa Maria Valley (L13; one on 14 April 2001, K. J. Winter), plus five for the Anza–Borrego Desert, undoubtedly of birds straying west of the main migration corridor through the Salton Sea: two at Middle Willows, Coyote Creek (C22), 29 April 1997 (P. D. Jorgensen), one at Borrego Springs (G24) 25 April 1998 (P. D. Ache), one at Culp Valley (G23/H23) 30 April 1983 (ABDSP database) and 7 May 1995 (M. L. Gabel), and one at Carrizo Marsh (O29) 13 April 1994 (P. D. and M. C. Jorgensen). In spring, inland records range in date from 29 March (2000, one at Sweetwater Reservoir, P. Famolaro) to 7 May and in number up to six on Otay Mesa (V13) 29 April 2000 (N. Perretta).

Small numbers of nonbreeding Whimbrels summer regularly along San Diego County's coast, with up to five at Batiquitos Lagoon 7 June 1998 (C. C. Gorman), eight around south San Diego Bay 24 June 1988 (Macdonald et al. 1990), 10 in the salt works in June 1994 (Stadlander and Konecny 1994), and 10 in the Tijuana River estuary 27 June 1998 (C. G. Edwards).

**Conservation:** The Whimbrel suffered considerably less than two of North America's other curlews, the Long-billed and Eskimo, during the era when the birds were hunted commercially. Over the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there has been little change in the Whimbrel's abundance in San Diego County, though habitat has been reduced, especially inland. The Whimbrel's winter range may have extended north to include southern California in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; winter records were almost unknown before about 1920 (Grinnell et al. 1918, Stephens 1919a, Willett 1933).

**Taxonomy:** All of North America's brown-rumped Whimbrels are best called *N. p. hudsonicus* Latham, 1790, the Hudsonian Curlew (Patten et al. 2003). Five vagrants of the partially white-rumped *N. p. variegatus* (Scopoli, 1786), breeding in east Asia, have been seen in the western conterminous United States, the southernmost at China Lake, Kern County, California (Heindel 1999). The Hudsonian Curlew was long considered a species distinct from the Whimbrel of the Old World and may be so again.