

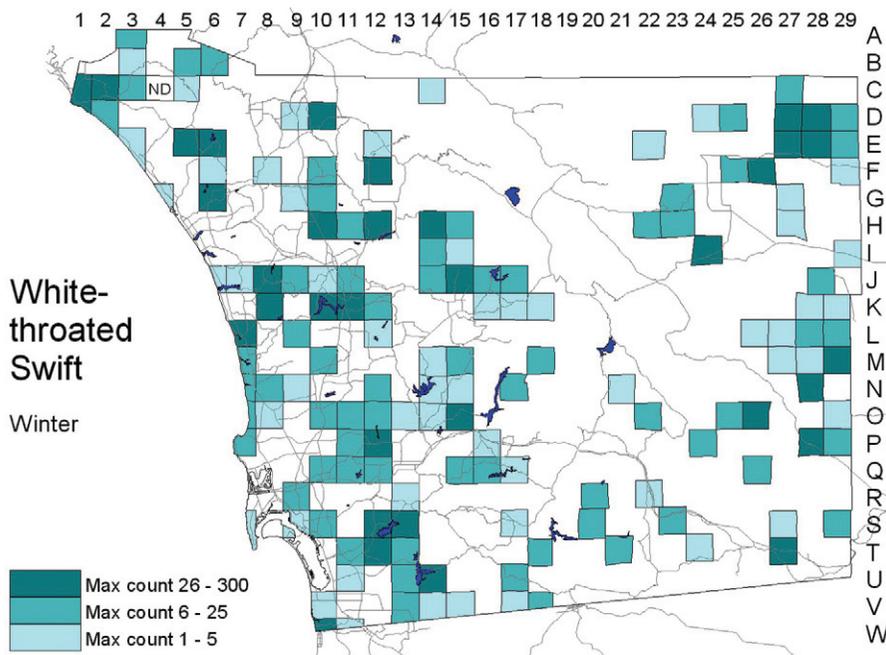
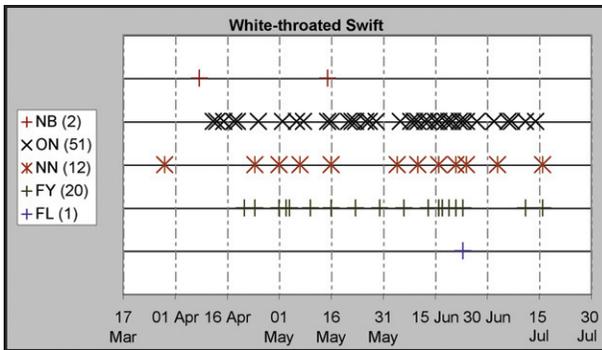
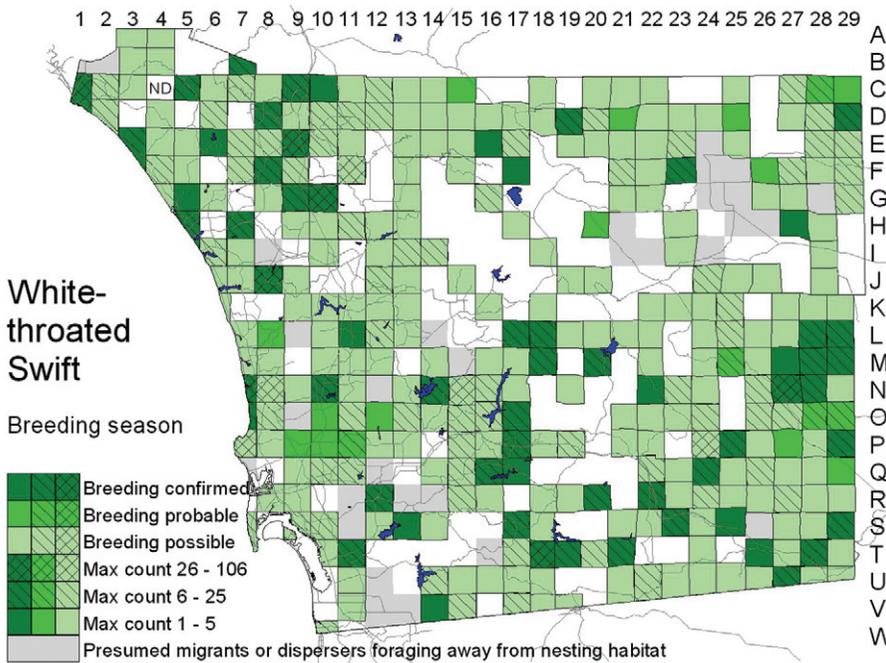
**White-throated Swift *Aeronautes saxatalis***

Cruising the skies by day for flying insects, the White-throated Swift touches ground only where it can cling to vertical surfaces. Cliffs, sea bluffs, and desert badlands offer the swift crevices for both roosting and nesting. In addition to these traditional habitats, the White-throated Swift now also takes advantage of crevices and holes in buildings and bridges. The White-throated is the only swift that breeds in San Diego County; it is locally common year round.

**Breeding distribution:** The White-throated Swift occurs widely through San Diego County during the breeding season, but actual nesting is constrained by the need for suitable sites. The distance the birds range from nest sites to forage is not known but probably is at least 10 miles



*Photo by Anthony Mercieca*



(Ryan and Collins 2000). In the Anza-Borrego Desert White-throated Swifts inhabit the badlands, where deep crevices have been eroded into steep banks. The Carrizo Badlands constitute the single largest block of atlas squares in which we confirmed White-throated Swift nesting, and counts here range up to 30 near Palm Spring (N27) 24–27 April 1998 (D. C. Seals). In San Diego County’s rugged mountains there are many cliffs and boulder outcrops offering nest sites. Undoubtedly we missed many of these sites because of difficult access, but the birds take advantage of them throughout the county, nearly to the summit of Cuyamaca Peak (M20; four on 14 July 2001, entering crevices in the west-facing cliffs just below the summit, J. R. Barth). Along the coast, sea cliffs, especially the bluffs between La Jolla and Los Peñasquitos Lagoon, provide another major habitat for the White-throated Swift. This was our most regular site for large numbers of swifts, up to 106 in Torrey Pines State Reserve (N7) 4 March 2000 (K. Estey).

**Nesting:** Hidden in crevices in cliffs, White-throated Swift nests are almost impossible for a person standing safely on the ground to see. Atlas observers had to rely on seeing the swifts entering crevices repeatedly and hearing the young calling from within them to identify nest sites. The White-throated Swift has also taken to nesting in man-made structures; the artificial sites we noted most frequently were the drain holes under box-

frame bridges, the same sites so favored by the Northern Rough-winged Swallow. Other nests are in crevices in tall buildings, such as expansion joints in the hospital in Camp Pendleton (E6; P. A. Ginsburg).

White-throated Swifts appear to begin nesting appreciably earlier in the Anza-Borrego Desert than on the coastal slope. Several reports of nests in April, and one of a nest with nestlings in Cañon sin Nombre (P29) 29 March 1999 (D. C. Seals), suggest the birds begin laying in this area in the first week of March. Desert nesting may extend into summer as well, with a nest with nestlings in Sandstone Canyon (M27) 21 June 2001 (R. Thériault) and occupied nests about 2200 feet

elevation in Borrego Palm Canyon (F23) 2–5 July 1999 (L. J. Hargrove). On the coastal slope our earliest nests were in the Interstate 805 bridge over the Sweetwater River (T11) 18 April 1999 (W. E. Haas), latest (with nestlings) in a bridge over the San Luis Rey River, Oceanside (G5), 16 July 2000 (R. E. Fischer).

**Winter:** The White-throated Swift is migratory over much of its range, but in San Diego County there is no clear variation in its abundance by season. It is seen at many of the same sites year round. Winter estimates during the atlas period range up to 300 at Sweetwater Reservoir 16 December 2000 (P. Famolaro). Weather conditions affect its visibility greatly: swifts are best seen on overcast days, when they must forage below the clouds. On warm clear days the birds may forage so high they are out of sight; when the weather is cold or stormy they remain in their roosts all day, revealing themselves only with occasional calls. They may also go torpid (Bartholomew et al. 1957).

The White-throated Swift is seen far less frequently in the mountains in winter than in summer, but we still noted the species three times in the Cuyamaca and

Laguna mountains above 4000 feet elevation, with up to 20 at 5100–5600 feet elevation along upper La Posta Creek (P24) 19 December 2001 (E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer). The swift appears to be regular through the winter at elevations up to 5800 feet in the Santa Rosa Mountains (C27), with up to 15 on 21 January 2000 (P. Unitt).

**Conservation:** No trends in the abundance of the White-throated Swift in San Diego County are clear. Variation in numbers seen on systematic counts due to variation in weather is enormous, overwhelming variation due to other sources. Man-made structures, especially freeway bridges, have given the species many new nesting sites. Some natural sites have been converted to rock quarries, but the swift has recolonized some abandoned quarries. Urbanization is likely bad for the swift's food supply, however, extensively paved areas generating fewer aerial insects than natural habitats.

**Taxonomy:** According to Behle (1973), all White-throated Swifts in the western United States and northern Mexico constitute one subspecies, the nominate *A. s. saxatalis* (Woodhouse, 1853).