

Wilson's Snipe *Gallinago delicata*

Unlike many members of the sandpiper family, snipes avoid the seashore, seeking fresh or brackish water with low vegetation and soft mud. Development of the coastal lowland has eliminated most of the seasonal wetlands ideal for snipes, and the species is on the decline in that area. Wilson's Snipe is basically a winter visitor to San Diego County, but it has probably nested less than 20 miles north of the county line in the Garner Valley of Riverside County and 50 miles south of the border at Ojos Negros (Huey 1928a). Thus the few summer sightings in southeastern San Diego County suggest the species could nest there irregularly.

Winter: Wilson's Snipe is widespread in San Diego County, but its habitat is naturally patchy in this arid region. Where the rivers have not been channelized, the floodplains of the coastal lowland offer some of the most extensive habitat. Even there the species is generally uncommon, though concentrations in this zone range up to 25 in San Dieguito Valley (M8) 27 December 1998 (P. Unitt). Low-lying places in San Diego County's largest grassland, Warner Valley, are also a center for



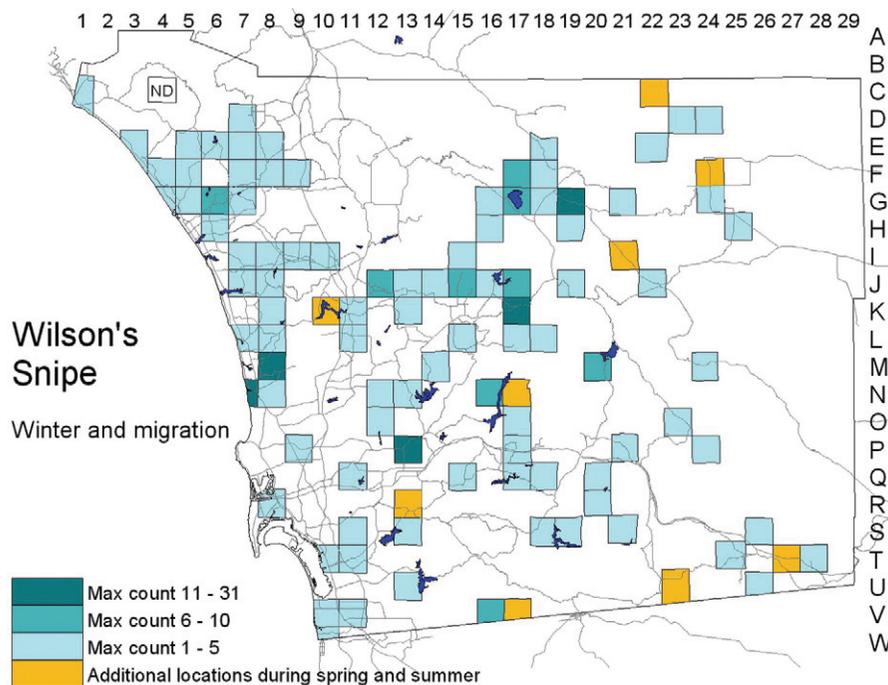
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

the snipe and had the largest number noted 1997–2002: 31 in the east arm of the valley along Buena Vista and San Ysidro creeks (G19) 10 December 2000 (R. and S. L. Breisch). Coastal wetlands attract fewer snipes than those inland, but Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7) has the species regularly, with up to 15 on 3 February 2002 and 20 on 3 March 2002 (S. E. Smith, D. K. Adams). If montane wetlands remain free of ice and snow the snipe may winter on them, with up to six at Lake Cuyamaca (M20) 7 January 2001 (R. B. Riggan) and four at Big Laguna Lake (O23) 18 January 1998 (P. Unitt).

In the Anza–Borrego Desert the snipe occurs at both artificial and natural oases. It winters regularly at Lower Willows along Coyote Creek (D23), where A. G. Morley has noted up to five per day (Massey 1998).

The numbers and distribution of the snipe in San Diego County may be expected to vary with the severity of the winter farther north and rainfall locally. Nevertheless, the number we recorded per hour varied little through the atlas period and was only 8% lower in the very dry winter of 2001–02 than in the wet 1997–98.

Migration: The snipe occurs in San Diego County primarily from early September to early April.



Dates range from 16 August (1964, one at San Diego) and 20 August (1983, one in the Tijuana River valley, G. McCaskie, AB 37:1027, 1983) to at least 6 May (2001, one at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon, D. R. Grine). One along Buena Vista Creek in Warner Valley (G18) 12 May 2001 (T. Stands, S. Yamagata) could have been summering.

Breeding distribution: Though the snipe is not known to breed in San Diego County, field work for this atlas yielded an unexpected number of sightings in summer. The only previous summer record was of one at Boulevard (T26) 6 July 1993 (P. Unitt, AB 47:1150, 1993). The most intriguing reports are from Tule Lake (T27), where J. K. Wilson noted the species repeatedly, with up to three on 21 June and 3 July 2000. On the latter date, two birds remained together at length, suggesting a pair. Sites of other summer records, all of single birds, are O'Neill Lake (E6; 2 July 1999, P. A. Ginsburg), Lake Henshaw (G17; 26 July 1998, R. A. Hamilton, FN 52:503, 1998), the upper end of El Capitan Reservoir (N17; 9 July 1999, D. C. Seals), Pine Valley (P21; 5 June 2001, M. B. Mulrooney),

and the south side of Corte Madera Lake (R20; 20 June 1998, P. Unitt, FN 52:503, 1998). Corte Madera and Tule lakes are the most likely nesting sites.

Conservation: Snipe numbers on the San Diego, Rancho Santa Fe, Oceanside, and Escondido Christmas counts all show a trend of decrease. The San Diego count averaged 46 from 1962 to 1981 but only 2.4 from 1997 to 2001. Development of floodplains and channelizing of streams eliminate snipe habitat. Though the upper ends of reservoirs are some of the county's main snipe sites, the filling of the reservoirs covered former habitat.

The recent upsurge in summer records probably reflects only attention paid during the atlas period to areas previously poorly known. Overgrazing, pumping of ground water, and a trend toward a drier climate are bad signs for wetland birds like the snipe.

Taxonomy: With its Eurasian and South American relatives ranked again as full species (Banks et al. 2002), Wilson's Snipe of North America is left as a monotypic species.