

BABBLERS AND WRENTIT — FAMILY TIMALIIDAE

Wrentit *Chamaea fasciata*

The Wrentit is one of the most abundant birds in San Diego County's most abundant habitat. It vies only with the Spotted Towhee for the title of most numerous bird in mature chaparral. The Wrentit also uses sage scrub and the understory of riparian and oak woodland—the fruit of the poison oak so prevalent in these woodlands is one of the Wrentit's staple winter foods. The Wrentit is famously sedentary, mated pairs remaining together for life in one small territory. Though they do not adapt to urban development, Wrentits remain in many undeveloped canyons within the city, clinging tenaciously to scraps of native scrub.

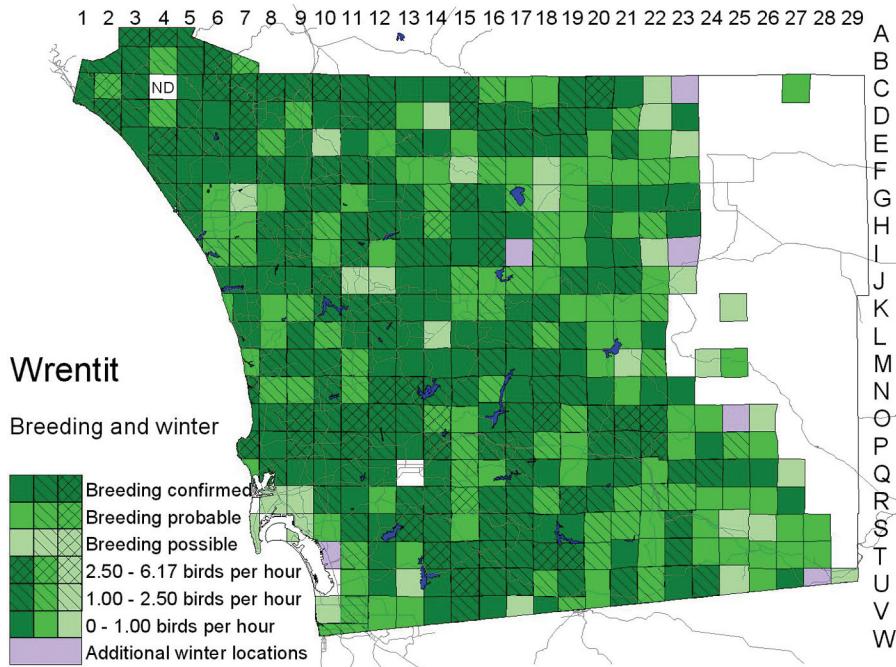
Breeding distribution: The Wrentit occurs throughout San Diego County's coastal slope and east down the desert slope as far as chaparral plants like the sugarbush and manzanita can grow. It is rather uniformly distributed in its habitats but may be somewhat more concentrated in northwestern San Diego County, where daily counts run as high as 75 along the Santa Margarita River north of Fallbrook (C8) 24 May 2001 (K. L. Weaver), 60 northwest of Morro Hill (E7) 26 July 1999 (P. A. Ginsburg), and 60



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

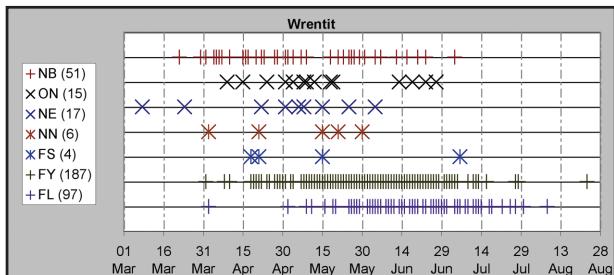
in the Santa Margarita Mountains near Cold Spring (A4) 24 June 2001 (J. R. Barth).

Points along the east edge of the species' range are Lower Willows (D23; up to nine on 20 June 1998, B. Peterson), Culp Valley (H23; up to five on 20 April 1998



and 16 June 1999, M. L. Gabel), Sentenac Ciénaga (J23; one on 16 July 2000, R. Thériault), the Tierra Blanca Mountains between Canebrake Wash and Indian Valley (O26; up to two on 7 April 2000, J. R. Barth), and the Imperial County line east of Jacumba (U29; one on 15 April 2001, P. Unitt). In the Anza-Borrego Desert, small numbers are isolated along Vallecito Creek, both near Vallecito Stage Station County Park (M25; two singing on 6 May 2001, one on 5 May 2002, J. R. Barth) and in the gorge between Mason and Vallecito valleys (one in the lower gorge, M24, 28 March 2001, P. K. Nelson; one pair resident there from 1985 to 1993, Massey and Evans 1994; specimen from the upper gorge, M23, 6 October 1984, SDNHM 43342). The Wrentit is rare in the pinyon-juniper zone of the Santa Rosa and Vallecito mountains with one breeding-season record in each range. A pair was at 4650 feet in upper Barton Canyon (C27) 17 June 2001 (R. Thériault), and a singing male was on the north-facing slope of Pinyon Mountain Valley (K25) 26 May 2000 (J. R. Barth).

Nesting: The Wrentit usually places its cup nest at a fork in the outer branches of a shrub, occasionally in a tree such as coast live oak. In and near Mission Trails Regional Park and the Otay-Sweetwater Unit of the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge, M. A. Patten monitored 76 Wrentit nests in sage scrub in 2001. The nests ranged in



height from 20 to 150 cm off the ground, averaging 64 cm, and 55% of the height of the supporting plant. Those plants encompassed 15 species, most often California sagebrush (29 nests). Some other plants were large shrubs like the laurel sumac, yellow bush penstemon, broom baccharis, redberry, and chamise that could protect or conceal the nest. But many were in smaller, more delicate shrubs like the flat-top buckwheat, white sage, and San Diego sunflower. Three nests were even placed in plants with almost no ability to conceal them, one each in bedstraw, cobwebby thistle, and California bee plant.

Like many birds of the chaparral, the Wrentit typically begins laying in the third or fourth week

of March, and this is what most atlas observers' records imply. M. A. Patten's egg dates in 2001 ranged from 29 March to 21 June. But the total spread of egg dates known from California is 1 March–2 July (Bent 1948), and a couple of reports from the Sweetwater River near Highway 94 (R13) imply laying around the first of March: a nest with large young 2 April 1997 (A. Mercieca) and a nest with eggs 8 March 1998, followed by fledglings 2 April (M. and D. Hastings). The large number of reports of fledglings being fed through July suggests that many Wrentits lay well into June, and young still being fed 23 August 2000 (Fallbrook Naval Weapons Station, D6, W. E. Haas) suggest that they lay rarely as late as early July.

Winter: The Wrentit does not spread in winter outside its breeding range. The four atlas squares along the desert edge where the species was recorded in winter but not in the breeding season are probably areas where it is resident in very low numbers. Wrentits remain through the winter even near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain (E20), where C. R. Mahrdt and K. L. Weaver noted them repeatedly, with a maximum of three on 16 February 2002. The only isolated locality where the species was encountered in winter was the north-facing slope of Pinyon Mountain Valley, with one at 4050 feet elevation 9 December 2001 (R. Thériault).

Conservation: The Wrentit is not an urban adapter, but in spite of its seemingly poor capability for dispersal, it is one of the scrubland birds least sensitive to habitat fragmentation. Our results imply that it takes nearly total elimination of sage scrub or chaparral from an atlas square to eradicate the Wrentit, and only five squares in metropolitan San Diego that presumably once had Wrentits have lost them. Studies addressing habitat fragmentation specifically (Bolger et al. 1997, Crooks et al. 2001) also identified the Wrentit as one of the less sensitive species. Unfortunately, current construction practices entail

recontouring topography completely. Pockets of native scrub in canyons, as were left in San Diego County's older residential neighborhoods, are now being eliminated.

Taxonomy: San Diego County Wrentits represent the pale grayish subspecies, the Pallid Wrentit, *C. f. henshawi* Ridgway, 1882. Independent genetic techniques suggest that the Wrentit, long placed in a monotypic family, then

with the babblers (Timaliidae), is related most closely to the Old World genus *Sylvia* (Barhoum and Burns 2002). The Wrentit's similarity to the Dartford (*S. undata*) and Marmora's (*S. sarda*) Warblers of the Mediterranean maquis, once presumed to be the result of convergent evolution in similar habitats on opposite sides of the world, now appears to be the result of close relationship after all.