

Yellow-breasted Chat *Icteria virens*

The song of the Yellow-breasted Chat, a mockingbirdlike series of repeated whistles, “chacks,” and “churrs,” is a characteristic sound of dense riparian woodland. Though often maddeningly difficult to see, the chat is a locally common summer visitor. Like many other riparian birds, it is a frequent host of the Brown-headed Cowbird. After a decline during the middle of the 20th century, the Yellow-breasted Chat has increased in numbers considerably since the mid 1980s, presumably in response to the widespread trapping of cowbirds.

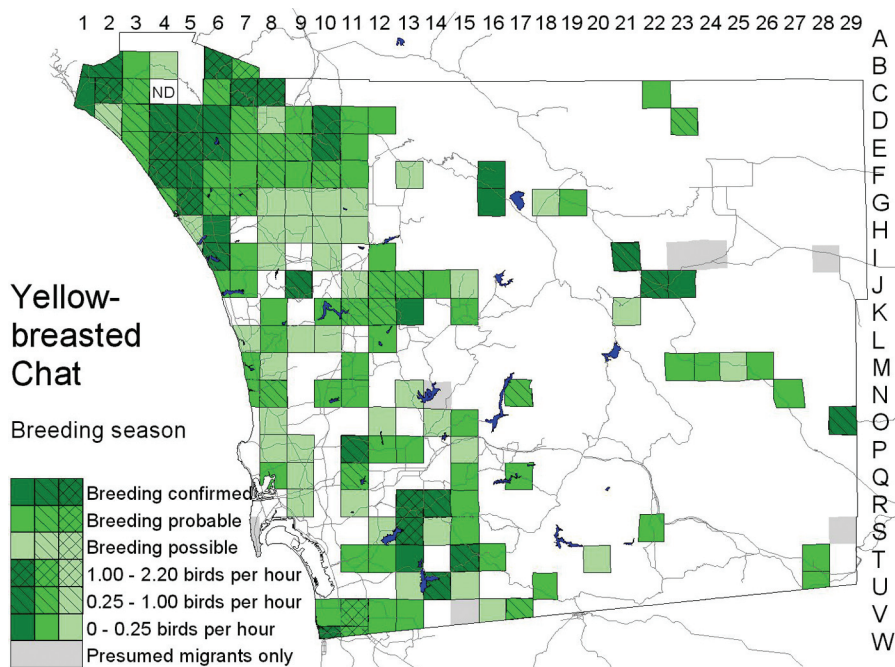
Breeding distribution: Yellow-breasted Chats occur widely in San Diego County’s coastal lowland wherever there is substantial riparian woodland. They are strongly concentrated, though, in the northwest, not only along the Santa Margarita and San Luis Rey rivers, but along smaller creeks too, like San Mateo, San Onofre, Las Pulgas, Aliso, and De Luz. Daily counts in this area go as high as 40 (36 singing males) along the Santa Margarita River north of Fallbrook (C8) 24 May 2001 (K. L. Weaver). Another large concentration is the San Benardo and San Pasqual valleys east of Lake Hodges. When the water level in Lake Hodges drops, the exposed basin is quickly colonized by shrubby willows offering

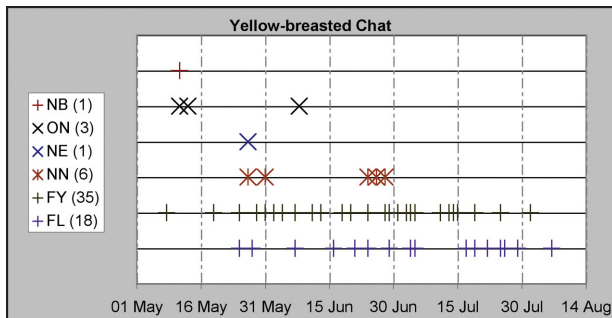


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

the Yellow-breasted Chat ideal habitat (K11; maximum count 50, including 45 singing males, 3 June 1997, E. C. Hall). Farther south concentrations are along lower Los Peñasquitos Canyon (N8; up to 21, including 15 singing males, 2 May 1999, P. A. Ginsburg), the San Diego River from Mission Gorge to Santee (Q11/P11–13), the Sweetwater River from Sweetwater Reservoir to Jamacha (S13/R13–14; up to 30 in R13 on 15 May 1998, D. and M. Hastings), Jamul and Dulzura creeks from Lower Otay Lake to Pio Pico Campground (U14/T15), the Tijuana River valley (V10–11/W10–11; up to 20, including 18 singing males, along the river east of Hollister St., W11, 27 June 1998, P. Unitt), and in Marron Valley (V16/V17). Away from these areas the chat is uncommon.

Above 1500 feet elevation on the coastal slope, chats are possibly irregular. Four sites in this area emerged during the atlas’ term: San Luis Rey River between Lake Henshaw and the La Jolla Indian Reservation (F16/G16; up to six near the San Luis Rey Day Use Area, G16, 24 June 2001, W. E. Haas), Buena Vista Creek near Warner’s Ranch (G18–19; up to three singing males east of the old ranch house, G19, 24 June 2000, E. C. Hall), Cottonwood Creek between Lake Morena and





Boulder Oaks (S22; two singing males 9 May 1999, R. and S. L. Breisch), and Hauser Canyon (T20; one on 15 May and 5 June 1997, J. M. Wells).

On the desert slope, the Yellow-breasted Chat is known or suspected to breed along Coyote, San Felipe, Vallecito, and Boundary/Carrizo creeks, as well as at Agua Caliente Springs (M26; three singing males 27 April 1998, D. C. Seals), in Canebrake Canyon (N27; two singing males 25 April 1998, M. U. Evans), and at Carrizo Marsh (O29; up to six on 6 May 1998, P. D. Jorgensen). Desert numbers are largest along the larger creeks, Coyote (up to 17 at Lower Willows, D23, 12 May 2001, B. L. Peterson) and San Felipe (up to 15, including 10 singing males, in San Felipe Valley, I21, 13 June 1999, J. O. Zimmer).

Nesting: Yellow-breasted Chats hide their nests in extensive thickets of dense vegetation, making them difficult to find. Almost all evidence of breeding that atlas observers reported was sightings of fledglings or adults carrying insects. These observations correspond closely with the range of dates of the 50 egg sets collected from 1889 to 1948, 4 May–6 July. The one exception is a record of an adult carrying food to young at the east end of Sweetwater Reservoir (S13) 8 May 1998 (P. Famolaro); this date implies eggs laid by 27 April.

Migration: Yellow-breasted Chats usually return to San Diego County in the second week of April. The schedule of their arrival varies somewhat from year to year; during the atlas' five-year term dates of first reports ranged from 26 March to 17 April. Arrival of chats in March,

as observed in 1997, had not been reported previously (one at the east of Sweetwater Reservoir 26 March 1997, P. Famolaro; three along the Sweetwater River near Highway 94, R13, 31 March 1997, D. and M. Hastings). Migrants are seen only rarely away from breeding habitat, most often at desert oases. Our 12 records of such migrants during the atlas' term ranged from 17 April (1999, one at Dos Cabezas Spring, S29, A. P. and T. E. Keenan) to 17 May (1999, one at Yaqui Well, I24, P. K. Nelson). Fall migration begins by early August, as attested by one at Cabrillo National Monument (S7) 3 August 2001 (J. L. Coatsworth). Most birds depart in mid September, with only rare stragglers seen later in the fall.

Winter: There are only two records for the Yellow-breasted Chat in San Diego County as late as December, of one at Otay (V11) 2 December 1973 (AB 28:694, 1974) and one in the Tijuana River valley (V10) 16 December 2000 (W. E. Haas). Possibly these were late fall migrants rather than wintering birds.

Conservation: Stephens (1919a) called the Yellow-breasted Chat "rather common" in San Diego County; Willett (1933) called it "common" through the lowlands of coastal southern California in general. By the 1970s, however, it was uncommon, with a count of six in a day being high (Unitt 1984). The chat evidently fell into the same trap as the Willow Flycatcher and Bell's Vireo, suffering simultaneously from the widespread destruction of riparian woodland and the invasion of the Brown-headed Cowbird. The chat is known as a common cowbird host over much of its range (Friedmann 1963), including southern California (e.g., Hanna 1928). The chat's recent rebound has taken place since cowbird trapping was initiated and appears concentrated where that trapping has been focused. Nevertheless, other factors play a role too. The rate of destruction of riparian woodland slowed after the Least Bell's Vireo was designated as endangered in 1986, and some habitat has regenerated, especially in the Tijuana River valley and at the heads of reservoirs.

Taxonomy: Only the western subspecies *I. v. auricollis* (Deppe, 1830) is yet known from California.