

Yellow-headed Blackbird
Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus

San Diego County lies at the southwestern margin of the Yellow-headed Blackbird's breeding range, so the species occurs here mainly as a rare migrant and winter visitor. Colonial, the Yellow-headed Blackbird has probably nested in the county irregularly, but the first colony described in any detail was discovered in 2000 at Tule Lake near Boulevard. Like that other colonial blackbird, the Tricolored, the Yellow-headed has suffered population decline in California, and it is recognized as a species of special concern by the California Department of Fish and Game.

Breeding distribution: Only one nesting colony was confirmed during the atlas' five-year term, within a private ranch near Boulevard at Tule Lake (T27). On 20 April 2000, F. L. Unmack and J. K. Wilson discovered 15 adults at a marsh within the lake, the males displaying and the females building nests. On 6 June at least three nests had nestlings, and at least one young had fledged. The colony was still active with more fledglings (20 individuals total) on 21 June. In 2001 the numbers were larger, with 50 adults and nests with nestlings on 6 June and 20 individuals, including fledglings, on 27 June (J. K. Wilson).

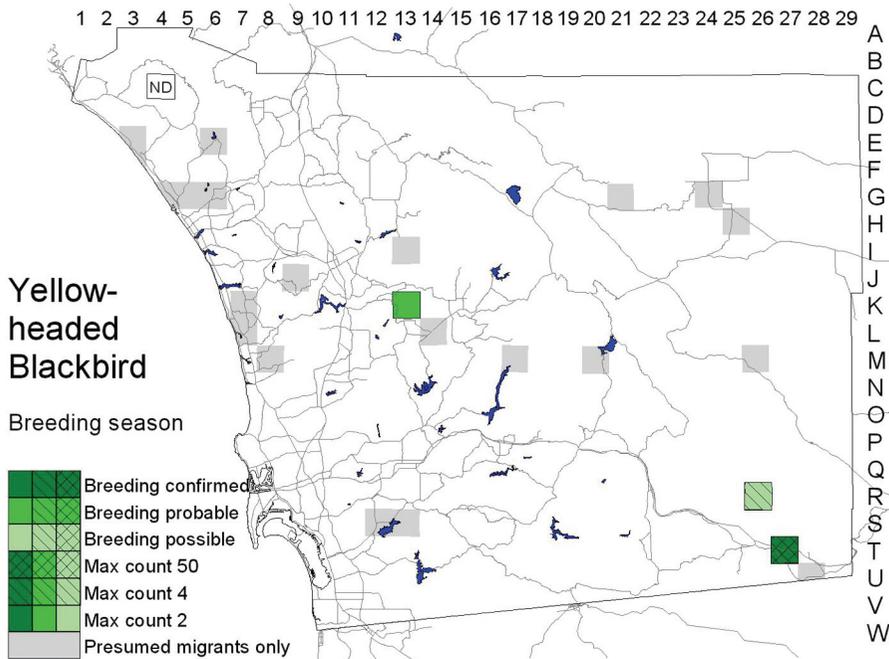
Other possible nestings were in nearby McCain Valley (R26), with four on 11 May 1999 (L. J. Hargrove), and near Rangeland Road northwest of Ramona (K13), with two and a suspected nest 26 May 2000 (P. M. von Hendy). The marsh in McCain Valley was dry in 2001, hosting a few Red-winged but no Yellow-headed or Tricolored Blackbirds. Sightings of the Yellow-headed elsewhere during the atlas period most likely represent migrants, though 20 southwest of Ramona (L14) 24 April 1999 (F. Sproul) suggest the possibility of another colony in the Santa Maria Valley.



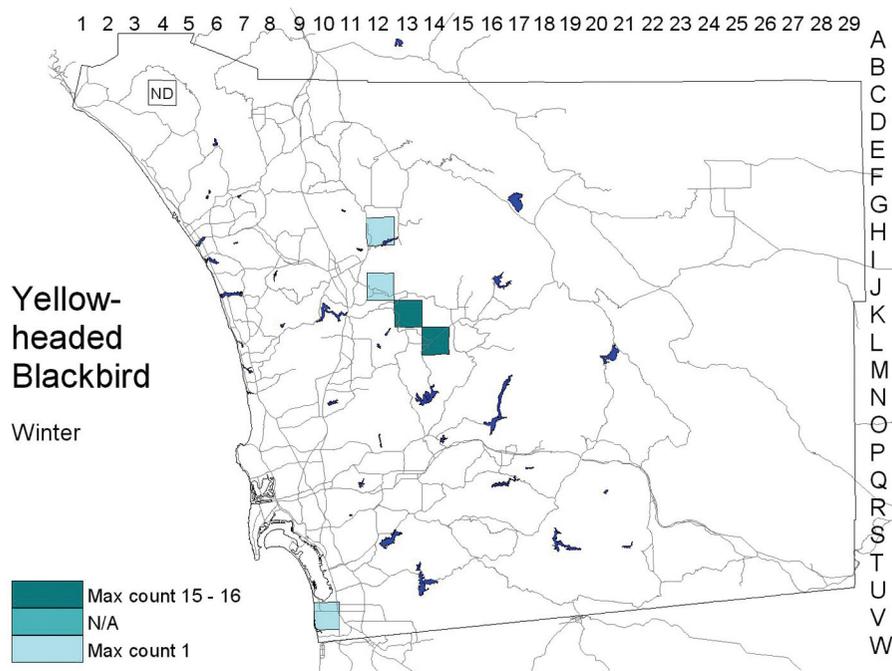
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Nesting: The Yellow-headed has the narrowest requirements of any of North America's blackbirds: it nests in deeply flooded freshwater marshes only (Twedt and Crawford 1995). Like those of the Red-winged and Tricolored, the nests of the Yellow-headed are usually wrapped around several vertical leaves of cattail or tule. Though colonial, and often polygynous, the Yellow-headed Blackbird seems to be more successful in small colonies than the Tricolored, and small colonies can get by with less foraging habitat surrounding the colony. The site at Tule Lake is typical.

Migration: As a spring migrant, the Yellow-headed Blackbird occurs most consistently in the Borrego Valley, sometimes in small flocks. Reported numbers range up to 35 at the Borrego sewage ponds (H25) 3 May 1997 (H. L. Young) and 20 at Borrego Springs (G24) 30 April 1997 and 19 April 1999 (P. D. Ache). Also of note in the desert were 13 at Agua Caliente County Park (M26) 4 May 2000 (D. C. Seals). Along the coastal slope numbers are much smaller, with a maximum of seven at Sweetwater Reservoir (S12) 4 May 1998 (P. Famolaro).



Spring migration of the Yellow-headed Blackbird takes place largely in April and early May. During the atlas period, spring records ranged from 1 April (2001, one at Borrego Springs, P. D. Ache) to 13 May (1998, one in the San Dieguito Valley, M8, J. Lesley) and 14 May (1998, one at Borrego Springs, M. C. Jorgensen). There are a few later records of nonbreeding summering individuals: one at Lake Cuyamaca (M20) 28 May 1998 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan); one at San Elijo Lagoon (L7) 12 July 1998 (B. C. Moore); one at Discovery Lake (J9) 17 July 1998 (J. O. Zimmer). Yellow-headed Blackbirds seen by early August



(one at O'Neill Lake, E6, 6 August 1997, P. A. Ginsburg) are probably fall migrants; Phillips et al. (1964) reported such migrants arriving in southern Arizona in July. Migrants are occasionally seen in flocks in the Borrego Valley in fall as well as spring, with up to 25 at Ram's Hill (H25) 12 October 1998 (P. D. Jorgensen).

Winter: The Yellow-headed Blackbird has become rare as a winter visitor to San Diego County. Atlas observers recorded the species only six times at this season 1997–2002. Three of these records were from the Santa Maria Valley: 16 along Rangeland Road (K13) 20 February 1999 and five there 2 January 1999 (P. M. von Hendy); 15 southwest of Ramona (L14) 11 December 1998 (F. Sproul). Three were from scattered other locations: one along Woods Valley Road (H12) 2 January 1999 (C. Bingham), one in San Pasqual Valley (J12) 14 December 1998 (P. A. Ginsburg), and one in the Tijuana River valley (V10) 15 December 2001 (L. and M. Polinsky). Yellow-headed Blackbirds have deserted their former area of winter concentration in the lower San Luis Rey River valley.

Conservation: The discovery of the colony at Tule

Lake in 2000 notwithstanding, the trend of the Yellow-headed Blackbird's numbers in recent years has been sharply downward. It is likely that the species bred at least irregularly in the past. Refuse excavated from the nineteenth-century stage station at Carrizo Marsh (O29) contained numerous bones of both male and female Yellow-headed Blackbirds (S. Arter, P. Unitt). Albert M. Ingersoll (in Willett 1912) believed the Yellow-headed Blackbird "probably breeds at Warner's Ranch" (G19). Stephens (1919a), while providing no details and never collecting a specimen, said that it bred "in small colonies in tule marshes." Sams and Stott (1959) wrote "a few records of breeding locally (Murray Res.)." The

Yellow-headed Blackbird summered at the Dairy Mart pond in the Tijuana River valley (V11) in 1979 and 1981 (Unitt 1984).

The species has become much scarcer since the late 1970s. In the lower San Luis Rey River valley (at Guajome and Whelan lakes and nearby dairies, G6/G7), the flocks of the 1960s and 1970s (Unitt 1984) dwindled to single digits in the early 1980s. Since 1984, the Oceanside Christmas bird count has recorded only a single individual. On the San Diego count the Yellow-headed Blackbird was found on 7 of 11 counts in the 1960s, with a maximum of 21 in 1963, but its frequency declined thereafter, with only a single individual noted since 1990.

Local factors, especially the urbanization of farm and pasture land, are undoubtedly contributing to the Yellow-headed Blackbird's decline in San Diego County. But factors operating on a broader scale, closer to the species' population centers, are probably more important. Threats identified by A. Jaramillo (unpubl. data) are loss of nesting habitat to drainage of marshes and pesticide contamination; the species feeds predominantly in agricultural areas.