

House Finch *Carpodacus mexicanus*

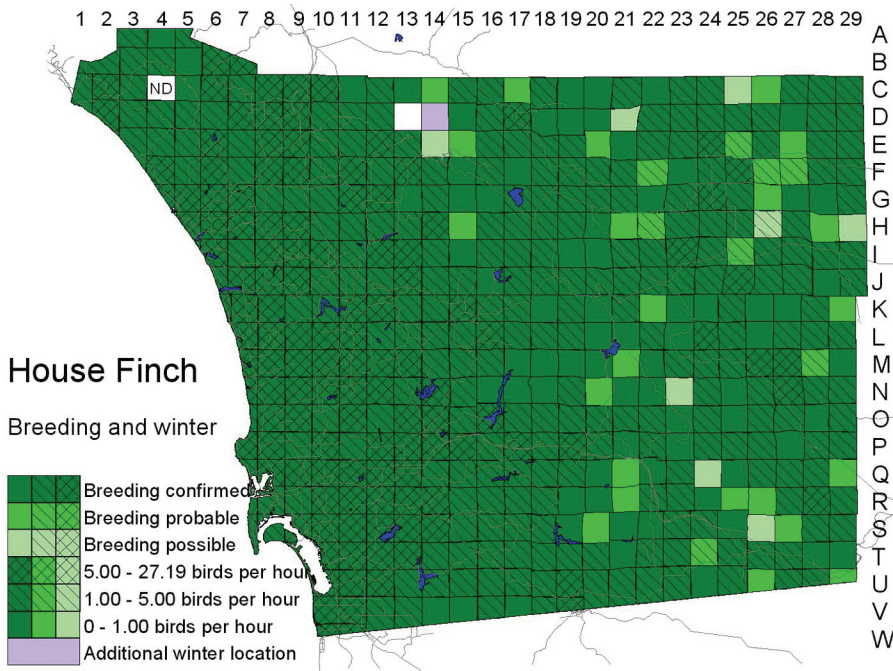
The House Finch is the most abundant bird in San Diego County, and the field work for this atlas only supported this statement further. A year-round resident, the House Finch occupies all terrestrial habitats, from the coastal strand to montane coniferous woodland and sparse desert scrub. Most of man's modifications of the environment favor the House Finch: buildings and bridges offer nest sites, and disturbed weedy areas offer foraging habitat. The House Finch is a leading patron of bird feeders—of both seeds and sugar water.

Breeding distribution: The House Finch is San Diego County's most widespread breeding bird. It is most



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

abundant in the coastal lowland (up to 335 in lower Los Peñasquitos Canyon, N8, 2 July 2000, D. R. Grine) and around oases and developed areas in the Anza-Borrego



Desert (up to 300 around Carrizo Palms and Indian Hill, R28, 6 May 1998, J. O. Zimmer). But it occurs throughout the county, being uncommon only in montane coniferous forest and in sparsely vegetated desert miles from water. During the breeding season, the House Finch was missed from only one well-covered atlas square, D14 on Palomar Mountain.

Nesting: With close to 1500 records, the House Finch was the bird we confirmed nesting most frequently. Many confirmations are of more than one nest; the House Finch sometimes nests colonially where good nest sites are scarce, as at desert oases with California fan palms. The House Finch has been said to nest “anywhere” (Adams 1899), but scanning atlas participants’ descriptions of nest sites reveals quickly that the birds prefer placing the nest on as solid a surface as possible, accounting for the abundance of nests on buildings. A covered situation is also desirable, leading the birds to nest in drain holes, under roof tiles, inside the hollow arms of power poles, behind slabs of buckled cottonwood bark, and in old nests of Black Phoebes, Cliff Swallows, and Hooded Orioles. If the birds nest in trees, the trees are usually ones that offer dense screening foliage, especially cultivated trees like orange and Italian cypress. In treeless chaparral, the

inflorescences of the chaparral yucca appear to be the preferred nest site. With 26 of 145 records, however, the most frequently described nest sites were cholla and prickly pear cacti, from the Anza-Borrego Desert to the cactus garden in Balboa Park. House Finches nest colonially in stands of the teddy-bear or jumping cholla. They evidently recognize the ability of cactus spines to deter predators.

House Finches may begin laying in San Diego County as early as the end of February, as attested by observations of nest building as early as 19 February, occupied nests on 27 February, nests with nestlings on 15 March, and fledglings on 21 March. They continue into July, with young still in the nest as late as 29

July. These dates extend the season known from 33 egg sets collected in San Diego County, 30 March–29 June, but agree with the 28 February–7 August spread of egg dates from California as a whole (R. S. Woods in Austin 1968).

Migration: After breeding, House Finches gather into large flocks and move nomadically, searching for good foraging. But they do not engage in regular migration, and their distribution’s uniformity masks seasonal shifts, if any.

Winter: The House Finch’s distribution in San Diego County in winter differs little from that in the breeding season, being concentrated at low elevations, sparser in the mountains and in regions of extensive unbroken chaparral. Flocks may be larger in winter than in the breeding season (up to 690 in and near June Wash, M27, 10 January 1998, R. Thériault). Numbers in the Anza-Borrego Desert varied positively with rainfall, increasing in 1998, decreasing thereafter. But the magnitude of the fluctuation was less than with other seed-eating birds. The total in 2001–02 was still 43% of that in 1998–99.

Conservation: The House Finch has been abundant in San Diego County since the earliest naturalists reported on the county’s birds. There is no evidence for significant recent change in the species’ numbers. Nevertheless, buildings, disturbed openings, irrigation, and bird feeders are all continuing changes to the environment that favor House Finches in man-modified habitats more than in natural ones.

Taxonomy: *Carpodacus m. frontalis*, widespread on the mainland of western North America, is the only subspecies of the House Finch in San Diego County.

