

TITMICE AND CHICKADEES — FAMILY PARIDAE

Mountain Chickadee *Poecile gambeli*

The Mountain Chickadee is one of the most abundant birds—perhaps the most abundant bird—in the conifers of San Diego County's mountains. The chickadee remains in the mountains in large numbers year round yet disperses regularly to low elevations as well, in numbers varying from year to year. Such visitors are most numerous in planted conifers in northwestern San Diego County, and a few observations in May and June suggest the Mountain Chickadee could be on the verge of colonizing this area as a breeding species.

Breeding distribution: The Mountain Chickadee occurs in all of San Diego County's main mountain ranges. The largest numbers live in mixed conifer/oak forests, whether these be dominated by Jeffrey pine or big-cone Douglas fir: up to 130 on the east side of Hot Springs Mountain (E21) 24 July 1999 (K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt), 100 on Volcan Mountain (I20) 28 June 2000 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan), and 120 on Middle Peak, Cuyamaca Mountains

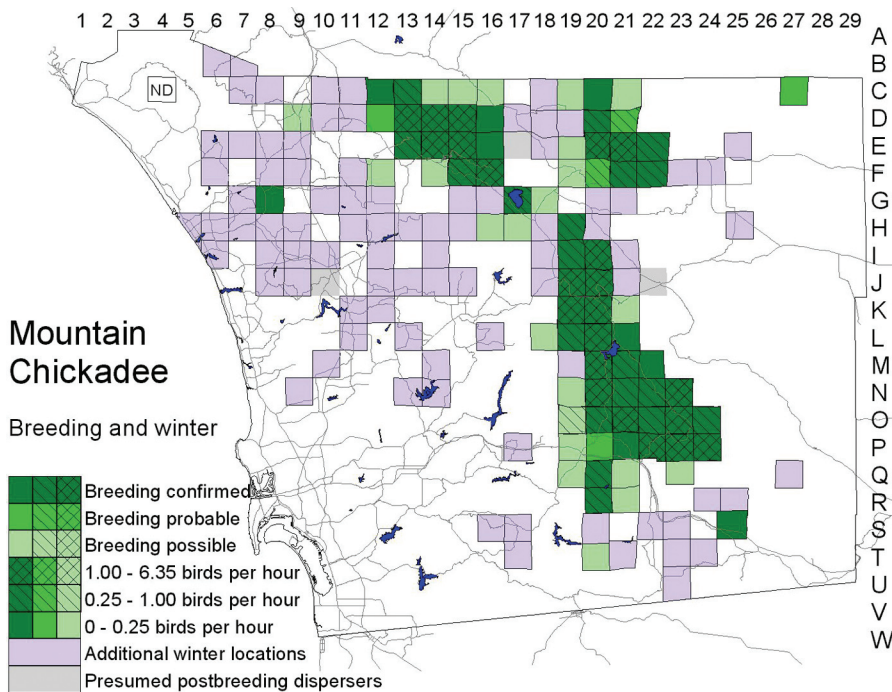


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

(M20) 11 June and 2 July 2000 (R. E. Webster). Much smaller numbers extend into oak woodland with few or no conifers in a halo just one atlas square wide surrounding the conifer-dominated core. Small numbers of chickadees range also through the oak woodland of the Mesa Grande area (up to seven along Highway 76 near Lake

Henshaw, G17, 17 July 1998, C. G. Edwards). In San Diego County, the breeding range of the Mountain Chickadee, and thus of the subspecies *P. g. baileyae*, extends south to Corte Madera Mountain (R20) except for a few birds isolated at Live Oak Springs (S25; pair feeding nestlings in a birdhouse 9 June 2001, R. and S. L. Breisch). A single singing male along Cottonwood Creek in Hauser Canyon (T20) 26 April 1997 (J. M. Wells, J. Turnbull) was not seen subsequently.

In the pinyons of the Santa Rosa Mountains, the Mountain Chickadee barely extends into San Diego County with one pair just within the county line at 5800 feet elevation 0.5 mile south of Rabbit Peak (C27) 2 May 2000 (P. Unitt).



Over most of San Diego County the Mountain Chickadee breeds only above 3500 feet elevation, but around Palomar Mountain it descends to about 2700 feet, and even below 2000 feet in deep canyons such as Agua Tibia (D12; pair 17 July 2001, K. L. Weaver). There are also a few records, including one breeding confirmation, at low elevations in northwestern San Diego County. One bird was about 4 miles east-southeast of Fallbrook (D9) 7 June 2000 (E. C. Hall), one was 1.5 miles southwest of the Pauma Valley post office (F12) 23 June 2001 (J. Simmons), one was at Felicita Park, Escondido (J10), 22 May 2000 (D. Parker), and one was 2.75 miles north of the Vista post office (G8) 31 May 2001 (E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer). The last was seen carrying insects, the first evidence for the Mountain Chickadee breeding at low elevations in San Diego County. In spring 2002, a pair was exploring tree cavities at O'Neill Lake (E6), Camp Pendleton, elevation 105 feet, and on 12 May 2003 a pair was feeding nestlings there in a cavity in a Peruvian pepper tree (P. A. Ginsburg). Summer 2002 also yielded unspecific reports of nesting in eastern Escondido and Rancho Bernardo (L11; D. W. Aguillard).

Nesting: The Mountain Chickadee is a secondary cavity nester, occupying old woodpecker holes or natural hollows in trees. It patronizes birdhouses readily. Our observations 1997–2001 suggest that in San Diego County Mountain Chickadees start laying regularly in late April, occasionally by 15 April (adults gathering insects along Nate Harrison Grade, E13, 29 April 2000, C. Sankpill). Thus the Mountain Chickadee begins breeding earlier in San Diego County than reported elsewhere in the species' range (spread of California egg dates 4 May–11 July, Bent 1946). Because of the dearth of historical data from San Diego County (only three collected egg sets), it is unclear whether early nesting of the Mountain Chickadee in San Diego County is a recent change or simply a reflection of the county's position near the southern tip of the species' range.

Migration: Records of the Mountain Chickadee outside the breeding range extend from 16 August (1999, one 1.2 miles north-northeast of Morro Hill, E7, P. A. Ginsburg) to 5 April (1997, one at Wilderness Gardens, D11, V. Dineen). Because of the few breeding-season records for northwestern San Diego County, extreme dates from this area may overestimate the species' dispersal, but wanderers in the opposite direction are known as early as 2 September 1992 in Culp Valley (H22; M. L. Gabel

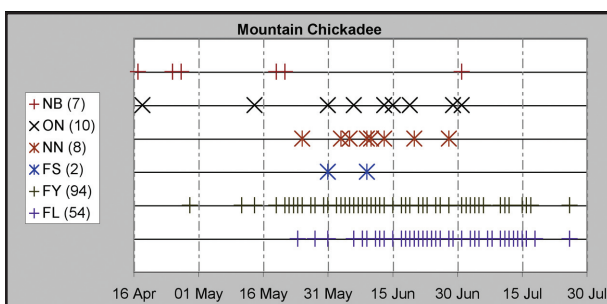
and 8 September 2000 near Scissors Crossing (J22; three individuals, P. D. Jorgensen).

Winter: The Mountain Chickadee remains common through the winter in San Diego County's mountains, even at the highest elevations (82 around the summit of Hot Springs Mountain, E20, 16 February 2002, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt). Nevertheless, it can be appreciably more numerous in the Mesa Grande area in winter than in the breeding season (H17; 18 on 27 December 1999, K. L. Weaver), and there is a significant movement each winter to low elevations in northwestern San Diego County. Generally the species is uncommon in the lowlands, but numbers 1997–2002 were as high as eight at Wilderness Gardens (D11) 20 December 1998 (V. Dineen), nine in Carlsbad 0.4 mile south of Carrillo Ranch Park (J8) 5 December 1998 (J. O. Zimmer), and 10 around Paradise Mountain (H13) 29 December 2001 (W. Pray). The greatest recorded incursion was in 1987–88. The Mountain Chickadee was recorded on 21 of 26 Oceanside Christmas bird counts 1976–2001, maximum 50 on 26 December 1987. It was recorded on 16 of 17 Escondido counts 1986–2001, maximum 79 on 2 January 1988. South of Escondido wintering Mountain Chickadees become rare; in the southwestern quadrant of the county they were noted during the atlas period no nearer the coast than Lee Valley (S16; two on 7 December 1998, P. Unitt). Rarely have they reached Point Loma (S7; male collected 25 September 1965, SDNHM 35520; six seen 7 September 1987, J. L. Dunn, AB 42:137, 1988). The species was recorded on four of 50 San Diego Christmas bird counts 1953–2002, maximum two on 19 December 1987.

In the Anza–Borrego Desert the Mountain Chickadee is a rare winter visitor, recorded mainly in planted trees in the Borrego Valley. The highest number reported is five in Borrego Palm Canyon (F23) 25 January 2001 (J. D. Barr). The only sighting away from the Borrego Valley is of two in Carrizo Canyon (Q27) 18 January 1998 (D. Julian). In the Santa Rosa Mountains the Mountain Chickadee has been seen in winter south to Villager Peak (C27; two on 10 January 2002, P. Unitt). Small numbers also disperse directly south of the breeding range, reaching practically to the Mexican border at Campo (U23; 11 on 14 January 2001; D. S. and A. W. Hester)—not surprising considering that four specimens of subspecies *baileyae*, breeding only north of the border, have been collected in northern Baja California (Panza and Parkes 1992).

Conservation: The Mountain Chickadee appears to be doing well in San Diego County. The recent summer records at low elevations may foreshadow a spread of the breeding range. Such a change may be a response to the use of conifers in landscaping or it may reflect more general—and more obscure—environmental changes. The Mountain Chickadee may follow in the steps of the Purple Finch, another mountain bird whose colonization of the lowland northwestern San Diego County is more advanced.

Taxonomy: All San Diego County specimens of the Mountain Chickadee, including the one from Point Loma



(examined by Panza and Parkes 1992), are *P. g. baileyae* (Grinnell, 1908). Those from the Laguna Mountains, however, are slightly darker on the back and thus intermediate

toward *P. g. atratus* (Grinnell and Swarth, 1926), the dark subspecies breeding in the sierras Juárez and San Pedro Mártir of northern Baja California (Patten et al. 2003).