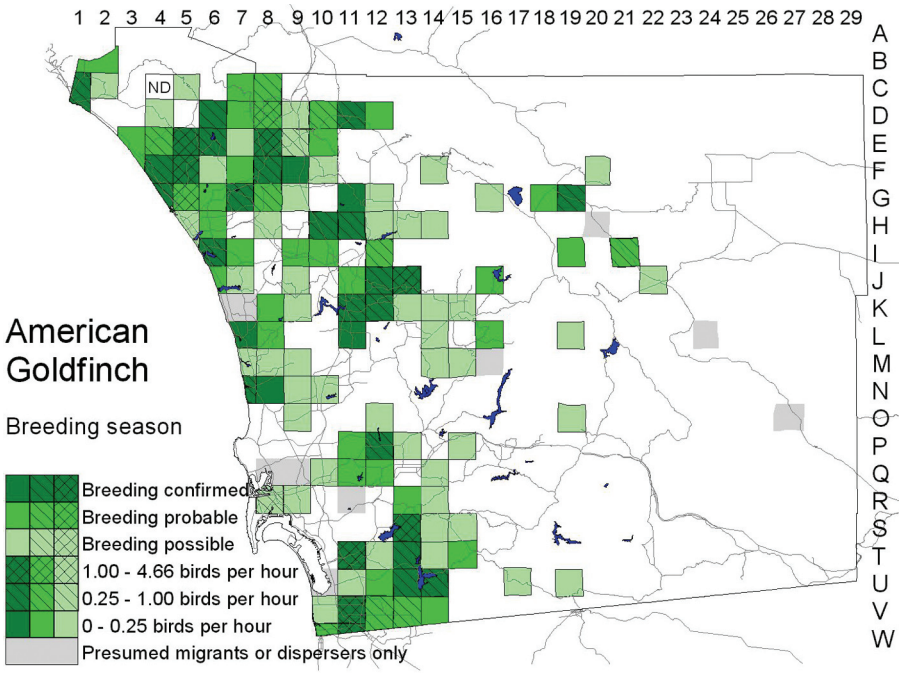
American Goldfinch *Carduelis tristis*

Photo by Anthony Mercieca

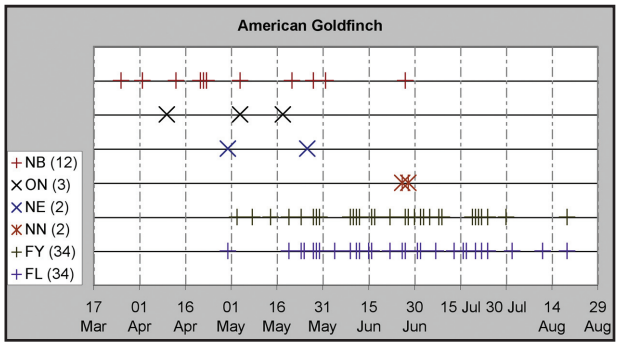
The American is the most widespread of the three goldfinches in North America but the most restricted in San Diego County, which is virtually at the southern tip of the bird's range. As implied by the names of the California subspecies, the Willow Goldfinch, *C. t. salicamans*, the American is a riparian species in this region. It is a common resident in northwestern San Diego County but common in only a few places elsewhere. During the nonbreeding season flocks readily depart riparian woodland to forage on seeds of plants like sunflowers and the great marsh evening primrose.

Breeding distribution: As a breeding bird, the American Goldfinch is closely tied in San Diego County to riparian woodland. By far the largest numbers are found along the Santa Margarita River in Camp Pendleton, where daily counts in a single atlas square ran as high as 120 near the confluence of De Luz Creek (D6) 20 July 1999 (D. C. Seals) and 100 between Rifle Range Road and Ysidora Basin (F5) 16 May, 13 June, and 11 July 1998 (R. E. Fischer). The species is common elsewhere in the lowlands of northwestern San Diego County (24 along the Santa Margarita River north of Fallbrook, C8, 16 July 1999, W. Pray; 50 along the San Luis Rey River near Gird Road, E8, 26 April 1999, P. A. Ginsburg) and found along small creeks as well as the Santa Margarita and San Luis Rey rivers. Farther south the American Goldfinch becomes more and more localized to the major riparian corridors but is still common in a few places, especially along the Sweetwater and Tijuana rivers (up to 50 along the Tijuana River east of Hollister Street, W11, 27 June 1998, P. Unitt). Above 1500 feet elevation the American Goldfinch is sparse and possibly irregular at any particular site. During the atlas period, the only place in this zone where the species was found repeatedly was along Buena Vista Creek in Warner Valley (G18/G19; up to 20 near Warner's Ranch, G19, 17 June 2000, J. D. Barr). The species is absent from southern San Diego County east of Descanso and Potrero. On the desert slope the American Goldfinch occurs in San Felipe Valley but not consistently. Near Paroli Spring (I21) there were 10, including multiple singing males and pairs, 26 April 1999, but on 13 June 1999 there was only a single bird (J. O. Zimmer). Farther downstream, near Scissors Crossing (J22), there were two on 14 May 1998 (E. C. Hall), but intensive coverage of this area May–July 2002 did not reveal any.

Nesting: Unsurprisingly for a species so closely linked to riparian woodland, the American Goldfinch nests primarily in willow trees. Of 18 collected egg sets whose site was described, 15 were in willows. Other known sites in San Diego County are cottonwood, cypress, orange trees, and goldenrod. Thus the American Goldfinch may nest high or low. In the eastern United States, the American Goldfinch is famed for nesting late in the summer, but in southern California its nesting season is typical of that of other riparian woodland birds. Dates of 33 egg sets collected 1889–1940 range from 21 April to 6 July, and the nesting activity we observed during the atlas period was largely consistent with this. The exception was at the upper end of Sweetwater Reservoir (S13) in 1997, when P. Famolaro noted nest building as early as 26 March, an occupied nest as early as 10 April, and fledglings as early as 30 April.



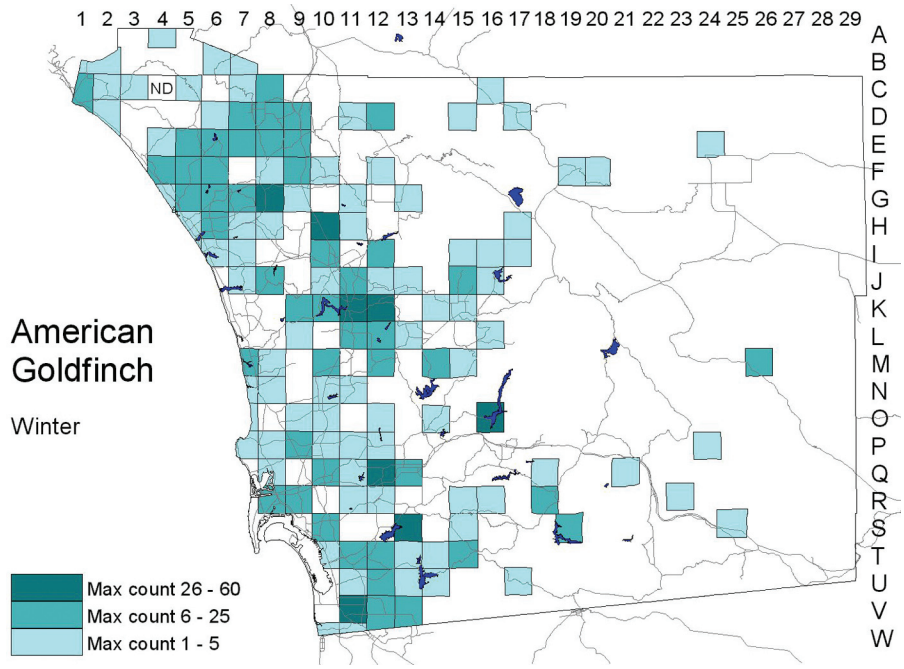
Migration: The American Goldfinch is not as nomadic as some members of its family, but occasional birds show up in nonbreeding habitat even in the middle of the breeding season (e.g., one at the Chula Vista Nature Center,



U11, 30 May 1999, B. C. Moore). The species is a very rare wanderer to the Anza–Borrego Desert, recorded from 19 September (1991, three in Culp Valley, H22, M. L. Gabel) to 22 April (1957, two at Yaqui Well, I24, ABDSP database). The only spring migrants reported from the desert 1997–2001 were three at Mountain Palm Springs (O27) 22 March 1998 (S. V. Fukuman) and one in Blair Valley (L24) 13 April 1998 (G. P. Sanders). Note that these records were in the wet spring of 1998 that induced the Lesser and Lawrence's Goldfinches to spread into the desert.

Winter: At this season the American Goldfinch loosens its attachment to extensive riparian woodland and takes advantage of weedy areas along minor creeks and even alder and liquidambar trees planted in parks and residential areas. The pattern of winter records, though, suggests that few birds move more than a few miles. High counts in winter were of 60 at the east end of Lake Hodges (K11) 31 December 1997 (E. C. Hall), 50 in Reidy Canyon (H10) 12 December 1999 (D. and D. Bylin), and 50 near the upper end of Sweetwater Reservoir 31 January 2002 (T. W. Dorman). A few American Goldfinches were reported in southeastern San Diego County, east to Live Oak Springs (S25; three on 21 January 2001, W. Dallas) and as high as 5200 feet elevation along La Posta Creek (P24; two on 19 December 2001, E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer). The latter is the only winter record above 4000 feet elevation. During the atlas period we noted the species twice in the Anza–Borrego Desert, one in the northern Borrego Valley (E24) 17 February 1999 (J. E. Fitch), eight at Agua Caliente Springs (M26) 1 December 1997 (E. C. Hall). The American Goldfinch has been recorded on only three of 18 Anza–Borrego Christmas bird counts 1984–2001, maximum eight on 28 December 1986. The winter irregularity of so many cardueline finches is not typical of the American Goldfinch in southern California, but the 262 reported on the Lake Henshaw Christmas bird count 3 January 1987 far exceeded the count's second highest total of 18.

Conservation: The range of the American Goldfinch may have retracted over the 20th century in Baja California. Currently, it is only a rare visitor south of the Tijuana River, despite its abundance along this river on the U.S. side of the border (Erickson et al. 2001). Within San Diego County, although much riparian woodland has been lost, the American Goldfinch has sustained its numbers in the habitat that remains. Cowbird trapping may benefit the American Goldfinch, as the goldfinch is a frequent victim of the cowbird in California (Friedmann 1963). With its vegetarian diet, however, the goldfinch is not a good host for the cowbird. Cowbird parasitism may reduce the goldfinch's nest success significantly even if it fails to increase the cowbird's.



Taxonomy: The only subspecies of the American Goldfinch known from southern California is the one breeding locally, the Willow Goldfinch, *S. t. salicamans* Grinnell, 1897.