

Ash-throated Flycatcher *Myiarchus cinerascens*

Common in summer, rare in winter, the Ash-throated Flycatcher breeds from the inland valleys to the mountains to the Anza-Borrego Desert in any habitat where it can find a suitable nest cavity. The members of the genus *Myiarchus* are the only North American flycatchers that nest in enclosed spaces like old woodpecker holes, other tree hollows, pipes, or bird houses. Despite the scarcity of suitable cavities, and the birds' willingness to use man-made nest sites, nesting Ash-throated Flycatchers remain largely outside the urban fringe. In the coastal strip the species is seen primarily in migration.

Breeding distribution: The Ash-throated Flycatcher is one of San Diego County's most widespread breeding

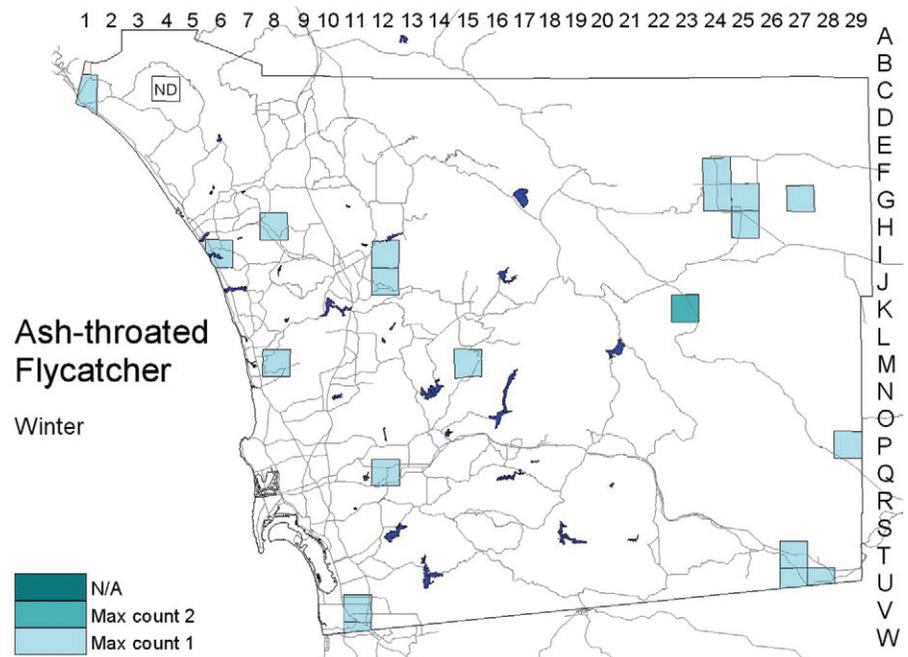
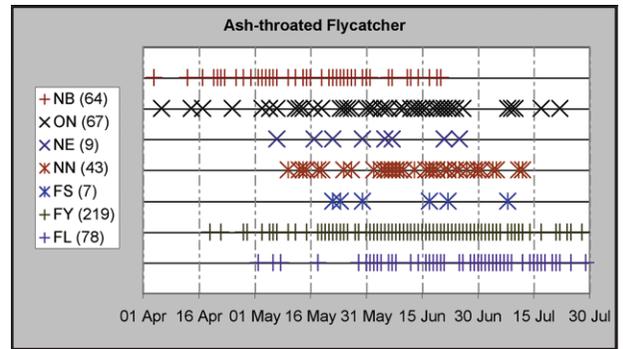
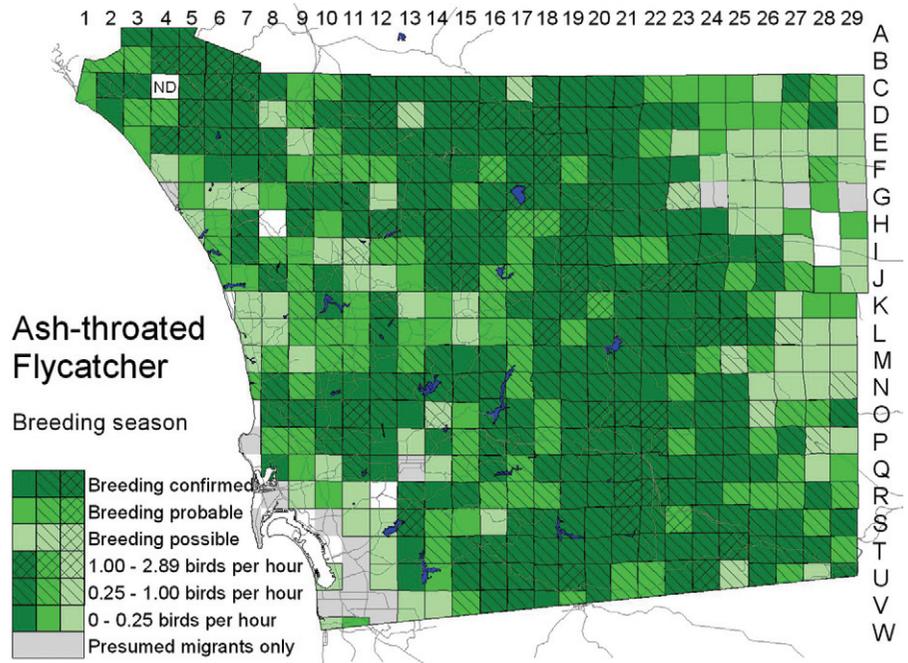


Photo by Jack C. Daynes

birds. It is most common in the mountains or foothill canyons where there is extensive woodland. Exceptionally high counts during the breeding season are of 40 around Case Spring, Camp Pendleton (B4), on 25 July 1998 (P. A. Ginsburg), 50 in Matagual Valley (H19) 18 June 2000 (S. E. Smith), and 35 in the Edwards Ranch northeast of Santa Ysabel (I19) on 9 June 2001 (D. W. Au, S. E. Smith). It is only along the coast and in the Anza-Borrego Desert where we see significant gaps in the Ash-throated Flycatcher's range. The Ash-throated resembles the Western Kingbird in avoiding the coastal strip as a breeding species, though it can be common just a short distance inland (e.g., 13 in Los Peñasquitos Canyon, N8, 7 June 1998, P. A. Ginsburg). In the Anza-Borrego Desert, because it depends for nest cavities largely on the Ladder-backed Woodpecker, it is rare or lacking where the woodpecker is rare or lacking, especially in the Borrego Badlands and Ocotillo Wells regions.

Nesting: Like most other cavity-nesting birds the Ash-throated Flycatcher is flexible and resourceful. Old woodpecker holes in trees are the most frequent site, but the cavity may be natural. Atlas observers described four nests in oaks (coast live, black, and Engelmann), three in sycamores, two in yuccas, one in cottonwood, and one in the split trunk of a desert willow. Nests in artificial sites included nine in nest boxes, five in metal or plastic pipes, one in a woodpecker hole in a fence post, one in a mailbox, and one in the tailpipe of wrecked vehicle used for target practice. Possible but unconfirmed sites in the Anza-Borrego Desert include cavities in rocks or bluffs and rodent burrows in sandy hummocks.

Bent (1942) reported 79 California egg sets ranging in date from 12 April to 5 July. In San Diego County, however, we found the Ash-throated Flycatcher nesting somewhat earlier, in several cases beginning around 1 April. Nest building was reported as early as 4 April (1997, in Earthquake Valley, K23, G. Sanders), occupied nest cavities as early as 6 April (2000, at Wilderness Gardens County Park, D11, V.



Dineen). Reports of adults feeding young as early as 19 April (1998, near Sunset Mountain, J26, F. L. Unmack, R. Orr) and fledglings as early as 2 May (2001, Inner Pasture, N25, A. P. and T. E. Keenan) also point to egg laying around 1 April. Many of these records, though, are from the Anza–Borrego Desert, poorly sampled by early egg collections. From Baja California, over much of which the Ash-throated Flycatcher is a year-round resident, Bent (1942) reported egg dates as early as 13 March. Most Ash-throated Flycatcher nesting in San Diego County, though, takes place later in the summer. An occupied nest in the Agua Tibia Wilderness (C13) on 22 July (2000, J. M. Wells) suggests the birds could be laying even later than Bent's spread implies.

Migration: Ash-throated Flycatchers begin arriving in the latter half of March; 17 March (1998, one near Angelina Spring, I22, P. K. Nelson) is the earliest date. As in many other species, these early arrivals (concentrated in the Anza–Borrego Desert) are likely of the local breeding population, with migrants headed farther north coming later, not in numbers until the second week of April. Peak migration is in late April, as implied by the 75 grounded in strong wind at Vallecito (M25) 29 April 1997 (M. C. Jorgensen). By the third week of May almost all migrants have continued north; 21 May (1999, one near the Santa Margarita River mouth, G4, P. A. Ginsburg) was the latest we recorded from 1997 to 2001. Even later stragglers have been recorded to 6 June (1974, two at Point Loma, S7, J. L. Dunn). Fall migration begins by 26 July (2001, one in Chula Vista, U11, T. W. Dorman) and trails off through October.

Winter: The Ash-throated Flycatcher is rare in winter but occurs annually, with 20 records 1997–2002. Of these, nine were at low elevations along the coast or in

the inland valleys, one was around 1350 feet elevation in Barona Valley (M15; one on 28 December 2000, J. Smith), four were around 2800 to 3500 feet elevation in the Jacumba area (F. L. Unmack), one was around 2350 feet elevation in Earthquake Valley (K23; two on 12 February 2000, P. Flanagan, the only winter record of more than one individual), and five were on the floor of the Anza–Borrego Desert. Previous winter records, at least 30, are all from the coastal lowland or desert floor. San Diego County lies just to the northwest of the Ash-throated Flycatcher's main winter range; wintering birds are quite a bit more numerous in eastern Imperial County and at the east base of the Sierra San Pedro Mártir in northern Baja California.

Conservation: Although the Ash-throated Flycatcher readily uses man-made structures for nesting, it is not an urban adapter. It is absent from the developed areas of the city of San Diego and very rare in the urban canyons, with scant evidence of breeding (“distraction display” in Tecolote Canyon, Q8, 10 June 1999, J. C. Worley). Other heavily developed areas likewise have few or no breeding Ash-throated Flycatchers. But because of the species' “anticoastal” distribution urbanization has likely had only a minor effect on the Ash-throated Flycatcher population. The species is most concentrated in areas where development pressure so far is light or none. Smooth-sided vertical plastic pipes, into which the birds can descend but not escape, are a hazard to this species (P. D. Jorgensen).

Taxonomy: The resident Baja California population of the Ash-throated Flycatcher, though averaging smaller than the migratory birds farther north, overlaps with the latter too much for two subspecies to be recognized. *Myiarchus cinerascens* is thus best considered monotypic (Patten et al. 2003).