

### Band-tailed Pigeon *Patagioenas fasciata*

California's only native large pigeon can be seen year round in San Diego's mountains, sometimes in large flocks, sometimes as only scattered individuals. Elderberries and acorns are its staple foods, so the Band-tailed Pigeon frequents woodland with abundant oaks. Though it inhabits all the mountains where the black and canyon live oaks are common, its distribution is oddly patchy in foothill woodland dominated by the coast live oak. Both migratory and nomadic, the Band-tailed Pigeon may be common in some areas in some years and absent in others; it shows up occasionally in all regions of the county as a vagrant.

**Breeding distribution:** As its name in Spanish suggests, Palomar Mountain is the center of Band-tailed Pigeon abundance in San Diego County (*paloma* = pigeon or dove). The pigeons move up and down the mountain, descending to the base in summer to feed on elderber-

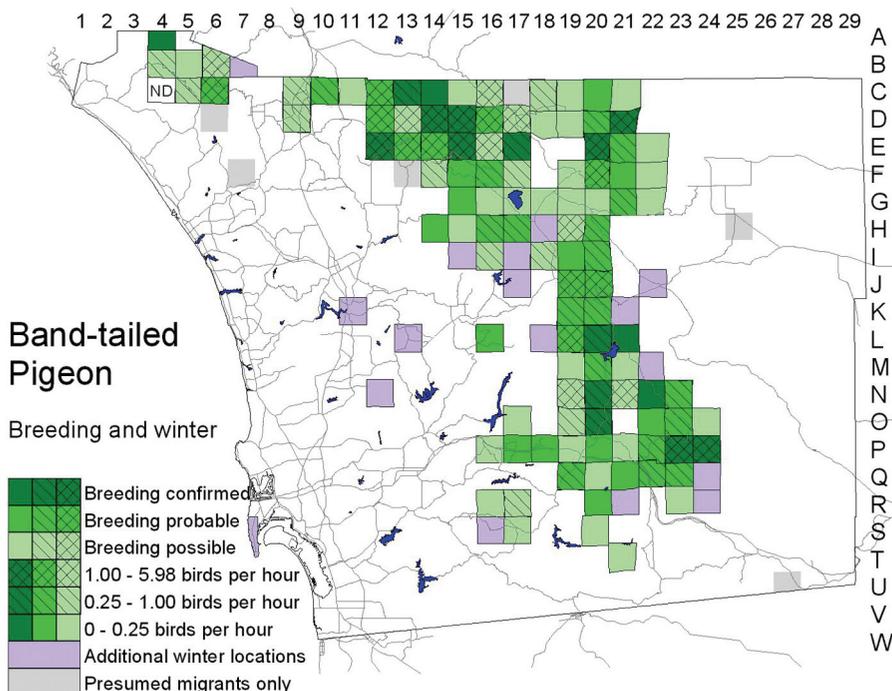


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

ries in dry scrub. Eleanor Beemer noted this movement at Pauma Valley in the 1930s, and it continues today. Some of our larger summer counts, including the largest, were in elderberries around the base of Palomar: 35 near Rincon (F13) 7 July 2000 (M. B. Mosher); 110 in Dameron

Valley (C16) 23 June 2001 (K. L. Weaver). Most of the birds nest in the forested area high on the mountain, but some nest around the base, as shown by a fledgling in Pauma Valley (E12) 19 May 2001 (E. C. Hall) and an occupied nest near the West Fork Conservation Camp (E17) 12 May 2001 (J. O. Zimmer).

Band-tailed Pigeons occur throughout the county's other mountains as well, with up to 40 on the south slope of Hot Springs Mountain (F20) 13 May 2001 (M. and B. McIntosh), 35 in Sherilton Valley, Cuyamaca Mountains (N19), 12 June 2001 (G. Wynn, P. D. Jorgensen), and 50 near the head of La Posta Creek, Laguna Mountains (P23), 3 June 1999 (E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer).



At lower elevations, in northwestern San Diego County Band-tailed Pigeons appear to be regular in small numbers around Rainbow (C10; up to 12 on 21 April 1999, D. C. Seals) and in much larger numbers in the Santa Margarita Mountains (up to 95 around De Luz, B6, 22 April 2000, K. L. Weaver). They spread over other areas of northwestern San Diego County irregularly. For example, K. L. Weaver found them irregularly common to absent during breeding-bird censuses along the Santa Margarita River east of Sandia Canyon (C8) from 1989 to 1994; in spite of thorough coverage he never recorded them there from 1997 to 2002. The Band-tailed Pigeon's nesting in the Santa Margarita Mountains is confirmed by a fledgling in Cold Spring Canyon (A4) 17 June 2001 (J. M. and B. Hargrove).

In the foothills of central San Diego County there is considerable oak woodland that seems attractive to Band-tailed Pigeons, yet our only spring sighting in this area was of one pair in San Vicente Valley (L16) 27 April 2000 (J. D. Barr). Then in the southern third of the county the pigeon recurs in this habitat, occurring in small numbers at elevations as low as 1400 feet in Peutz Valley north of Alpine (P16; up to two on 11 July 1999, P. Unitt). We found the species consistently in an enclave slightly isolated from the rest of the range from Lawson Creek south to Lyons Peak (R16/R17/S17), with up to nine in Lawson Valley (R17) 29 March 1999 (J. R. Barth). This population may be of long standing, as A. O. Treganza collected a Band-tailed Pigeon egg from Lyons Peak 12 March 1929 (WFVZ 28947)—the southernmost confirmed nesting ever of subspecies *P. f. monilis*. From 1997 to 2002 the southernmost likely site of Band-tailed Pigeon nesting was near Morena Butte (T21), where R. and S. L. Breisch noted three juveniles 5 July 1997. One 0.8 mile southeast of Music Mountain (U27) in April 1997 sang regularly for four to five weeks but never attracted a mate and was in marginal habitat (F. L. Unmack), as was another nearby in Jewell Valley (U26) 6 July 1993 (P. Unitt).

**Nesting:** Band-tailed Pigeon nests are difficult to find; over five years we noted only eight. The nest is placed on a tree branch, often quite high in the tree. Conifers may offer better nest sites than do oaks, accounting for the pigeon's occurring principally in mixed coniferous/oak woodland. But the birds nest in oaks as well: see Abbott (1927b) for a photograph of a nest of in a black oak at Mesa Grande (H17). The Band-tailed Pigeon usually lays only one egg per clutch but makes up for this low number with a long breeding season. Sharp (1919) and Abbott (1927b) reported several fall nests of the Band-tailed Pigeon in San Diego County, and fall nesting is common elsewhere too (Keppie and Braun 2000), probably stimulated by the ripening of acorns. The nesting activity we

observed during the atlas period all falls well within the interval of 6 March–14 October based on collected eggs and literature reports.

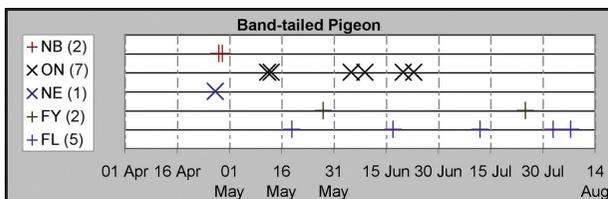
**Migration:** In the northern part of its range the Band-tailed Pigeon is highly migratory. Some of these migrants reach San Diego County; pigeons banded in northern California have been recovered here (Keppie and Braun 2000). Occasional vagrants reach the coast at almost any season, most often in late spring and fall, less often in summer, and least often in late winter. Our only spring migrant toward the coast during the atlas period was one about 0.5 mile southwest of Morro Hill (F7) 27 April 1997 (A. Peterson), but there are over a dozen reports from Point Loma (S7) at various seasons, with up to 25 during May 1981 (G. McCaskie).

In the Anza–Borrego Desert there are eight records, two in April, one each in May and June, and two each in August and November. Most are of single individuals, but up to three were in Indian Gorge (P27) 20 November 1988 (ABDSP database). The only one in the desert during the atlas period was in the developed area of Ram's Hill, Borrego Springs (H25), 20 April 2000 (R. Halford).

**Winter:** In spite of the Band-tailed Pigeon's nomadism, the distribution we observed in winter was closely similar to that in spring and summer. Our maximum numbers in winter were somewhat larger, up to 175 coming to bait set out for turkeys in Green Valley, Cuyamaca Rancho State Park (N21), 25 February 1998 (P. D. Jorgensen). At low elevations in northwestern San Diego the pigeons occurred in almost exactly the same areas in winter as in summer, with an exceptional high count of 92 near Ross Lake (B7) 2 January 2002 (K. L. Weaver). The situation with the isolated population in the Lyons Peak region was parallel, with a maximum count of 11 between Lyons and Lee valleys (S16) 17 January 2000 (J. R. Barth).

From 1997 to 2002 we had four winter records of vagrants well outside the known breeding range, with five at the Vineyard golf course (K11) 1 December 1998 (E. C. Hall). Right along the coast the Band-tailed Pigeon is generally less frequent in winter than at other seasons, but the winter of 1989–90 broke this pattern. That year the species was reported widely, with up to 170, by far the largest flock of coastal vagrants reported, in Los Peñasquitos Canyon (N8) 18 January 1990 (B. Zepf, AB 44:329, 1990).

**Conservation:** Over California as a whole, the Band-tailed Pigeon was decimated by overhunting early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Grinnell 1913). In San Diego County the reduction may have been milder, as local naturalists were largely silent on this topic. Subsequent protection led to at least a partial recovery. Current trends are unclear because of the species' inherent irregularity and the difficulty of devising survey methods applicable over diverse habitats (Keppie and Braun 2000). The pigeon's biology entails relying on one food that is abundant at one season, then shifting to another food abundant at another season. If one link in this seasonal chain is broken, the pigeons could suffer even though the other links remain intact.



For example, if development around the base of Palomar Mountain removes a substantial fraction of the elderberry trees, the carrying capacity of the entire Palomar range could be affected.

**Taxonomy:** Band-tailed Pigeons along the Pacific coast are *P. f. monilis* (Vigors, 1839), darker than the other subspecies in the United States and Mexico. It breeds from the Pacific Northwest south to San Diego County, apparently reaching northern Baja California as a nonbreeding visitor only.