

## BARN OWLS — FAMILY TYTONIDAE

### Barn Owl *Tyto alba*

An uncommon permanent resident through much of San Diego County, the Barn Owl is the county's most urban owl. It nests in buildings and among the bases of palm leaves more often than in cavities in native trees or on natural cliff ledges. Also, the owls readily use nest boxes designed for them. An increasing number of San Diegans are turning to the Barn Owl as an agent of natural rodent control, encouraging the owls by hanging these boxes in trees.

**Breeding distribution:** The Barn Owl is widespread on the coastal slope of San Diego County at low to moderate elevations, occurring in riparian and oak woodland as well as in any open area where trees, buildings, or other man-made structures offer secure sites for roosting and nesting. Its numbers are greatest in the inland valleys, with up to 12 in Poway (M12) 10 June and 15 July 1998 (P. von Hendy), and 10 at Wilderness Gardens (D11) 5 April 1997 (V. Dineen). The availability of suitable nest sites probably governs the species' numbers more than



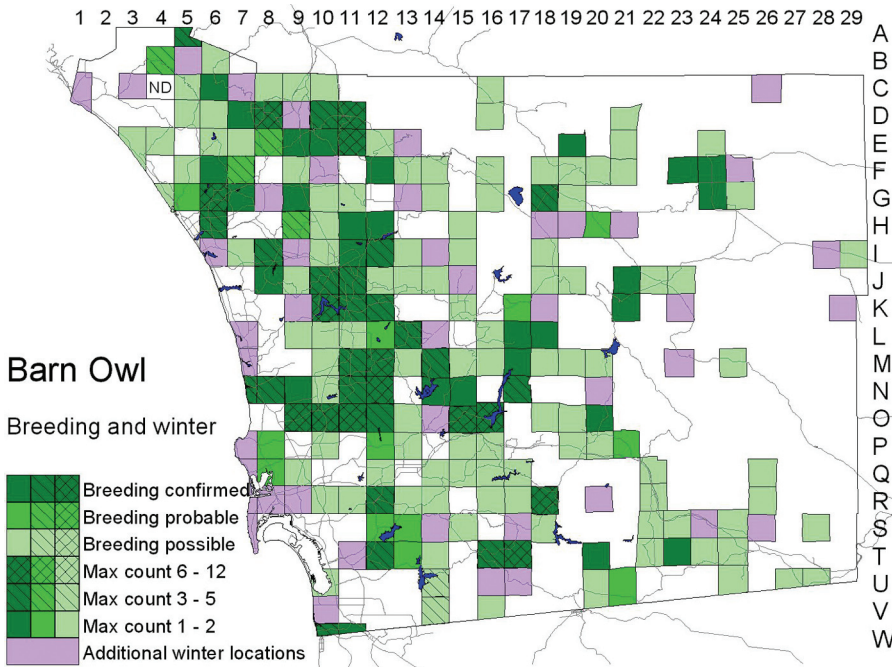
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

the nature of the surrounding habitat, provided that there is ample open ground over which the owls can hunt.

In the higher mountains the Barn Owl is rare but recorded as high as around 5000 feet elevation near the upper end of the middle fork of Borrego Palm Canyon (E21; one on 18 June 1999, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt)

and about 4650 feet near Camp Hual-Cu-Cuish, Cuyamaca Mountains (M20; one on 2 July 2000, R. E. Webster). It is confirmed breeding as high as 3900 feet at Oakzanita Springs Campground (O20; fledgling on 2 September 1998 at nest site used regularly in previous years, D. W. Povey).

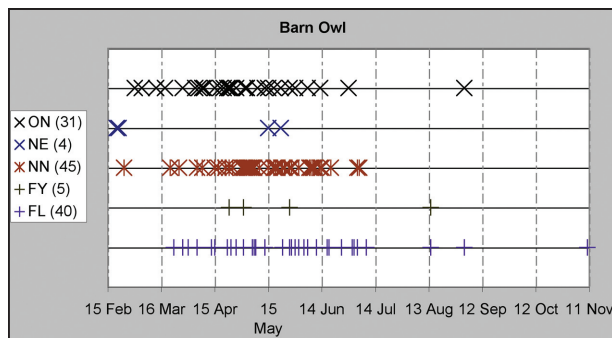
In the Anza-Borrego Desert the Barn Owl is uncommon, found mainly in the developed or agricultural areas of the Borrego Valley and at campgrounds elsewhere in the desert. It has been confirmed nesting only in the Borrego Valley and at Tamarisk Grove (I24; fledgling on 8 May 1988, A. G. Morley). It has never been found in the badlands, even though the deeply eroded can-



yons in them offer many suitable nest sites similar to those the owls exploit on the coastal slope. In spite of being so partial to planted palms on the coastal slope, and even in Borrego Springs, the Barn Owl makes almost no use of native groves of the California fan palm in the Anza–Borrego Desert (only record is of three at Southwest Grove, Mountain Palm Springs, P27, 8 July 1993, P. D. Jorgensen). Perhaps there is too little prey in native desert habitats to support breeding Barn Owls, at least in dry to average years (1992–93 was unusually wet).

**Nesting:** Primitively, Barn Owls nested in San Diego County in tree cavities and crevices in sandstone bluffs; they still nest in these sites where available. Atlas observers reported three nests in large cavities in coast live oaks, one in a cottonwood. Road cuts now offer sites similar to those of natural bluffs, and in the exposed dirt the owls may dig their own burrows (Martin 1973). With palms so widely planted in San Diego County, both the skirts of fan palms and the crevices among the leaf bases of Canary Island date palms attract many Barn Owls. The bases of sawed-off palm leaves often break off in clumps, leaving sheltered niches in which the owls can nest. The species' habit of nesting in buildings, of course, is responsible for its name; any structure that offers a solid support below and shelter above will do. Besides barns, aircraft hangars at the Miramar Air Station (O9/O10), the Mission San Luis Rey (G6), and an air conditioner in a building at Fallbrook High School still under construction (D8) were reported as nest sites during the atlas period. The nest site atlas observers reported most frequently were nest boxes set out for the owls—the boxes have become popular as the Barn Owl's role as means of natural gopher control is more widely understood. They are now available commercially or can be built simply as a box with an opening at least 6 inches across, mounted on a post or hung in a tree.

The Barn Owl's breeding season is governed more by food supply than by the calendar. Following the wet winter of 1997–98, Barn Owls nested far later than in other years, with four fledglings on 14 August near the mouth of Beeler Canyon, Poway (N11; K. J. Winter), one on 2 September at Oakzanita Springs Campground (O20; D. W. Povey), and two on 10 November, one at the De Anza golf course, Borrego Springs (F24; R. Thériault), the



other at the Club Circle golf course, Borrego Springs (G24; B. Zuehl). In the other years of the study our observations imply the owls laid eggs from late December to late April. The Barn Owl is thus, along with Anna's Hummingbird, one of San Diego County's earliest nesting birds.

**Winter:** The Barn Owl is nonmigratory, and its breeding season extends over much of the winter. So the species' winter and breeding distributions are essentially the same; almost all variations are most likely due to chance. Winter counts ranged as high as 12 in Miramar Air Station (O11) 24 February 1999—already at nests with nestlings on this date (W. E. Haas). We did note the species twice in winter in the Anza–Borrego Desert far from likely breeding sites: one in an isolated tamarisk tree 3 miles north of Clark Dry Lake (C26) 29 December 2001 and another in the Elephant Tree Area (K29) 24 November 2000 (L. J. Hargrove).

**Conservation:** There is no good numerical basis for assessing trend in Barn Owl numbers in San Diego County, but the species has likely benefited from the clearing of scrub and erecting of structures that accompany low-intensity development. Though the species lives in cities, urbanization probably disfavors it; housing tracts offer few nest sites, and traffic takes a heavy toll on the Barn Owl.

**Taxonomy:** Over its cosmopolitan range the Barn Owl breaks into many subspecies, but only *T. a. pratincola* (Bonaparte, 1838) occurs on the mainland of North America.