

Bewick's Wren *Thryomanes bewickii*

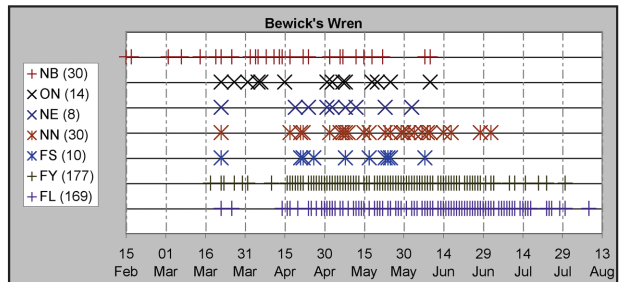
Bewick's Wren is something of an enigma, a cavity nester that is common in chaparral and sage scrub, habitats with no trees offering cavities. The answer is the wren's flexible definition of a cavity: rocks, caves, holes in the ground, and the litter of humanity serve for nest sites just as well as holes in trees. Bewick's Wren thus can occupy any habitat with at least moderately dense shrubbery: sage scrub, the understory of oak, riparian, and pinyon-juniper woodland, desert-edge scrub, and desert washes, as well as chaparral, the habitat where it is most abundant. Though a year-round resident, Bewick's Wren spreads uncommonly in winter even into the sparsest desert scrub.

Breeding distribution: The Bewick's Wren is one of San Diego County's most widespread birds. In the breeding season it occurs over the entire coastal slope except the Coronado Peninsula, ranging as high as the summit of Hot Springs Mountain (E20; pair with fledglings 15 July 2000, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt). Its abundance on the coastal side follows no strong pattern except that numbers are low in extensively urbanized or heavily forested areas. Numbers can be high in both the coastal lowland (e.g., 50 in Vista, H8, 16 May 1999, J. O. Zimmer) and in the mountains (e.g., 33 in Noble Canyon, O22, 22 April 1997, P. Unitt). Counts in the Pine Valley area (O21/O22/P21/P22) 1993-97 suggested that in mature chaparral the only species exceeding Bewick's Wren in abundance are the Wrentit, Spotted Towhee, and Black-chinned Sparrow (Cleveland National Forest data).

Field work for this atlas revealed Bewick's Wren to be considerably more widespread than expected on the desert slope. Even in the breeding season it is lacking only from the most sparsely vegetated valley floors and



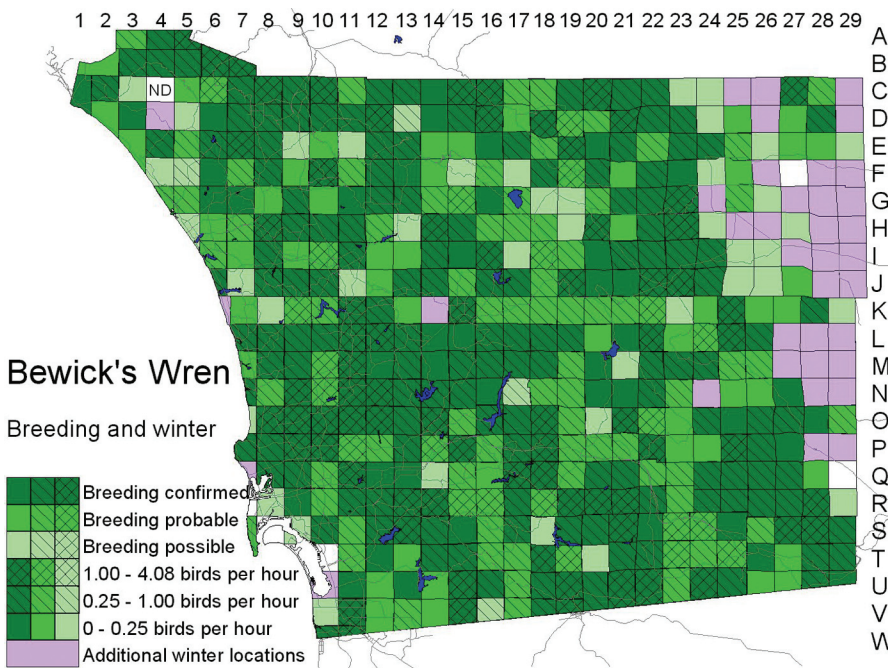
Photo by Jack C. Daynes



badlands. It is one of the more common birds on scrubby rocky slopes and among pinyons and junipers in desert mountains, with numbers up to 29 on the northwest slope of Whale Peak (L25) 25 June 1998 (R. Thériault). Bewick's Wren is rare in the town of Borrego Springs itself but resident in the thicket of mesquites on the Borrego Valley's floor (G25; up to eight on 8 April 1997; pair entering possible nest crevice in a mesquite 11 March 1997, R. Thériault).

Nesting: Bewick's nests in tree cavities like those used by the House Wren; atlas participants noted three nests

in coast live oaks and one in a willow. Trees isolated or scattered in chaparral offer Bewick's Wrens nest sites in areas too sparsely wooded for House Wrens. But more often we found nests in man-made structures: in crevices of wooden buildings, in pipes, under roof tiles, and in birdhouses. Bewick's Wrens take advantage of discarded trash that offers cavities, and in treeless chaparral such trash may provide the best nest sites. We noted Bewick's Wren nests in a discarded hub of a truck wheel, in a cardboard beer carton, in a coffee can, and in an abandoned bullet-riddled car. One nest was reported from a yucca, and it is likely the wrens nest among the leaf bases of Mojave yuccas as



well as in woodpecker-excavated cavities in them. Caves, rock crevices, and brush piles have also been noted as nest sites for Bewick's Wren (Bent 1948).

Our observations from 1997 to 2001 suggest that Bewick's Wrens lay mainly from mid March to mid June, in agreement with 54 egg sets collected in San Diego County from 1887 to 1937. Occasional pairs may start earlier, building nests as early as 15 February (2001, Pauma Valley, E12, K. Fischer). Nest building may take over three weeks to complete, however (Kennedy and White 1997), so such dates may not be good guides to dates of egg laying. Reports of Bewick's Wrens "feeding young" as early as 18 March could refer to males feeding incubating females. But fledglings near Ross Lake (B7) 26 March 1999 (K. L. Weaver) must have come from a clutch in which incubation began about 24 February.

Migration: Because there are so few areas in San Diego County where Bewick's Wren is not resident, there is almost no information on its migration here. At places in the Anza-Borrego Desert where it is not suspected to breed, Bewick's Wren has been seen as late in spring as 26 March (1999, one in June Wash, M27, R. Thériault). Away from its few breeding locations in the Salton Sink Bewick's Wren has been recorded from 29 August to 17 April (Patten et al. 2003).

Winter: Bewick's Wren is even more widespread in San Diego County in winter than in the breeding season. Over most of the county winter numbers are very similar to those in the breeding season (maximum daily count 50, north of Morena Reservoir, S21, 16 February 1998, S. E. Smith, and along Espinosa Trail, R19, 23 February 1999, G. L. Rogers). The birds remain through the winter at least in small numbers at high elevations, being recorded from the summits of Hot Springs Mountain (E20) and Monument Peak in the Laguna Mountains (O23). Even there the impression of numbers lower than in the breeding season could be due simply to less calling and no singing in the winter. Though territorial pairs may be sedentary, there is appreciable movement, perhaps mainly by young birds. We noted Bewick's Wren in winter in almost every atlas square in the Anza-Borrego Desert where it was absent during the breeding season. Numbers of such dispersers into sparse desert scrub are usually small, but daily counts were sometimes as high as nine, along Fish Creek Wash (M27) 2 February 2000 (M. B. Mulrooney) and at Split Mountain (L29) 2 December 1999 (P. D. Jorgensen).

Conservation: Despite its heavy use of man-made artifacts as nest sites, Bewick's Wren is not an urban adapter. Apparently its need for extensive shrubbery for foraging, or a dependence on insects of native habitats for food, keeps it in territories with a component of native scrub. But it is relatively tolerant of this habitat being fragment-

ed. Bolger et al. (1997) and Crooks et al. (2001) identified Bewick's Wren as a species of low sensitivity to fragmentation, and this is corroborated by our atlas results. In central San Diego, Bewick's Wren is missing from only those squares that have been totally urbanized, lacking any significant native scrub. Of the eight chaparral birds analyzed by Crooks et al. (2001), the Bewick's Wren was the least sensitive, predicted to have a 95% chance of surviving for 100 years in fragments as small as 13 hectares.

In the eastern U.S., Bewick's Wren has experienced serious population decline and range contraction, attributed to the increase and spread of the House Wren, which competes for nest cavities and destroys the eggs of other birds (Newman 1961). Even though the House Wren is increasing in San Diego County, a concomitant decrease of Bewick's Wren seems unlikely here. The treeless chaparral in which Bewick's Wrens are so common is unsuitable for breeding House Wrens. Unless development of the entire coastal slope penetrates far deeper into foothill chaparral than it does now, into the Cleveland National Forest and other open-space reserves, it seems that large numbers of Bewick's Wrens will remain well isolated from both the inroads of the House Wren as well as from direct loss of habitat.

Taxonomy: Bewick's Wrens breeding in San Diego County are *T. b. charienturus* Oberholser, 1898, in which the upperparts are dark chocolate brown and the central rectrices are so dark as to mute the blackish bars. *T. b. correctus* Grinnell, 1928, is a synonym of *charienturus*, based on the comparison of newer unfoxed and older foxed specimens (Rea 1986). With a range encompassing southwestern Alta California and northwestern Baja California, this subspecies—darker than others in the western United States—is another taxon characterizing the San Diegan District of the California Floristic Province.

A few Bewick's Wrens from farther north reach San Diego County as winter visitors. At least one specimen is the paler *T. b. drymoecus* Oberholser, 1898, which breeds mainly inland from southern Oregon south to central California: La Mesa (R12) 1 November 1914 (SDNHM 32621). One specimen is the more rufous *T. b. spilurus* (Vigors, 1839), which breeds in the San Francisco Bay area: 3.3 miles southeast of Borrego Springs (G25) 24 January 1985 (SDNHM 42874). A small fraction of the Bewick's Wren population of the Anza-Borrego Desert is unusually pale and gray, resembling the pale gray subspecies *T. b. eremophilus* of the Great Basin and southern Rocky Mountains. Two specimens from Mason Valley (M23), collected 30 November 1913 (SDNHM 32620) and 9 September 1984 (SDNHM 43308) look like *eremophilus*, but the latter was still in molt so must be of the local population rather than a migrant.