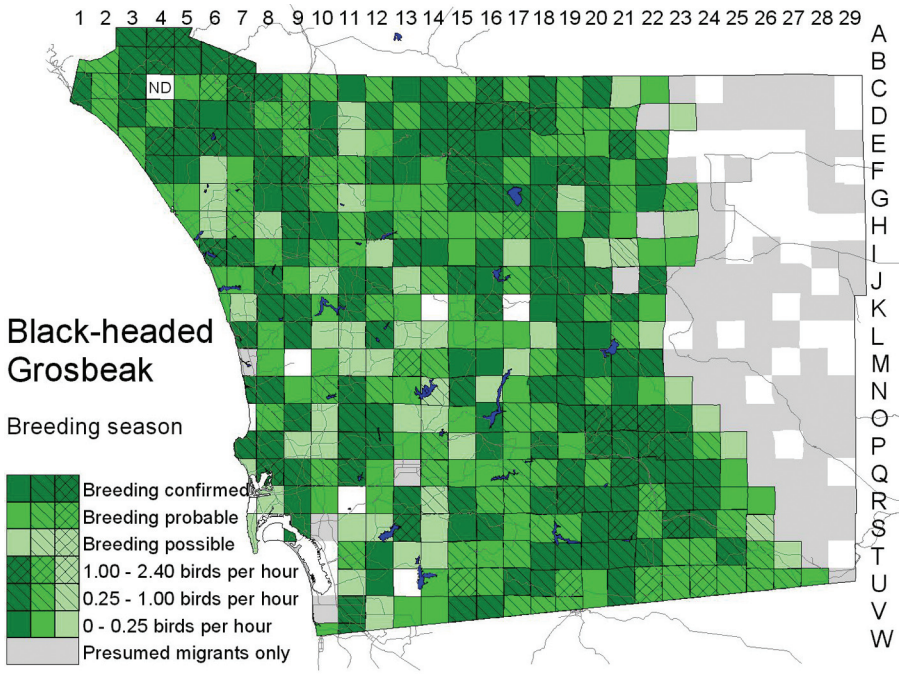
Black-headed Grosbeak *Pheucticus melanocephalus*

A common summer visitor, the Black-headed Grosbeak is one of the characteristic birds of oak and riparian woodland. It is also locally common in mature chaparral, mainly on north-facing slopes. But it is rare, though possibly increasing, as a breeding species in developed areas. As a migrant it is seen throughout the county, including deserts and cities. In winter it is very rare—much rarer than its eastern counterpart, the Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

Photo by Anthony Mercieca

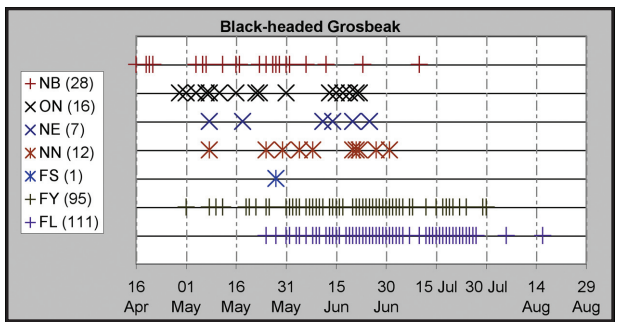
Breeding distribution: At the scale of our atlas grid, the Black-headed Grosbeak is distributed almost uniformly over San Diego County's coastal slope. It is most common in oak and riparian woodland, with up to 30, including 20 singing males, in Moosa Canyon (F9) 18 May 1999 (J. Evans) and up to 27, including 20 singing males, along the Santa Margarita River north of Fallbrook (C8) 24 May 2001 (K. L. Weaver). Mature chaparral often offers good habitat as well, as on the north slope of Otay Mountain (U15; 46 on 25 May 1999, G. L. Rogers). Certain types of chaparral, such as those dominated by scrub oak or Tecate cypress, may be more favorable than others, such as those dominated by chamise or redshank. The Black-headed Grosbeak is also numerous in montane pine/oak woodland (up to 25 at Palomar Mountain, E15, 3 July 2000, E. C. Hall) but over 6000 feet elevation begins to thin out; the maximum daily count near the summit of



Hot Springs Mountain (E20) was only three on 19 May 2001 and 15 July 2000 (K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrdt).

The distribution hardly extends over the crest of the mountains to the desert slope, however. Records of apparently breeding birds along the east edge of the range are of one at Lower Willows in Coyote Creek Canyon (D23) 20 June 1998 (B. L. Peterson), four, including a pair, in Hellhole Canyon (G23) 7 July 1998 (M. L. Gabel), a pair in Grapevine Canyon (I23) 11 May 1998 (P. K. Nelson), and a pair at Jacumba (U28) 1 July 2000 (P. Unitt). Note that most of these marginal records followed the wet winter of 1997–98. In dry years Scissors Crossing along San Felipe Creek (J22) is probably the farthest into the desert breeding Black-headed Grosbeaks extend.

Nesting: Female Black-headed Grosbeaks build a flimsy open-cup nest of twigs and other plant material, placing it in the outer branches of a tree or shrub. Atlas observers reported nests in willows (5), Engelmann, black, and coast live oak. Nest building begins in the third week of April, egg laying in the fourth week of April, and hatching in the second week of May, in agreement with past data (California egg dates 23 April–10 July, Bent 1968). The birds continue far into the summer, making the Black-headed Grosbeak one of San Diego County's later-nesting species, with fledglings reported as late as 16 August.



Migration: The Black-headed Grosbeak is one of San Diego County's most punctual migrants, the first birds normally returning in the last few days of March. From 1997 to 2001 the first reported date varied only from 27 March to 1 April, except for a report of one at Butterfield Ranch (M23) 17 March 1999 (H. and K. Williams). The only earlier published date is 16 March 1986 (one male at Point Loma S7, J. Oldenettel, AB 40:525, 1986). San Diego County is evidently on the grosbeak's main spring migration route from western Mexico to the Pacific coast, taking advantage of the comparatively low elevation of the county's mountains to cross from the desert to the coast. As for many other species, San Felipe Valley (I21) is evidently the center of the corridor, with at least 620 migrating northwest there 24 April 1999 (W. E. Haas) and 100 a short distance farther upstream (H20) the same day (A. P. and T. E. Keenan). The route apparently continues from the head of San Felipe Valley across Warner Valley to Sunshine Summit (D17) at the east base of Palomar Mountain, where A. Mauro noted 50 in migrating flocks 1 May 1999. Many individuals follow other paths. Numbers of migrants drop through May; from 1997 to 2001 24 May 1999 (six at Yaqui Well, I24, P. K. Nelson) was the latest spring date outside the breeding range. Previous late spring dates for Point Loma run as late as 3 June (1974, J. L. Dunn). Fall migrants pass through mainly from late July through mid September, exceptionally to mid October.

Winter: Of the 14 winter records for the county, only two are since 1983, of one at Point Loma 8 January 1991 (D. and M. Hastings, AB 45:322, 1991) and one at a feeder in Oceanside (H5) winter 1996–97. Thus the Black-headed Grosbeak is much less frequent in winter than the Rose-breasted, and the disparity is growing. All other winter records are from parks and residential areas around San Diego, except two reports (possibly of one individual) wintering at Pauma Valley (E12) 1953–55 (Unitt 1984).

Conservation: The Black-headed Grosbeak's ability to adapt to the urban environment is so far modest. The species persists uncommonly in San Diego's largest canyons (San Clemente, Tecolote, Mission Valley), with a maximum of 16, including 10 singing males, in Tecolote Canyon (Q8) 15 June 1999 (J. C. Worley). In small urban canyons and residential areas, as a breeding species, it is rare. For example, in La Jolla (P7) a pair with two fledglings came to a feeder 27 June 1999 (L. Polinsky), in a La Mesa (Q11) canyon a pair had a nest 29 May–4 June 2002 in a laurel sumac within 20 meters of backyards (M. A. Patten), a pair nested in a pepper tree along I Avenue in Coronado (S9) in 1997 and 1998 (J. Guilmette), and

in East San Diego (R10) the only record outside migration periods is of one in Talmadge Park Canyon 30 June 1997 (J. A. Dietrick). At least one pair began summering in eucalyptus groves in Fallbrook (D7) in 2000 (K. L. Weaver).

Taxonomy: Specimens from San Diego County, migrants and breeders (none yet for winter), are *P. m. maculatus* (Audubon, 1837), occurring all along the Pacific coast and smaller billed than the nominate subspecies of the Rocky Mountain region.