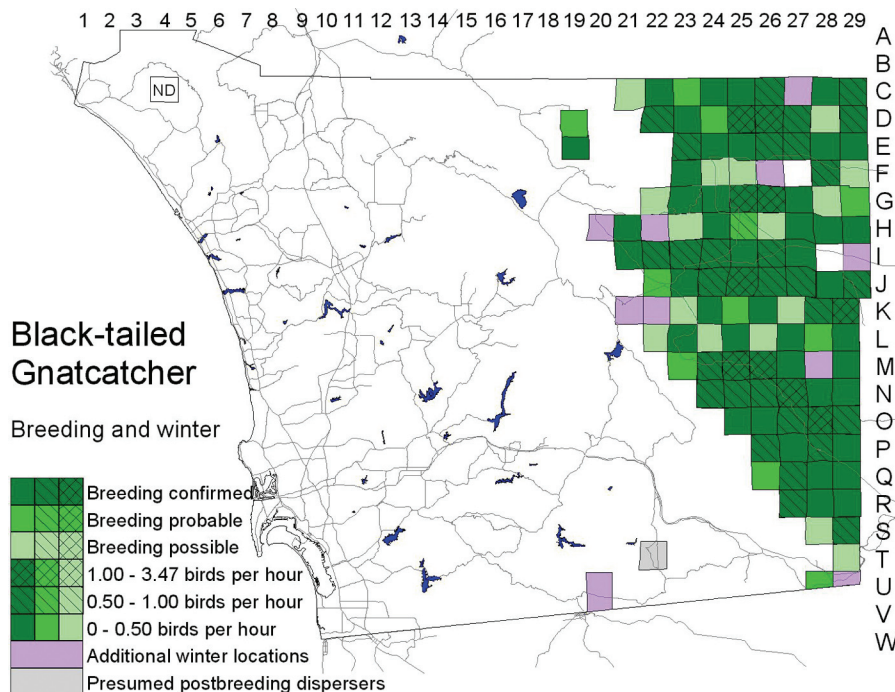


### Black-tailed Gnatcatcher *Poliophtila melanura*

The Black-tailed Gnatcatcher is one of the Anza-Borrego Desert's characteristic birds, fairly common within the desert, essentially absent elsewhere. Like the better-studied California Gnatcatcher, the Black-tailed apparently remains in pairs year round. It is a permanent resident among spiny trees and shrubs like mesquite, smoketree, and palo verde, the preferred sites for nests. We found no current overlap between the California and Black-tailed Gnatcatchers in San Diego County, though there is one such site just north of the county line near Aguanga, and strays of both species have been seen near the Mexican border in the gap between their ranges.



Photo by Anthony Mercieca



**Breeding distribution:** The Black-tailed Gnatcatcher occurs almost throughout the Anza-Borrego Desert, being absent only from the higher mountains, stands of low halophytic scrub, and the most barren badlands. Within the desert it was missed during the breeding season in only five atlas squares: in the Santa Rosa Mountains (C27), from Peg Leg Road to Font's Point (F26/F27), and around Ocotillo Wells (I28/I29). Even in the latter area it should be expected occasionally in the scattered ironwood trees. The birds are most concentrated in mesquite thickets and in well-vegetated washes and bajadas. The largest numbers were reported from the west end of Clark Dry Lake northwest along Rockhouse Truck Trail (D25; 40 on 14 April 2000, K. J. Winter) and from Mescal Bajada (J25; 30 on 26 April and 12 June 1998, M.

and B. McIntosh). As spiny vegetation becomes sparser, so do the gnatcatchers. The species is confirmed breeding up to an elevation of about 3100 feet in Smuggler Canyon (L25, building nest 21 March 2000, R. Thériault) and recorded in the breeding season up to about 3400 feet at the western edge of Culp Valley (G22; one on 28 May 2001, P. D. Jorgensen). Points on the west edge of the range are Alder Canyon (C21; one on 3 May 2000, G. Rebstock), about 3200 feet elevation on the northeast side of San Felipe Valley (H21; seven on 22 May 2001, E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer), the northwest corner of Mason Valley (L22; two on 2 May 2001, R. Thériault), and near Jacumba (U28; up to four on 20 March 1998, C. G. Edwards).

The Black-tailed Gnatcatcher occurs on the coastal slope within 2 miles of the San Diego County line northeast of Aguanga in south-central Riverside County (Weaver 1998b). But, unlike the Ladder-backed Woodpecker and Black-throated Sparrow, it does not extend into the semi-desert scrub of nearby Dameron Valley (C15/C16). Two completely unexpected sightings, however, suggest that the Black-tailed Gnatcatcher may be a rare resident in the arid chaparral about 3800 feet elevation along Lost Valley (Indian Flats) Road north of Warner Springs. The first report was of a pair building a nest 28 April 1998 (E19; W. Pray, O. Carter). Then, on 6 June 2001, a short distance farther north in square D19, southeast of Pine Mountain, a pair appeared agitated, as if disturbed near a nest (K. J. Burns, E. Sgariglia). These observations are unprecedented, and the area was surveyed repeatedly on other occasions with no other observations. Yet rare occurrences in this area could connect the population seemingly isolated near Aguanga with the species' main range.

Another sighting on the coastal slope out of the known range was of two males, still with black caps and making short buzzy calls typical of the Black-tailed and dissimilar from the California, about 3200 feet elevation near Morena Village (T22) 1 July 2000 (R. and S. L. Breisch). Might the Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, like the Verdin whose habitat it shares, extend locally onto the coastal slope in northern Baja California, providing a source of dispersers across the border? (See also under Winter.)

**Nesting:** The Black-tailed Gnatcatcher has a strong preference for nesting in spiny shrubs or trees. Of the 17 nests whose placement atlas observers described, four were in smoketrees, four in palo verde, three in mesquite (two of these in or under clumps of mistletoe), two in desert thorn, two in desert lavender, one in desert apricot, and only one in a nonspiny plant, a California juniper. The

heights of the nests ranged from 3 to 12 feet but were mainly around 5 feet.

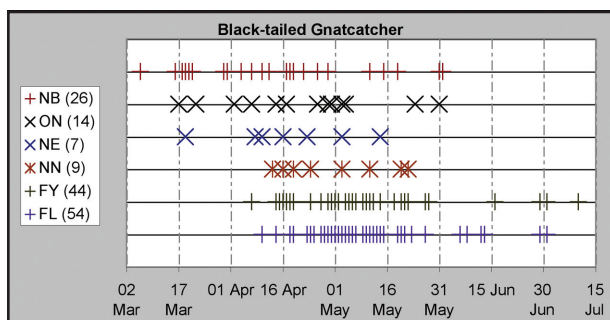
The Black-tailed Gnatcatcher begins nesting in March. Our earliest record of nest building was 6 March 1997 at Yaqui Well (I24; P. K. Nelson), of an occupied nest (incubation probably begun) was 17 March 2000 at the west end of Clark Dry Lake (D25; K. L. Weaver), and of a nest with eggs 19 March 1998 along Borrego Sink Wash (G26; P. D. Jorgensen). If the Black-tailed Gnatcatcher's incubation and nesting periods are the same average 14 and 13 days, respectively, as the California Gnatcatcher's (Grishaver et al. 1998), fledglings near Halfhill Dry Lake (J29) 10 April 1998 (L. J. Hargrove) hatched from eggs laid by 14 March. The close of the nesting season is more difficult to gauge and probably varies from year to year, variation in rainfall governing the abundance of insects and whether the birds can raise more than one brood. Our later observations of nesting activity, however, were not disproportionately concentrated in the wet year of 1998. Birds building nests in lower Carrizo Valley (O28) 31 May and 1 June 2001 (P. Famolaro, P. D. Jorgensen) suggest laying in early June.

**Winter:** The Black-tailed Gnatcatcher's dispersal in winter out of its breeding range is almost nil. In the Anza-Borrego Desert, we noted the species in seven squares with marginal habitat where we did not find it in the breeding season, though it could be a very sparse or irregular resident even in those. Winter records extend west to the edge of the range of the honey mesquite at Banner Queen Trading Post (K21), a well-covered site where the only sighting was of one on 2 December 1999 (P. K. Nelson). Two reports from chaparral in Potrero County Park (U20), of one on 25 January 1998 and two on 29 December 1999 (R. and S. L. Breisch), however, lie 23 miles west of the Black-tailed Gnatcatcher's nearest known locality of residence at Jacumba. The birds' calls were heard and the undersides of their tails were seen well. Like the July record from Morena Village, these observations could reflect an unknown extension of the range in Mexico.

Numbers of the Black-tailed Gnatcatcher varied less over the five years of the project than those of many other desert birds, but even this species was not immune to the cycle of wet and dry years. The count per hour in the drought-plagued final two winters of the project was 69% of that in the first three.

**Conservation:** The Black-tailed Gnatcatcher has always been considered common in the Anza-Borrego Desert, and most of its habitat is conserved in the state park. In spite of its nesting in a habitat unsuitable for cowbird foraging, the Black-tailed Gnatcatcher is subject to cowbird parasitism; we noted two instances of gnatcatchers feeding fledgling cowbirds as well as two instances of pairs mobbing cowbirds. Also, overpumping of groundwater could kill mesquites, eliminating one of the Black-tailed Gnatcatcher's primary habitats.

**Taxonomy:** All Black-tailed Gnatcatchers in California are *P. m. lucida* van Rossem, 1931. The Black-tailed



Gnatcatcher has had a tortured taxonomic history. Aside from being lumped with the California Gnatcatcher as a single species from 1926 to 1988, the Black-tailed was long known as the Plumbeous Gnatcatcher, *Polioptila plumbea* (Baird, 1854). When it was realized that the name *plumbea* had been applied earlier to the species now called the Tropical Gnatcatcher, the next oldest name, *Polioptila melanura* Lawrence, 1857, had to be substituted, and the common name Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, already in use for what we now call the California Gnatcatcher, was

applied to the entire complex. When *P. melanura* and *P. californica* were shown to be distinct species (Atwood 1988), the English name Black-tailed went with the former, in agreement with the scientific name, which means black-tailed in Greek. This agreement between the scientific and common names, however, reverses traditional usage and contradicts the birds' actual characters—the Black-tailed Gnatcatcher has less black in the tail than the California Gnatcatcher.