

California Thrasher *Toxostoma redivivum*

A sickle-shaped bill, long tail, and creative song give the California Thrasher the character its plain brown plumage does not. A sedentary resident, the thrasher is one of the characteristic birds of chaparral, though it occurs in lower density in sage scrub, oak and riparian woodland, desert-edge scrub, and mesquite thickets as well. It is still common over much of San Diego County but does not adapt to urban development. Within the city of San Diego it survives in large canyons like Florida and Tecolote but disappears from small canyons surrounded by housing tracts.

Breeding distribution: The California Thrasher is widespread over the coastal slope of San Diego County, lacking only in heavily urbanized areas. It is common wherever there is extensive chaparral and considerably more common in dense chaparral than in coastal sage scrub or other habitats (Cody 1998). So it is no surprise that the greatest concentrations are where chaparral is most extensive: along the north side of the Santa Margarita



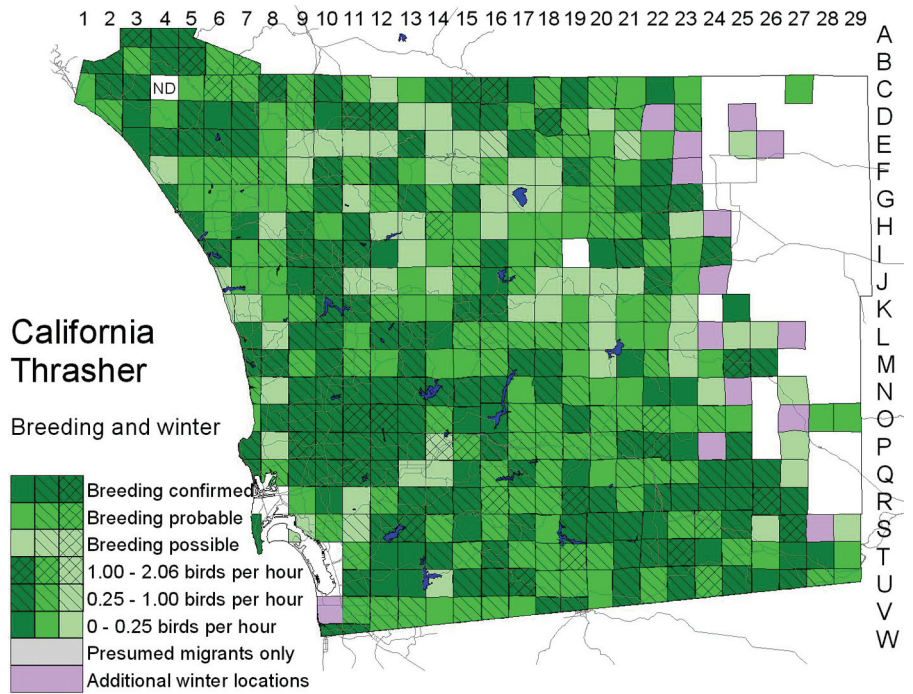
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Mountains east to Fallbrook, along the north side of Palomar Mountain east to Bucksnot Mountain and Indian Flats, in central San Diego County from Miramar

east to El Cajon Mountain and Alpine, and all across southern San Diego County from Otay Mountain to the Jacumba Mountains. The species ranges from sea level to the summit of Hot Springs Mountain (E20; up to three on 9 June 2001; K. L. Weaver).

The California Thrasher extends down the east slope of the mountains to their bases, being uncommon in open desert-edge scrub. Small numbers are isolated in the pinyon/juniper zone of the Vallecito Mountains (up to three in Pinyon Mountain Valley, K25, 26 May 2000, D. C. Seals). In the Santa Rosa Mountains the California Thrasher ranges barely into San Diego County on the south flank of Rabbit Peak (C27; two singing on 3 May 2000, P. Unitt). At low elevations in the northern Anza-Borrego Desert the species ranges east to Lower Willows (D23; up to five on 12 May 2001, B. Peterson) and Tamarisk Grove (I24; up to six on 17 March 1998, P. K. Nelson), except for irregular occurrences in the mesquite thicket at the west end of Clark Dry Lake [E25; seen repeatedly in 1993, M. L. Gabel in Massey (1998); one on 17 March 2000, K. L. Weaver]. In the southern Anza-Borrego Desert the California Thrasher occurs at all the oases along the bases of the mountains, being especially numerous in the extensive mesquites at Vallecito (M25; up to 12 on 27 April 1998, M. C. Jorgensen). Along Carrizo Creek it ranges east to Carrizo Marsh on the Imperial County line (O29; up to three, including an agitated pair, on 6 May 1998, P. D. Jorgensen).

Nesting: California Thrashers build a bulky cup nest of sticks, usually placing it in the upper half of a dense shrub where it is screened from above by foliage. Like most sedentary chaparral birds, the California Thrasher begins laying typically in the third week of March, but occasionally it begins earlier. Reports of feeding young as early as 18 March and fledglings as early as 28 March imply incubation begun about 1 March. California Thrasher eggs have been collected at San Diego as early as 9 February,

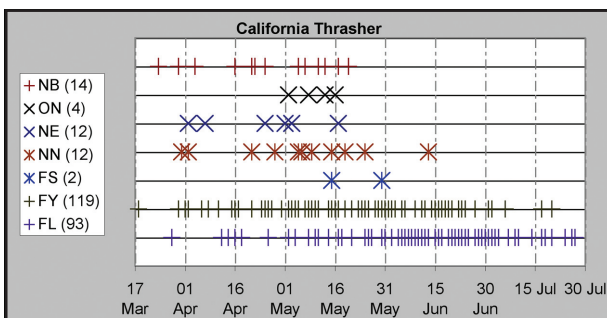


however, and at Pasadena, Los Angeles Co., as early as 15 December (Grinnell 1900, Bent 1948). November nests have been reported from Pasadena by Sargent (1940) and from Los Angeles by Davis (1952). In San Diego County a barely fledged young was picked up in Valley Center (G11) 16 October 1997 (SDNHM 49967). Michael A. Patten noted young one to two weeks out of the nest near Spring Valley (R13) 11 March 2002. Evidently a few California Thrashers will nest in fall or winter if stimulated by conditions such as early rain.

Winter: As expected for a sedentary species, the California Thrasher's pattern of abundance in winter is the same as in the breeding season. Our maximum daily count was 45 around Oriflamme Mountain (M22) 22 February 2000 (J. R. Barth).

The species' dispersal outside its breeding range is minimal. In winter, we noted it in the Anza-Borrego Desert in 12 atlas squares where we did not record it during the breeding season, but all these were adjacent to squares where we did find it in spring or summer. Winter records include two for the mesquite thicket at the west end of Clark Dry Lake (D25; up to two on 20 December 1998, E. Post).

Conservation: The California Thrasher is moderately sensitive to habitat fragmentation. Among San Diego's canyons isolated by urbanization, Crooks et al. (2001) found thrashers consistently in tracts of scrub of 30 or more hectares only; they found them inconsistently in fragments of 8 to 30 hectares and not in fragments smaller than 8 hectares. By 1997 they had disappeared from 4 of 11 canyons where they occurred in 1987 and colonized only one additional canyon (Crooks et al. 2001). On the scale of our atlas grid, however, the California Thrasher appears absent from only the most heavily urbanized areas.



The California Thrasher prefers a habitat that is subject to fire, but it is among the slower species to recolonize recovering burned chaparral. Surveys near Pine Valley found the California Thrasher to be one of three chaparral birds still significantly less abundant in areas averaging 6 years since a fire than in areas averaging 30 years since a fire (Cleveland National Forest unpublished data).

Taxonomy: The California Thrasher has been divided into two or three subspecies, but the differences (in color) are slight. Whether they suffice to support a taxonomic distinction needs reevaluation on the basis of unfoxed, freshly molted specimens.