

### Canyon Wren *Catherpes mexicanus*

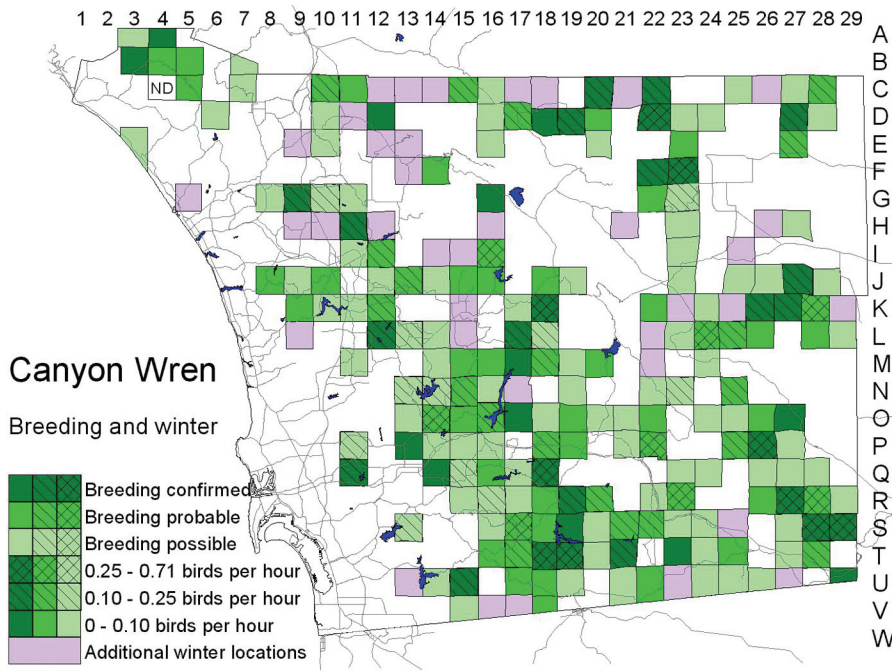
No bird sound evokes a feeling of wilderness more than the spiraling, echoing song of the Canyon Wren. Cliffs, talus slopes, desert gorges, rocky ravines, and boulder-studded chaparral are the Canyon Wren's habitat. A year-round resident, the Canyon Wren is uncommon, living in well-spaced territories.

**Breeding distribution:** The Canyon Wren's range is constrained by the birds' need for rugged topography. Such conditions are widespread in San Diego County's foothills, mountains, and desert, but even here the wren's distribution is quite patchy. San Diego County's mosaic of geology also affects the Canyon Wren: mountains formed of granite, such as Woodson or Corte Madera, offer far more exposed rock and so more Canyon Wren habitat than those formed of gabbro, such as Viejas or McGinty, which lack extensive rock outcrops and are more uniformly clothed in chaparral. The higher counts on the coastal slope are from granitic terrain like the San Diego River gorge near Dye Mountain (K18; nine on 9 July 2000,



Photo by Suzanne I. Bond

L. J. Hargrove), Lyons Peak (S17; seven on 11 July 1999, J. R. Barth), and the gorge of Cottonwood Creek below Barrett Dam (T18; seven on 8 June 2000, L. J. Hargrove). Nevertheless, the wrens still occur in fair numbers on some steep gabbro peaks like Otay Mountain (four on the north slope, U15, 31 May 2000, L. J. Hargrove).



Indian Flats (D19) 23 May 2001 was in a vertical crevice just below some White-throated Swift nests (J. R. Barth). The Canyon Wren takes advantage of man-made nest sites too. One nest near the rocky slopes of the south fork of Moosa Canyon (G9) 30 May 1998 was in an outdoor light on a patio (C. Cook); another at Lake Morena (T21) 31 May 1999 was inside an equipment shed (R. and S. L. Breisch).

Bent (1948) reported that 68 California egg sets ranged in date from 28 March to 11 July. The breeding season we observed in San Diego County 1997–2001 agrees with this almost exactly, except that a bird between Lake Poway and Mount Woodson (L12) carrying insects 4 April 1998 (M. and B.

Other than a single singing male near the mouth of Horno Canyon (E3) 30 May 1998 (R. and S. L. Breisch) we did not find the Canyon Wren during the breeding season within about 5 miles of the coast. The most coastal localities were in San Mateo Canyon (B3; two singing males 28 May 2000, P. Unitt), the canyon of San Marcos Creek (J8; pair 28 June 1997, J. O. Zimmer), and Mission Gorge (Q11; up to six on 11 July 1999, N. Osborn). Elevation is not a concern to the Canyon Wren in San Diego County; the species occurs near the summits of both Hot Springs Mountain (E20; singing male 19 May 2001, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt) and Cuyamaca Peak (M20; two singing males 23 May 1998, G. L. Rogers). Canyon Wrens reach their peak abundance in the steep canyons descending the east face of the mountains: the maximum count was 14, including eight singing males, in Borrego Palm Canyon (F23) 5–8 July 2001 (L. J. Hargrove). Farther out into the desert the birds are fewer but well distributed in suitable terrain, with up to seven along Alma Wash near Starfish Cove (K28) 24 March 2000 (L. J. Hargrove).

**Nesting:** The Canyon Wren typically nests in rock crevices, in caves, or on sheltered rock ledges. One nest near

McIntosh) implies young hatched from eggs laid by about 19 March. Several species nested exceptionally early in the wet spring of 1998.

**Winter:** The Canyon Wren engages in only minor dispersal away from its breeding territories in winter. Furthermore, most locations where the species was seen in winter but not the breeding season may be suitable breeding habitat, perhaps occupied only intermittently. The only site where the species occurred in winter more than one atlas square away from where it was found in the breeding season was Ysidora Gorge (G5), along the Santa Margarita River in Camp Pendleton (one on 26 December 1998 and 23 December 2000, P. Unitt). There is little if any retreat from the higher elevations in winter. One individual was near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain 5 February 2000 (K. L. Weaver); others were around 5600 feet elevation near Garnet Mountain (N22) 19 and 26 February 2000 (G. L. Rogers).

**Conservation:** The Canyon Wren has become a village and even city bird in places in Mexico. At San Javier in Baja California Sur it enters the old stone mission and takes advantage of the church's acoustics to amplify its song. But in San Diego County it shows little sign of urban adaptation: the walls of packed adobe common in Mexico are a microhabitat no longer duplicated in the United States. Most Canyon Wren habitat is insulated from development by its very ruggedness. The only possible change in the species' distribution we detected was its absence 1997–2002 from the bluffs at Torrey Pines City Park (O7), where J. L. Dunn noted it occasionally from 1974 to 1976 (Unitt 1984).

**Taxonomy:** Canyon Wrens in San Diego County are *C. m. conspersus* Ridgway, 1873, which ranges from the Great Basin south to northwestern Mexico.

