

Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*

The Common Yellowthroat is second only to the Song Sparrow as the commonest bird of San Diego County's riparian woodland. Freshwater marshes and even uplands overgrown with rank weeds like fennel or white sweet clover also offer good habi-

tat. The yellowthroat is common in both summer and winter but not sedentary. Wintering birds move into ornamental shrubbery and thickets of dry weeds where the species does not breed, and migrants show up occasionally even in desert scrub or chaparral. Despite its preferring wetland habitats

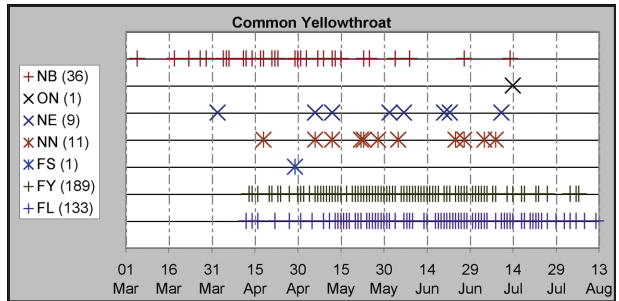
and being a principal host of the Brown-headed Cowbird, the Common Yellowthroat has sustained its numbers in San Diego County better than have many other small insectivorous birds.

Breeding distribution: As a bird primarily of riparian woodland and freshwater marshes, the Common Yellowthroat is most numerous in the valleys of the coastal lowland. Counts in one atlas square on a single day ranged as high as 107 (70 singing males) in lower Los Peñasquitos Canyon (N8) 7 May 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg et al.). With increasing elevation the yellowthroat's habitat becomes scarcer and the birds less abundant, though they are still locally common, as near Mesa Grande (H17; 23 on 12 May 2001, C. and J. Manning) and along Buena Vista Creek in Warner Valley (G19; 25 on 24 June 2000, E. C. Hall). Yellowthroats breed up to about 4500 feet elevation in the Palomar and Cuyamaca mountains. On the desert slope they breed at riparian oases, especially Lower Willows (D23; up to 26 on 12 May 2001, B. L. Peterson) and Sentenac Ciénaga (J23; up to 33, including 26 singing males, 7 June 2000, R. Thériault), uncommonly elsewhere.

Nesting: Common Yellowthroats nest in dense, low undergrowth, sometimes on the ground. Atlas results revealed their breeding season to be broader than the 14 April–14 June attested by 23 egg sets collected from San Diego County 1902–35 (WVZ) and even the 4 April–10 July attested by 66 from throughout California (Bent 1953). Observations of nest building along the Sweetwater River in Sunnyside (S12) 5 March 1999 (T. W. Dorman) and fledglings in Mission Valley (Q10) 12 April 1998 (P. Unitt) suggest that yellowthroats begin laying as early as mid March. Observations of nest building at the upper end of Sweetwater Reservoir (S13) 13 July 1998 and fledglings at O'Neill Lake (E6) 12 August 1998

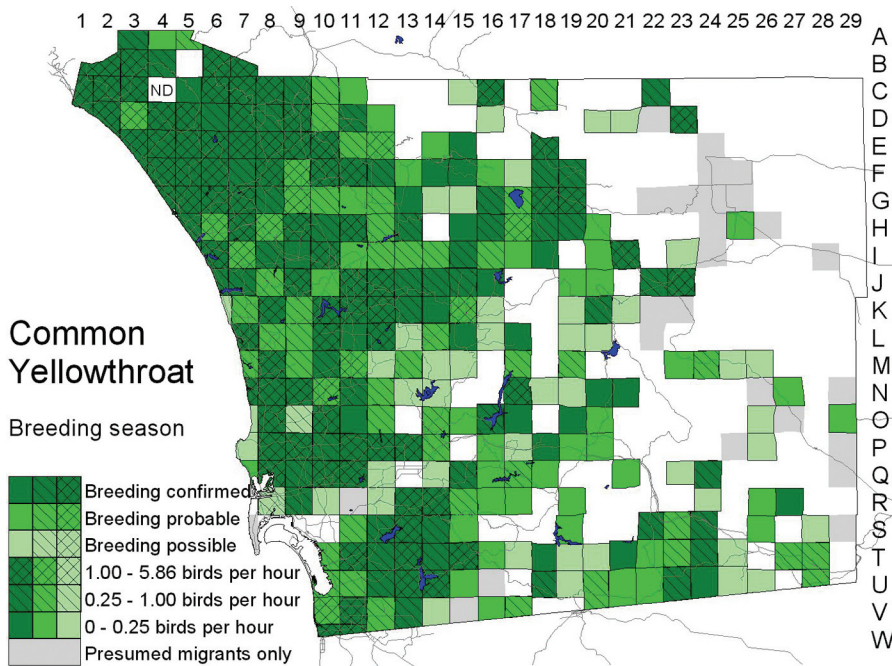


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

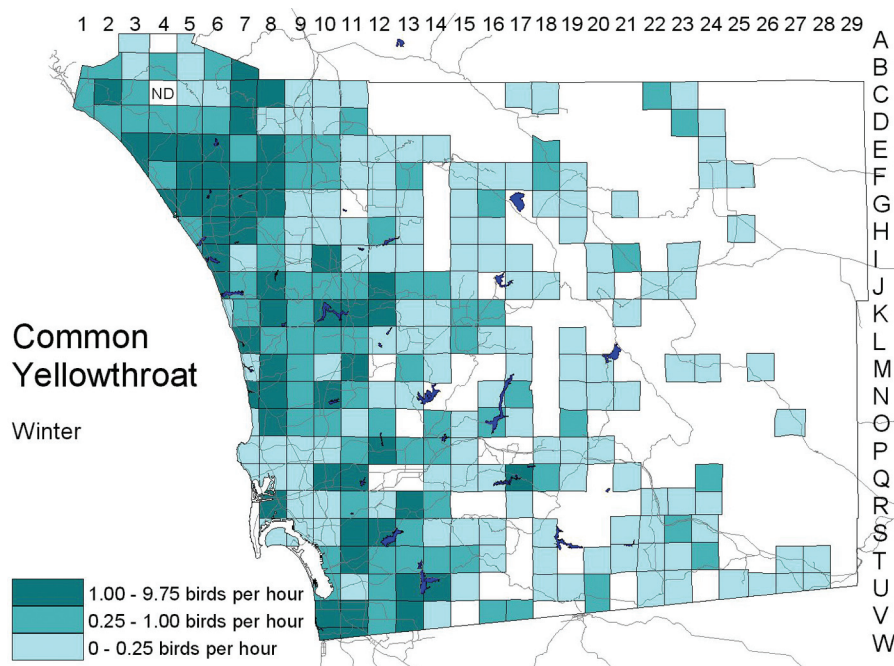


(P. A. Ginsburg) suggest they continue laying as late as mid July.

Migration: Away from sites where it breeds and winters, the Common Yellowthroat is an uncommon migrant. Seldom are more than two such migrants seen in a day, though maximum counts of them range up to eight in Borrego Springs (G24) 25 April 1998 (P. D. Ache) and seven in Rodriguez Canyon (L22) 26 April 1999 (P. Unitt). Peak spring migration is in April (30 of 46 records), but dates range from 15 March (1997, four at Borrego Springs, P. D. Ache) to 25 May (2000, one in Rodriguez Canyon, J. R. Barth). Postbreeding dispersal evidently begins as early as 10 July (1997, one at Chollas Lake, R11, C. G. Edwards).



Winter: Though Common Yellowthroats breeding farther north invade San Diego County in migration and winter, the species winters mostly in the same areas where it breeds. Wintering Common Yellowthroats are strongly concentrated in the coastal lowland, where over 100 per day can be found in marshes and riparian undergrowth (e.g., 135 at Lake Hodges, K10, 26 December 1999, R. L. Barber). Some birds use ornamental shrubbery and patches of low



weeds away from water. The maximum count of birds wintering in nonbreeding habitat is of six at North Island Naval Air Station (S8) 18 December 1999 (R. T. Patton). Above 1500 feet elevation the species is generally uncommon, more numerous only in Warner Valley (up to 20 near Swan Lake, F18, 18 December 2000, G. L. Rogers). Winter records at exceptionally high elevations are of single birds at 4600–4650 feet at Doane Pond, Palomar Mountain State Park (E14; 27 February 2000, J. K. Wilson, A. Mauro), and Lake Cuyamaca (M20; 1 February 1999, A. P. and T. E. Keenan). In the Anza–Borrego Desert the Common Yellowthroat is a rare winter visitor to irrigated places in the Borrego Valley (up to four in the north end of the valley, E24, 19 December 1999, P. R. Pryde), with one record from a natural oasis where the species does not breed (three at Mountain Palm Springs, O27, 8 January 2000, P. K. Nelson)

Conservation: There is no strong evidence for significant changes in the numbers or status of the Common Yellowthroat through San Diego history. Even though marshes and riparian woodland have been much reduced, the yellowthroat persists in small remnants and readily recolonizes regenerated habitat. Though perhaps the

most frequent foster parent to the Brown-headed Cowbird in San Diego County, the Common Yellowthroat did not decrease grossly when the cowbird invaded, if one may judge from general assessments in the literature; the yellowthroat has always been common. Like other common hosts, it likely benefited from the widespread trapping of cowbirds initiated in the late 1980s.

Taxonomy: Subspecies of the Common Yellowthroat remain poorly quantified; the validity of many is uncertain. Grinnell (1901) distinguished the yellowthroats of southern California as *G. t. scirpicola* on the basis of their brighter color, more extensive yellow on the belly, and more rounded wing than in *G.*

t. occidentalis Brewster, 1883, of the Great Basin. *G. t. scirpicola* has been maintained through successive editions of the American Ornithologists' Union checklist though synonymized by Ridgway (1902) and Phillips et al. (1964). Similarly, a darker subspecies *G. t. arizela* Oberholser, 1899, of the Pacific Northwest and northern California was recognized by the A. O. U. (1957) but not by Grinnell and Miller (1944) or Marshall and DEDRICK (1994). Yellowthroats from the ranges of both *arizela* and *occidentalis* may be expected to reach San Diego County in migration. One subspecies universally recognized is *G. t. sinuosa* Grinnell, 1901, breeding in the salt marshes of the San Francisco Bay area and distinguished by its smaller size as well as darker color and browner flanks. It is partially migratory and known in San Diego County still from only two specimens, from San Diego 30 October 1914 (SDNHM 33397, Willett 1933) and San Diego Bay 3 March 1939 (SDNHM 18054). With the elimination of over 80% of the salt marshes around San Francisco Bay *sinuosa* has become rare (Marshall and DEDRICK 1994). Presumably the numbers of birds dispersing south has been reduced proportionately, and the even greater level of habitat loss in southern California could select against migrants.