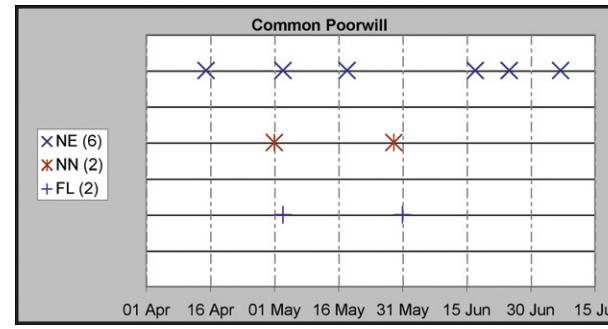
Common Poorwill *Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*

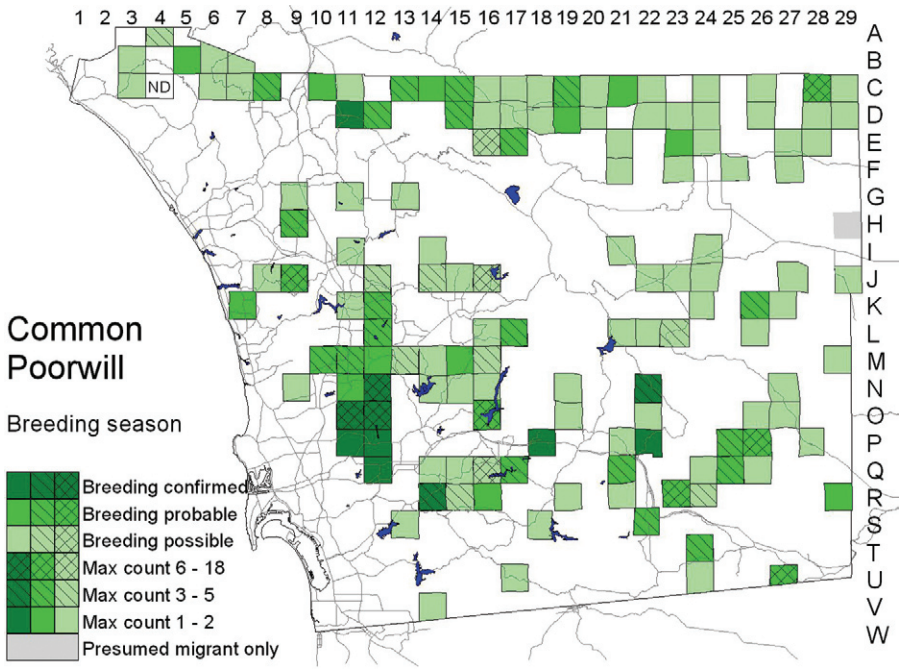
The Common Poorwill rests quietly on the ground during the day, hidden under chaparral or camouflaged on rocky desert slopes. After dark it forages for flying insects and advertises its territory with its eponymous trisyllabic call, "poor-will," or, more accurately, "poor Philip." The poorwill is fairly common at least locally but seldom found except by voice. Thus apparent variations in its abundance could be due more to weather conditions that affect the birds' calling—and human listeners' ability to hear—than to variations in the birds' numbers by habitat.

Photo by Anthony Mercieca

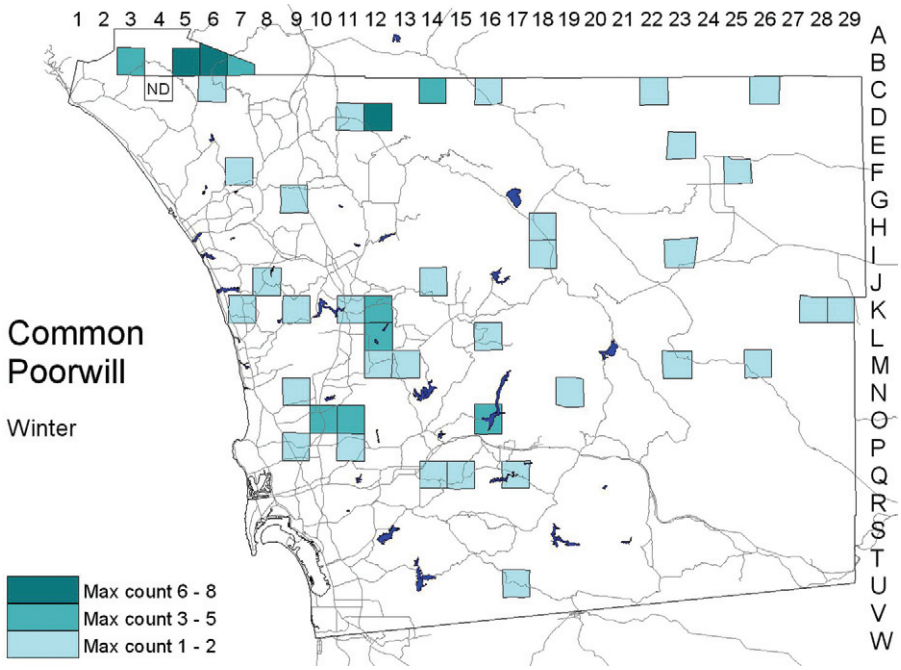
Breeding distribution: The poorwill is perhaps the bird most poorly sampled by our atlas protocol. Because we had no standards for nocturnal coverage, some atlas squares were covered at night much better than others, and the poorwill was undoubtedly missed in dozens of squares where it occurs. Nevertheless, the species is widespread in San Diego County, though lacking from developed and forested areas. It may avoid the coast, or the dearth of coastal records during the breeding season may be a by-product of urbanization. In the Anza–Borrego Desert the poorwill inhabits rocky hills, alluvial slopes, and badlands but probably not flat valley floors. The few records from flat sandy areas (latest, one near Peg Leg Road in the Borrego Valley, F25, 7 May 1998, P. D. Ache) may be of migrants, not locally breeding birds. On the coastal slope the largest numbers are in areas of extensive chaparral, as in Goodan Ranch County Park (N12; 16 on 28 April and 3 May 1998, W. E. Haas) and along Kitchen Creek Road (R23; 12 on 13 April 1997, L. J. Hargrove). The Campo Plateau offers much habitat for poorwills, and some high counts came from this area (eight 1.5 miles east of Lake Domingo, U27, 2 May 2000, F. L. Unmack), but our nocturnal coverage of this region was light. The site nearest the coast was 1.5 miles inland in Leucadia (K7; two on 29 April 1998, B. Bothner), but we seldom noted the species less than 10 miles inland. The poorwill is not confined by elevation and is confirmed breeding up to 5000 feet elevation in the Laguna Mountains (N22; eggshells found 14 July 2001, G. L. Rogers).

Nesting: The poorwill lays its eggs on the bare ground with the benefit of no nest whatsoever. Even if the species were diurnal its nesting would be difficult to track, as it carries no nest material and feeds its young by regurgitation. As a result, we confirmed breeding only a few times, finding just five nests with eggs (15 April–25 June), two broods of young chicks three or four days old (about 1 May 2001, Mission Trails Regional Park, P11, D. C. Bostock; 29 May 1999, near Jamacha, R14, W. E. Haas), and fledglings twice, plus the broken eggshells in the Laguna Mountains.





Migration: Specimens of the inland subspecies on the coastal slope attest to the poorwill's migrating through San Diego County in both spring and fall (see Taxonomy). Furthermore, the poorwill has been found repeatedly if rarely in both spring and fall in areas and habitats where it does



not breed, especially at Point Loma. The local population may be largely resident, the birds going torpid rather than migrating when the supply of night-flying insects is low.

Winter: One surprising result of the atlas study was the number of poorwills found in winter and how that number was related to rainfall. Before 1984 there was only one record of the poorwill in San Diego County in December or January; from 1997 to 2002 we noted it 35 times in those two months. The detections of the poorwill in winter (February included) were concentrated strongly in the wet year 1997–98, which yielded 32 reports totaling 59 individuals. The next winter the figures dropped to 17 reports totaling 29 individuals, and in the drought-plagued final three winters of the study they stabilized at 6 to 9 reports and 11 to 18 individuals per year. Though the nights during El Niño were often cool and wet, the rain clearly stimulated the birds to call and feed. The largest numbers found per night were greatest at this time (up to six near De Luz, B6, 25 January 1998, and eight in the Santa Margarita Mountains, B5, 31 January 1998, W. E. Haas). The winter report from the highest elevation, about 3200 feet in Sherilton Valley (N19; one on 18 January 1998, G. and R. Wynn), was also during the wet year.

Though we found poorwills in winter in a few places where we did not find them in the breeding season, these were all most likely locations where the species is resident.

Conservation: No adequate data exist from which trends in poorwill numbers in San Diego County can be judged. Nevertheless, as a bird that roosts and nests on the ground, the poorwill is ill adapted to the habitat loss, human disturbance, and cats that accompany urbanization. It appears absent from urban canyons, though still inhabiting areas on the urban fringe such as Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, Mission Trails Regional Park, and the Otay–Sweetwater unit of San Diego National Wildlife Refuge. Poorwills often use the openings in chaparral provided by roads as launch pads for their nocturnal foraging. As a result, they are particularly susceptible to being killed by moving cars; the San Diego Natural History Museum has received many specimens as a result. As the human population of San Diego County's back country increases, so does the number of roads and traffic on them, increasing the toll on the poorwill.

Taxonomy: San Diego County is an area of contact and intergradation between the dark brownish subspecies *P. n. californicus* Ridgway, 1887, and the pale nominate *P. n. nuttallii* (Audubon, 1844), in which the pale areas on the upperparts are silvery-gray, making the black spots and triangles stand out in bolder contrast. Subspecies *californicus* matches leaf litter; *nuttallii* matches granite. A small minority of the 45 specimens from the coastal slope of San Diego County are as dark as *californicus* from northern California, such as a male from Dulzura (T16) 15 May 1917 (SDNHM 31432) and a female that had recently ovulated from Lakeside (P14) 23 July 1992 (SDNHM 48121). Most, however, are slightly paler, intermediate toward *nuttallii*, including the one winter specimen, from Mission Trails Park (P11) 31 December 1991 (SDNHM 47868), and two specimens from slightly east of the mountain crest, from San Felipe Valley near Paroli Spring (I21) 10 October 1983 (SDNHM 42604) and Boulevard (T26) 12 September 1981 (SDNHM 41585).

Fourteen specimens from the coastal slope are typical of *nuttallii* or closest to it. Some of these are probably migrants from the north or northeast; *nuttallii* definitely migrates through southeastern California (Rea 1983, Patten et al. 2003). But some of the specimens of *nuttallii* from the coastal slope represent the breeding population, especially one from Mission Valley 19 May 1922 (SDNHM 31460) and one still in molt from Pamo Valley 8 miles north of Ramona (I15) 10 August 1992 (SDNHM 48118). The situation of the poorwill thus resembles that of the Great Horned Owl, in which the population of San Diego County's coastal slope is heterogeneous, covering all variations between the coastal and desert subspecies.

Of the ten specimens of the poorwill from the lower elevations of the Anza–Borrego Desert most are typical of *nuttallii*. These very likely represent the local breeding population; some of those collected in April had moderately enlarged gonads, though none was in full breeding condition. The breeding range of *nuttallii* thus extends south of that mapped by Grinnell and Miller (1944). One specimen from 0.25 mile west of San Felipe Narrows (I25) 6

May 1966 (SDNHM 36000) is closer to *californicus*, resembling most specimens from the coastal slope. Two specimens from the Anza–Borrego Desert (SDNHM 17937, 40974) have the black spots on the upperparts more or less reduced and are thus somewhat intermediate toward *P. n. hueyi* Dickey, 1928. Their color, though, is still the silver gray of *nuttallii*; true *hueyi*, pinkish and finely patterned, appears narrowly restricted to the lower Colorado River valley, being unrecorded even in the Salton Sink.