

Crissal Thrasher *Toxostoma crissale*

Here at the western limit of its range, the Crissal Thrasher has one precarious toehold on San Diego County: the thicket or bosque of mesquite in the floor of the Borrego Valley. Though year-round residents, the birds are rare, shy, and difficult to see. The poor health of the bosque, likely the result of a water table lowered by groundwater pumping, bodes ill for the thrasher's long-term survival here. The Crissal Thrasher is scarce throughout its California range and is regarded as a species of special concern by the California Department of Fish and Game.

Breeding distribution: The Crissal Thrasher's habitat in San Diego County covers about 3 square miles, almost entirely within atlas square G25 between the Borrego Valley airport and Borrego Sink, east of Borrego Valley Road. The population's size is unknown but is unlikely to be more than 10 pairs. The highest daily counts during the breeding season consisted of just one family group of five, on 4 and 11 June 1998 (R. Thériault). The only sighting outside of square G25 was of two just to the east, on the northeast side of the Borrego Sink in G26 18 April 1998 (P. Unitt, F. L. Unmack).

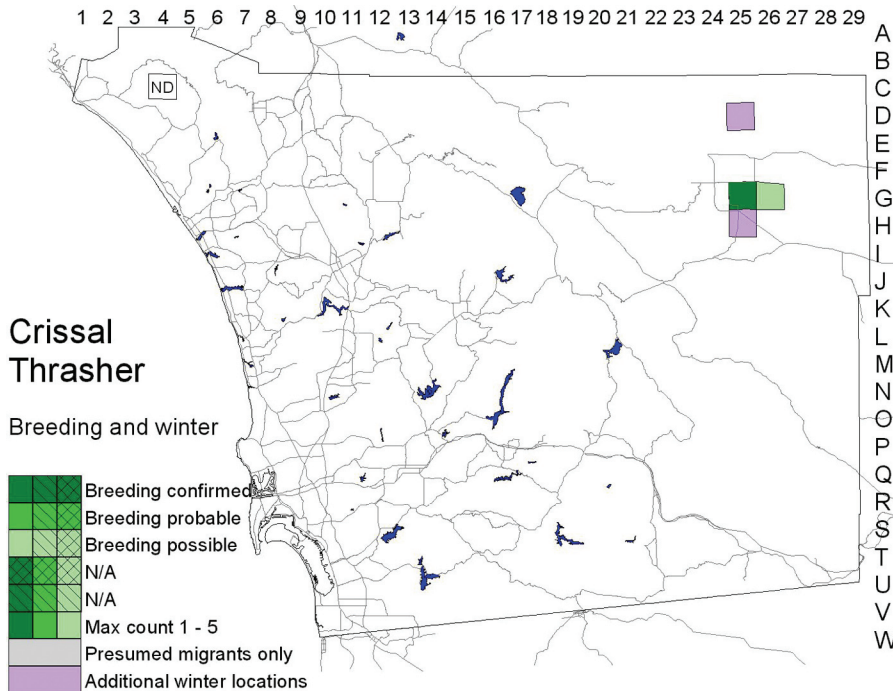
Melvin L. Gabel (in Massey 1998) noted the Crissal Thrasher in the mesquite thicket at the west end of Clark

Dry Lake (D25/E25) on 4 June 1993 and 27 June 1994 but found the California Thrasher there more consistently. From 1997 to 2002 our only sighting here was of one in winter. Lying 7 miles north of the Borrego Valley mesquite bosque, this is the only place in California where both the California and Crissal Thrashers have occurred. Reports of the Crissal elsewhere in the Anza-Borrego Desert are based on misidentified California Thrashers.

Nesting: The Crissal Thrasher usually builds its nest in dense thorny shrubs, using mesquite primarily if it is available (Gilman 1909, 1915, Hanna 1933). The only information recorded on Crissal Thrasher nesting in San Diego County is Robert Thériault's observations in 1998: fledglings following or being fed by their parents on 4, 11, and 15 June. On the basis of an incubation period of 14 days and a nestling period of 11–16 days, these young hatched from eggs laid in early May. Most likely they were the result of a second or replacement clutch, as the mean date of eggs collected in the Coachella Valley, Riverside County, is 27 March (Cody 1999). Fifty-six egg sets from throughout California range from 10 February to 10 June (Bent 1948).

Winter: Winter records of the Crissal Thrasher are from the same area in the Borrego Valley as those in the breeding season, except for a few sightings near the Borrego Springs sewage ponds, on the south side of the Borrego Sink (H25; P. D. Jorgensen, Massey 1998), and one at the northwest corner of Clark Dry Lake (D25) 4 February 1999 (B. Scheible et al.). All winter sightings during the atlas period were of single individuals only. The species is found on most Borrego Springs Christmas bird counts, always as a result of a targeted search; the maximum recorded on the count was four on 28 December 1986.

Conservation: The Crissal Thrasher has been noted continuously in the Borrego Valley's mesquite bosque since Stott and Sams (1959) first reported four on 12 December 1958. Data are too skimpy to suggest any trend. But the long-term outlook is not good: the mesquite bosque suffers from a falling water table and illegal wood cutting (R.



Thériault in Massey 1998). The area is divided among multiple privately owned parcels, but public access is uncontrolled. Overpumping of groundwater, putting the water table out of reach of mesquite roots, is probably the most serious threat to this habitat, unique in San Diego County. Habitat loss to agriculture, urbanization, and the spread of saltcedar threaten the Crissal Thrasher

throughout its California range (Laudenslayer et al. 1992, S. D. Fitton unpubl. data).

Taxonomy: The Crissal Thrashers of California belong to the pale subspecies *T. c. coloradense* van Rossem, 1946. The species has not yet been collected in San Diego County.