

Downy Woodpecker *Picoides pubescens*

Among San Diego County's more interesting bird stories is that of the Downy Woodpecker. There were a few records, including breeding, before the early 1970s, but by that time the woodpecker was essentially a lost species. In the late 1970s it was found locally in northwestern San Diego County, then in the 1980s it spread abruptly throughout the coastal lowland. Currently it is an uncommon but widespread resident of riparian woodland and gradually spreading inland to ever higher elevations.

Breeding distribution: The Downy Woodpecker's center of distribution remains the riparian woodlands of northwestern San Diego County, where daily counts in one atlas square are as high as six (along the San Luis Rey River near Gird Road, E8, 21 and 26 March, 26 April, and 9 July 1999, P. A. Ginsburg). In this region the birds have moved beyond the main rivers to colonize many subsidiary creeks with willow thickets. In the southern half of the county the Downy Woodpecker still occurs mainly along the principal watercourses: Los Peñasquitos Canyon, the San Diego River, the Sweetwater River, the Otay River, and the Tijuana River. The most inland sites where the species is known during the breeding season are Temecula Creek near Oak Grove (C16; up to four on 20 June 1998, K. L. Weaver), the San Luis Rey River near Puerta La Cruz (E18; two on 18 June 2000, J. K. Wilson, P. K. Nelson), Warner Springs (F19; one on 3 May 1999, C. G. Edwards), the San Luis Rey River near the Forest Service picnic ground (G16; up to two, a pair, on 3 July 1999, W. E. Haas), Witch Creek (J18; female with two fledglings 12 July 1999, S. E. Smith), Hatfield Creek 3.2 miles east of Ramona (K16; pair at nest 11 June 2000, L. J. Hargrove), Sweetwater River above Loveland Reservoir (Q17; one on 21 May 1999, P. Famolaro), and Marron Valley (V17; four on 12 June 2000, P. P. Beck).

The records along the Mexican border, in Marron

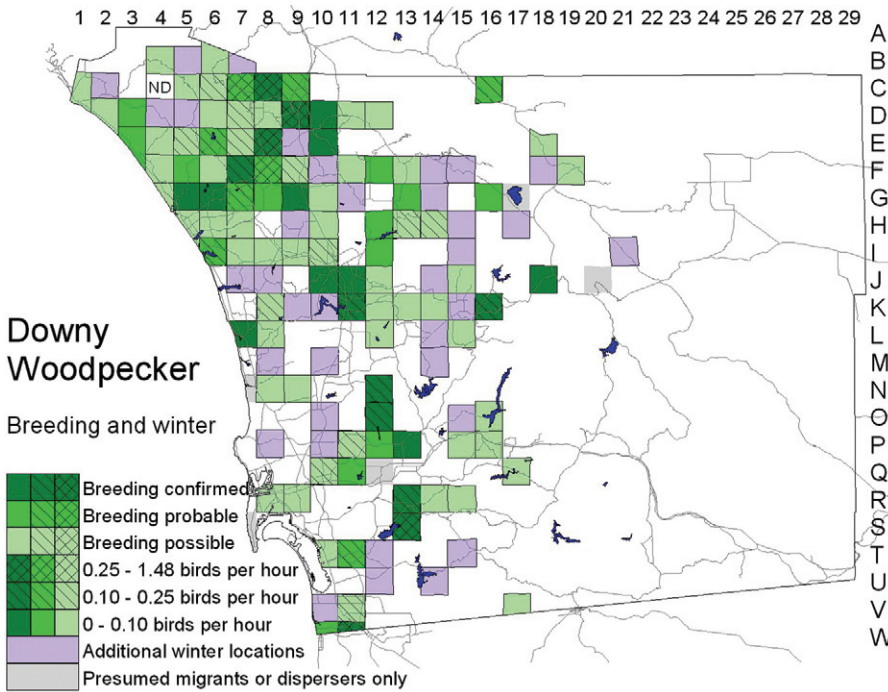


Photo by Jack C. Daynes

Valley and the Tijuana River valley (W11; up to three, including a fledgling, 19 June 1999, P. Unitt) are notable because the Downy Woodpecker is not known to breed in Mexico. By 2001 there were only four well supported records from Baja California, all from November through February (Erickson et al. 2001; M. A. Patten).

Nesting: In San Diego County, the Downy Woodpecker nests typically in willow snags. Dates of breeding activity observed suggest egg laying from mid April to mid June; Bent (1939) gave 7 April–9 June as the range for 82 California egg sets.

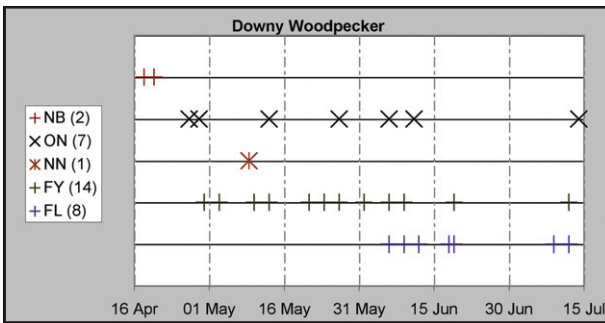
Migration: The Downy Woodpecker is nonmigratory, but there must be considerable dispersal for the species to have spread so rapidly. Some, perhaps most, of this is done by the young soon after fledging. A juvenile found dead in the Fletcher Hills area of El Cajon (Q12) 14 June 1998 (C. Tratnyek, SDNHM 50417) was crossing unsuitable habitat. Other records of apparent dispersers or pioneers away from breeding sites are of single birds at Point Loma (S7) 12 April 1986 (R. E. Webster, AB 40:524, 1986) and 22 May 2001 (P. A. Ginsburg), one in the Hillcrest area of San Diego (R9) 25 July 2001 (P. Unitt), one at



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Breeding and winter

- Breeding confirmed
- Breeding probable
- Breeding possible
- 0.25 - 1.48 birds per hour
- 0.10 - 0.25 birds per hour
- 0 - 0.10 birds per hour
- Additional winter locations
- Presumed migrants or dispersers only



Lake Henshaw (G17) 17 July 1998 (C. G. Edwards), and one near Julian (J20) 17 August 2000 (M. B. Stowe). At 4000 feet, the last, and one at 4650 feet at Lake Cuyamaca (M20) 11 March 1988 (C. G. Edwards), were at the highest elevations where the Downy Woodpecker has yet been recorded in San Diego County.

Winter: Our winter observations of the Downy Woodpecker included several in marginal or atypical habitat, suggesting further pioneering. Such birds included individuals at 2650–3350 feet elevation along the San Luis Rey River between Lake Henshaw and Puerta La Cruz (F18) 10 December 2000 (J. R. Barth, M. Mathos), at Mesa Grande (H17) 17 December 2001 (K. L. Weaver, J. McCole), and, most notably, one a short distance onto the desert slope in San Felipe Valley (I21) 3 December 2000 (W. E. Haas).

Conservation: In the first half of the 20th century the Downy Woodpecker was rare in San Diego County but recorded at Bonsall, the head of Lake Hodges (eggs collected, WFVZ), San Pasqual (“rather rare,” eggs collected, Sharp 1907), 2–3 miles northeast of Old Mission Dam, and 2 miles northeast of Lakeside (Short 1971). Then the species evidently declined almost to extirpation: in the 1950s and 1960s there were only two records. In the 1970s it

was absent from the San Pasqual and Old Mission Dam areas but present in small numbers along and near the Santa Margarita and lower San Luis Rey rivers (Unitt 1984). From 1981 on the Downy Woodpecker could be found consistently along the San Diego River. It was first noted in the Tijuana River valley 25 September 1983 (C. G. Edwards, AB 38:247, 1984), and by 1990 it was resident there. Since then the Downy Woodpecker has been filling in by colonizing smaller patches of riparian woodland and spreading inland. It was found on only one San Diego Christmas bird count before 1986, but since then it has been found annually, the numbers increasing gradually, reaching 10 on 15 December 2001.

The Downy Woodpecker’s reversal of fortune in San Diego County seems counter-intuitive for a species dependent on riparian woodland, so much of which has been degraded and removed. A possible factor is the damming of most rivers and creeks, stabilizing the riparian environment in a way it never experienced previously. Under natural conditions winter floods knock over trees and perhaps prevent many from growing to maturity and developing enough dead snags for nest sites. Now such flooding has been greatly reduced, allowing more trees to live to maturity and senility. Changing land use has allowed riparian woodland to regenerate in some areas, such as the Tijuana River valley, where it was absent in the 1960s.

Some other subtle factors may be at work, too. The Downy Woodpecker may be benefiting from whatever causes are enabling the Nuttall’s Woodpecker to spread also. The southward spread of the Downy Woodpecker parallels that of some other species of similar habitats, especially the Western Flycatcher and Orange-crowned Warbler.

Taxonomy: Downy Woodpeckers in San Diego County, as in most of cismontane California, are *P. p. turati* (Malherbe, 1860), small with the underparts lightly tinged smoke-gray. In the field, the difference from white is difficult to appreciate in spring and summer when the birds are in worn plumage and more or less stained from months of contact with trees, but it can be seen in a good view in fall and winter when the birds are clean and fresh.

Hybrids between the Downy and Nuttall’s Woodpeckers continue to turn up occasionally, as 2.3 miles northeast of Bonsall (E8) 7 May 1984 (SDNHM 43956, Unitt 1986) and in the Tijuana River valley 25 February 1984 (G. McCaskie, AB 38:358, 1984) and 5 December 2000 (P. Unitt).