

Dusky Flycatcher *Empidonax oberholseri*

One of America’s most obscure birds, the Dusky Flycatcher is a summer visitor to San Diego County only in coniferous woodland on the tops of the highest mountains. It is uncommon in the Cuyamaca Mountains, rare and irregular on Hot Springs, Volcan, Laguna, and probably the Santa Rosa mountains. Though it nests widely in the mountains of western North America to the north of San Diego, its rarity as a migrant at lower elevations implies that its migration route to its winter range in mainland Mexico lies well to the east of us.

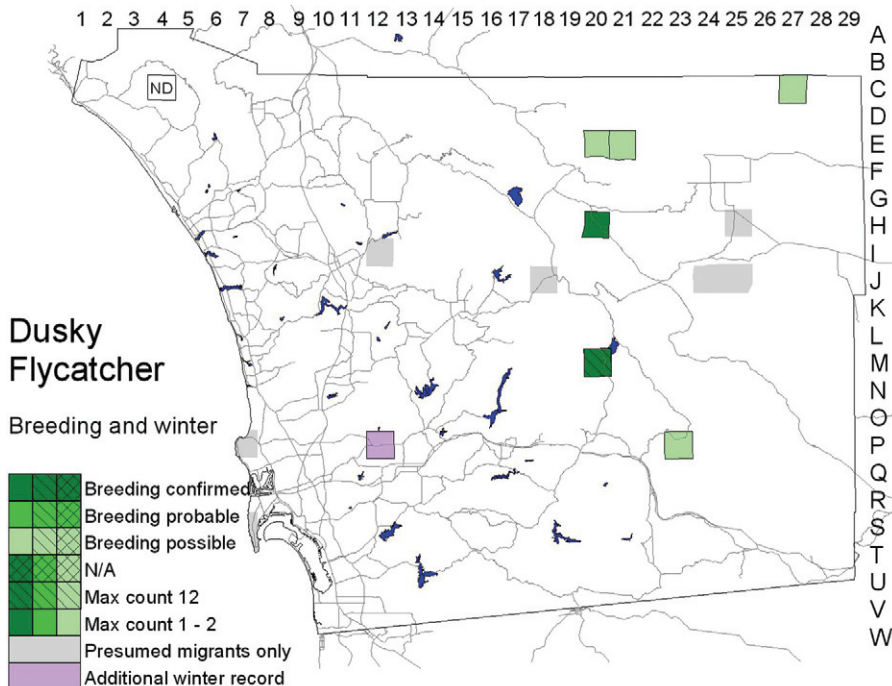
Breeding distribution: The lower end of the elevation zone occupied by the Dusky Flycatcher barely grazes the tops of San Diego County’s highest mountains. The species is normally found only above 5200 feet elevation, in conifer-dominated woodland. The vegetation zone is that where the white fir grows, though the flycatcher has no special attachment to any particular species of plant. Most records and the highest numbers are from Cuyamaca and Middle peaks (M20) in the Cuyamaca Mountains. The maximum daily count is 12, including nine singing males, on Middle Peak 11 June 2000 (R. E. Webster). Elsewhere the Dusky Flycatcher is rare, with records 1997–2001 also from Hot Springs Mountain (E20/E21; 19 June 1999



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

and 19 May 2001, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt) and from Morris Ranch Road (P23; 30 July 1999, K. Smeltzer) and the head of La Posta Creek in the Laguna Mountains (P23; 23 June 2000, E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer)—single individuals only in each case. Previous records from

the Laguna Mountains were from nearby Agua Dulce Creek and the unusually low elevation (4150 feet) of Cibbets Flat (Q23) (feeding fledgling cowbird on 4 July 1978, AB 32:1209, 1978). Before the atlas period the Dusky Flycatcher was noted on Volcan Mountain (I20), with one on 25 May 1993 (R. T. Patton) and two on 31 May 1993 (P. Unitt), as well as on Hot Springs Mountain (Unitt 1981) and Cuyamaca Peak. Also, the species may be a rare summer resident in the sparse stands of pinyons along the ridgeline of the Santa Rosa Mts., with two at 5700 feet elevation barely inside San Diego County 0.6 mile south of Rabbit Peak (C27) 2 May 2000 (P. Unitt) and one probable Dusky Flycatcher at 5400 feet near the



summit of Villager Peak (C27) 5 June 2001 (R. Thériault). The Dusky Flycatcher breeds commonly in the Riverside County portion of the Santa Rosa Mountains (Weathers 1983). The single San Diego County record of breeding Dusky Flycatchers away from these principal mountains is of a pair, the female building a nest, in a north-facing canyon at 3800–4000 feet elevation about 0.75 mile southeast of Barrel Spring at the north end of the San Felipe Hills (H20; A. P. and T. E. Keenan).

San Diego County lies near the southern tip of the Dusky Flycatcher's breeding range; the small population discovered by Erickson and Wurster (1998) in the Sierra San Pedro Mártir is the only one known farther south.

Nesting: The Dusky Flycatcher's cup nest is typically attached by its sides to vertical twigs, either upright or hanging. Knowledge of the species' nesting in San Diego County, though, is minimal. Besides the record from near Barrel Spring, the only breeding confirmations 1997–2001 were of one nest building in tall *Ceanothus* or *Cercocarpus* at the south side of Cherry Flat near the summit of Cuyamaca Peak on 23 May 1998 (G. L. Rogers) and of one feeding young one quarter mile from the summit of Cuyamaca Peak 6 August 1999 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan). Earlier records are of an occupied nest in a sugar pine on the north slope of Middle Peak 25 June 1988 (P. Unitt) and a nest with young near Agua Dulce Creek (O23) 13 July 1974 (AB 28:950, 1974).

Migration: Because of the difficulty in identifying silent Dusky Flycatchers in the field, information on the species' migration is scanty and uncertain. Nevertheless, the Dusky Flycatcher is very rare in both spring and fall. It is very rare also in the Salton Sink (Patten et al. 2003)

and essentially absent as a migrant in Baja California (Erickson et al. 2001), so its migration route evidently swings far to the east before it reaches the latitude of San Diego County. Eight published spring records from Point Loma extend from 21 April to 9 May (AB). Fall dates extend from 11 September to 12 October (Unitt 1984).

Winter: Brennan Mulrooney studied one along the San Diego River in Santee (P12) 17 December 1999 (NAB 54:221, 2000). He noted a medium-long narrow bill with a largely dark mandible, thin even eye-ring, tail flicked up repeatedly, and a "whit" call, features that in combination appear to eliminate all similar species. This is the first winter record for San Diego County and one of very few for southern California.

Conservation: Though Stephens (1919a) said "breeds in small numbers in the higher mountains" (at a time before the Dusky and Gray Flycatchers were adequately distinguished), he collected none. No details of Dusky Flycatcher nesting were reported in San Diego County's mountains until 1974. The species has remained rare except in the Cuyamaca Mountains, where it has increased and can be found regularly in small numbers. The species as a whole is maintaining itself or increasing (Sedgwick 1993). Johnson (1974) attributed an increase from the 1930s to the 1970s in the mountains of southern Nevada to a shift toward a cooler, wetter climate. The birds' habitat in San Diego County is little disturbed, but climatic warming and drying could dislodge the Dusky Flycatcher from its toehold on the mountain tops. Annual rainfall and summer temperature data from Cuyamaca 1948 to 2002 reveal no long-term trend.