Hooded Oriole *Icterus cucullatus*

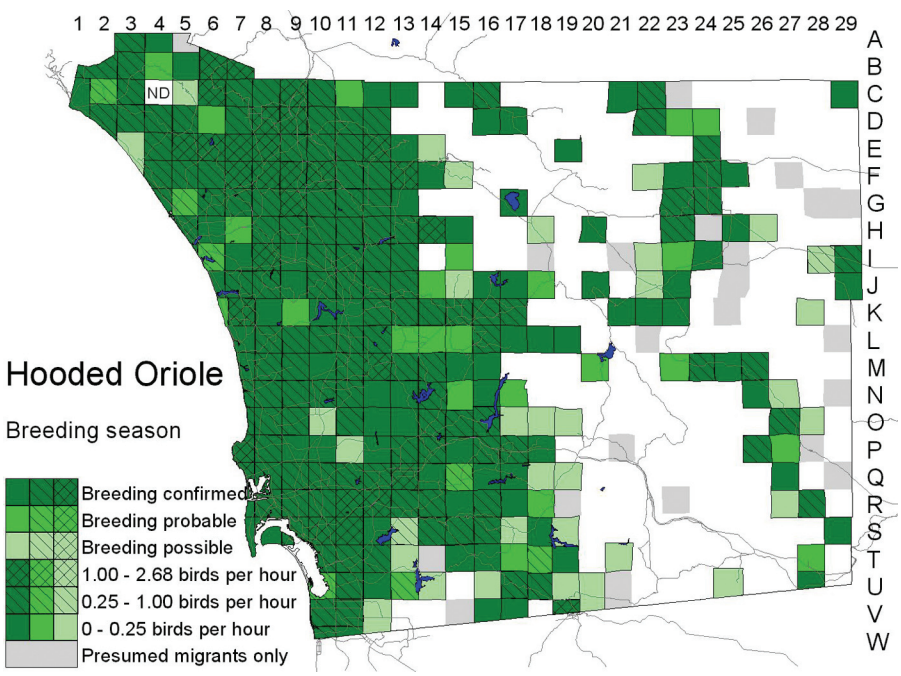
The southern California lifestyle suits few birds more than it does the Hooded Oriole. The iconic palm trees are the oriole's primary nest site and source of nest material. Where palms are absent, the orioles turn readily to eucalyptus. They patronize hummingbird feeders eagerly. They are far more numerous along palm-lined streets and in eucalyptus groves than in their primitive habitats of desert palm oases and riparian sycamores. Though adapted to the urban landscape, the Hooded Oriole keeps tightly to its schedule of migration. In San Diego County it is common in spring and summer but very rare in late fall and winter.

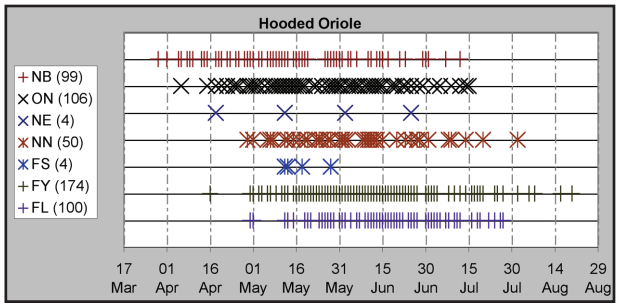
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Breeding distribution: The Hooded Oriole occupies two main zones of San Diego County: the coastal lowland and lower foothills and the canyons draining into the Anza–Borrego Desert. On the coastal slope, the oriole is most common below 2500 feet elevation in suburbs and agricultural valleys. It spreads uncommonly as high as 3500 feet only where palms or eucalyptus trees are planted around buildings. In this zone there are substantial areas where the birds are rare or absent, as on Otay and Tecate mountains and between Potrero and Campo. Between 3500 and 4600 feet there are few records: near Julian (J20), six, including adults feeding young, 26 June 2001 (O. Carter et al.); at Lake Cuyamaca (M20), a pair 28 May 1999 and one bird 2 July 1999 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan); at Pine Valley (P21), one on 17 May 1997 (J. K. Wilson); near Yellow Rose Spring (R23), one on 13 May 1997 and two the following day (L. J. Hargrove). Only the last were in natural habitat, and the birds at the last two locations were most likely migrants.

One of the surprises of the atlas effort was persistence of Hooded Orioles in small numbers in sycamores away from palms and eucalyptus groves. This was most noticeable in northern Camp Pendleton and the San Mateo Canyon Wilderness, the only region of the coastal lowland where entire atlas squares still lack any development other than a few dirt roads and trails. Daily counts in this area ranged as high as seven in San Mateo Canyon (B3) 27 May 2001 (P. Unitt).

In the Anza–Borrego Desert, the Hooded Oriole's distribution traces the lower east slope of the mountains where oases of California fan palms dot the canyons. There are usually only two or three pairs of orioles in each grove (Massey 1998), but counts ran as high as 10 at Carrizo Palms (R28) 6 May 1998 (J. O. Zimmer) and 20 at Agua Caliente County Park (M26) 4 June 1998 (E. C. Hall). Smaller numbers use riparian woodland without palms, e.g.,





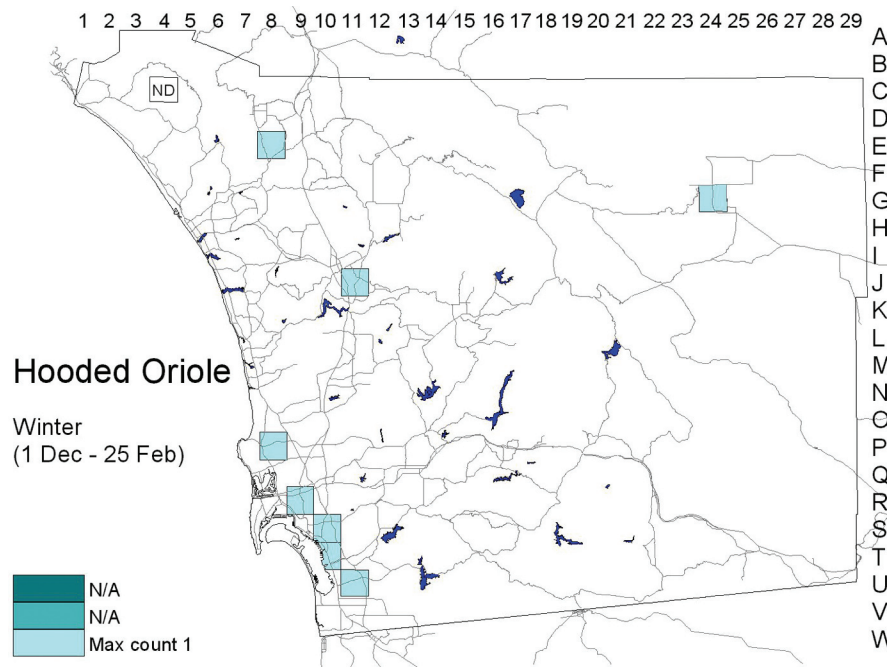
six near Banner (K21) 16 April 1999 (P. K. Nelson) and three at Sentenac Ciénaga (J23) 14 June 1998 (R. Thériault). The Hooded Oriole is uncommon to fairly common in orchards, nurseries, and developed areas around Earthquake Valley, Borrego Springs, and Ocotillo Wells but rare and irregular at native palm oases away from the base of the mountains (birds themselves never seen but old nest in palm in Travertine Palms Wash, C29, 24 January 2000, R. Thériault). Hooded Orioles at Seventeen Palms and Five Palms Spring (G29; two or three on 5 April 1997, one on 11 April 1998, G. Rebstock, K. Forney) were migrants only.

Nesting: The Hooded Oriole's predilection for nesting in palms has been known for a century (e.g., Wheelock 1904). It is so familiar to southern California birders that atlas participants seeking to confirm the species' nesting targeted palms. The birds strip the fibers from the leaves, weave a pouch, and sew it to the underside of a leaf. Twenty-eight of 39 nests whose site atlas observers described were in fan palms (the Mexican as well as the California); only one was in a Canary Island date palm. Nests in eucalyptus trees are also common (atlas observers described three), placed within a cluster of leaves that forms a canopy over the nest. Near the De Luz Fire Station (C6) 5 June 1999, K. L. Weaver found Hooded Orioles nesting almost colonially in eucalyptus trees with Bullock's Orioles, about six pairs of each species in a small grove. Four nests were in sycamores, presumably the species' original nest site in coastal San Diego County (two of these were in mistletoe clumps within a sycamore, one under a Red-shouldered Hawk nest). The Hooded Oriole's preference for a canopy occasionally leads to its suspending the nest from man-made structures, as reported by Bent (1958) and Hardy (1970). In San Diego County, one nest was attached under the eave of a house, one was under a building's second-story deck, and one with nestlings was under the shade of a light fixture in a campground.

Hooded Orioles begin building nests in early April, with one record for 29 March. Nestlings are heard from about 1 May to 1 August, suggesting laying mainly from mid April to mid July. The 42 egg sets collected 1895–1936 range from 21 April to 4 August. Adults carrying insects at Banner 16 April 1999 (P. K. Nelson) imply occasional laying in the first few days of April. The prevalence of Hooded Oriole nesting in June and July suggests the birds raise two broods in a season in coastal southern California, as elsewhere (*contra* Pleasants and Albano 2001).

Migration: Hooded Orioles return to San Diego during March; they are rare during the first half of the month, common by the end. From 1997 to 2001 first arrival dates ranged from 26 February to 18 March. Adult males precede females. Arrival in the last few days of February is exceptional; no dates earlier than 26 February are known (2000, one at Borrego Springs, F24, M. L. Gabel; one at Agua Caliente County Park, M26, E. C. Hall). Records of spring migrants far from nesting habitat in the Anza–Borrego Desert peak in late April and extend as late as 9 May (2000, one at Split Mountain, L29, J. R. Barth). In fall, adult males depart in August, the young of the year largely in the second week of September. Stragglers occur rarely through October.

Winter: The Hooded Oriole has been slower than many species to respond to the newly available winter habitat offered by urban trees. At this season it remains rare; some winters, like 1999–2000, pass with no records at all. Wintering birds are usually single (though sometimes with other wintering orioles). The maximum winter numbers reported were three on the San Diego Christmas bird count 21 December 1968 and five at Point Loma (S7) during the winter of 1963–64 (AFN 18:289, 1964), but the possibility of the Orchard Oriole may not have been fully appreciated at the time. From 1997 to 2002, 10 individual



wintering Hooded Orioles were reported in San Diego County. Most of these were within 5 miles of the coast, but two were somewhat farther inland, one in San Luis Rey Heights (E8) 3 December 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg) and a female in Kit Carson Park (J11) 23 February 1999 (W. Pray). The only previous winter record so far inland was of one on the Escondido Christmas bird count 1 January 1993. One in Borrego Springs (G24) 23 January 1999 (M. C. Jorgensen) was the first in winter in the Anza–Borrego Desert, though the species occurs nearly annually in winter in the Salton Sink (Patten et al. 2003).

Conservation: In California the Hooded Oriole has become practically a commensal of man, expanding its range considerably with settlement and urbanization, so one would hardly think it a conservation problem. Along the middle Gila River and lower Rio Grande, however, the population has declined (Rea 1983, Pleasants and Albano 2001). The Hooded Oriole is a frequent host of the Brown-headed Cowbird; in 1975, S. I. Rothstein found that 16 of 23 nests around Santa Barbara had been parasitized (Friedmann et al. 1977). The Hooded Oriole is one of the more likely birds to be affected by the spread of the American Crow; atlas observers noted crows depredating Hooded Oriole nests. Suspending their nests from the lowest leaves of urban palms renders the birds vulnerable to tree trimming during the nesting season. Yet the local population is vigorous, colonizing new habitat as soon as it becomes available. For example, in Mission Valley (R9) in 1991, the orioles nested in a condominium complex within the first year after it was built and landscaped with transplanted full-grown fan palms (P. Unitt).

Taxonomy: The only subspecies of the Hooded Oriole in California is *I. c. nelsoni* Ridgway, 1885. Males are paler, with less black on the face, than the subspecies of southern Texas and eastern Mexico; females have the flanks yellowish rather than gray.