

Horned Grebe *Podiceps auritus*

A winter visitor, the Horned Grebe is small and easily overlooked among the many other swimming birds along San Diego County's coast. Even though San Diego is near the southern tip of the species' winter range, the Horned Grebe is fairly common on San Diego and Mission bays, though outnumbered by the similar Eared Grebe.

Winter: In San Diego County, the Horned Grebe occurs most numerous on San Diego and Mission bays. Our highest count on San Diego Bay from 1997 to 2002 was on the Christmas bird count 15 December 2001, when 54 were found, 47 in the south bay, seven in the north bay. A high count for a more limited area was 38 in San Diego Bay off Crown Cove (T9) 9 December 1988 (Macdonald et al. 1990). Regular surveys of north and central San Diego Bay 1993–94 yielded no daily count higher than 17 on 1 February 1994 (Mock et al. 1994). Within the salt works Horned Grebes are fewer; Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) found no more than five there per weekly survey 1993–94. In Mission Bay, numbers ranged up to 12 in the northwest quadrant of the bay (Q7) 8 January and 12 February 2000 (L. Polinsky).

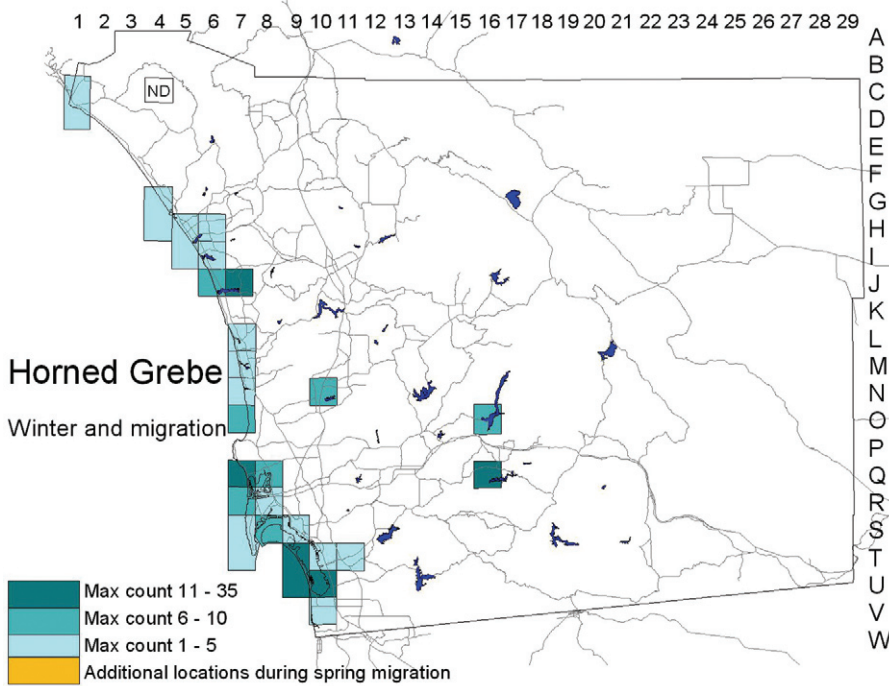
Elsewhere in the county the Horned Grebe is at best uncommon. A few occur on the ocean near shore (up to eight between La Jolla and Torrey Pines State Reserve, O7, 11 December 1997, S. E. Smith), in the Oceanside harbor, and the lagoons open to the tide (up to 11 in Batiquitos Lagoon, J7, 26 December 1998, R. Stone; four in Agua Hedionda Lagoon, I6, 23 December 2000, R. T. Patton). In lagoons with intermittent or no tidal input, such as San Elijo and Buena Vista, the Horned Grebe is rare.



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

There is considerable variation in the number of Horned Grebes found in San Diego each year, but it seems chaotic. The peaks and troughs on San Diego and Oceanside Christmas bird counts do not coincide. The highest total on an Oceanside count was 57 on 1 January 1977; since 1960 the highest total on a San Diego count was 176 on 26 December 1966.

Our finding wintering Horned Grebes a few times on inland reservoirs was unexpected because all but one of the few previous inland records for San Diego County were of spring migrants. Six at Lake Miramar (N10) 3 January 1998 dwindled to one by 12 February (P. M. von Hendy, P. Unitt, M. B. Stowe). Eight were on El Capitan Reservoir (O16) 20 December 1998 (S. Kingswood). At Loveland Reservoir, the species was found in two winters, with three on 31 January 2001 and 20 on 12 January 2002 (J. K. Wilson). The earlier record is of one in a borrow pit in the San Diego River (Q10) 1–9 January 1975 (J. L. Dunn).



Migration: The Horned Grebe occurs in San Diego County mainly from November to March, sometimes arriving in the last few days of October (earliest, one at Batiquitos Lagoon 27 October 1997, Merkel and Assoc. 1997). Surveys of San Diego Bay in 1993 and 1994 (Mock et al. 1994) recorded the species from 18 November to 6 April; Macdonald et al. (1990) recorded it as late as 17 April. From 1997 to 2001 our only record later than the third week of March was of one at Batiquitos Lagoon 16 April 1998 (C. C. Gorman). The only records later than 5 May are of one on San Diego Bay 25 May 1957 (AFN 11:376, 1957), two there 13 May 1984 (R. E. Webster, AB 38:957, 1984), one there 4 June 1967, and one on Mission Bay 11–18 July 1967 (G. McCaskie, AFN 21:604, 1967).

Horned Grebes migrate overland over southern California but rarely stop inland. In San Diego County, such migration has been noted mainly in spring 1983,

when the many rainstorms associated with El Niño were an obstacle for migrants and Roger Higson monitored Lake Henshaw (G17), where many migrating water birds came down. That year, Higson noted at least 15 Horned Grebes from 4 March to 29 April, with a maximum of three on 31 March (AB 37:912, 1983). The only other records of inland migrants are of two at Lake Henshaw 7 March 1978 (D. W. Povey), one there 20–26 February 1979 (AB 33:312, 1979), and two at Lake Cuyamaca (M20) 1 March 1980 (AB 34:815, 1980).

Conservation: The Horned Grebe appears to be experiencing a slow decline in numbers and a contraction of its breeding range (Stedman 2000). In

San Diego County, which lies near the southern end of the species' winter range on the Pacific coast, possible evidence of change comes from totals on Christmas bird counts in the 1950s, up to 661 in 1956 and 428 in 1957, that have not been approached since. These could, however, have been misidentified Eared Grebes. Siltation of the coastal lagoons degrades them as Horned Grebe habitat; conversely, the dredging of Batiquitos Lagoon in the mid 1990s led to the grebes using this site, where they had been absent previously.

Taxonomy: Parkes (1952) upheld the distinction of the Horned Grebe of the Old and New worlds as subspecies, with *P. a. cornutus* (Gmelin, 1789) in North America. But Cramp and Simmons (1977) reported too much individual variation for the subspecies to be valid.