

House Wren *Troglodytes domesticus*

The House Wren breeds commonly in San Diego County’s woodlands of oak, sycamore, and conifers, but here it is only beginning to take on the city-dwelling habits that justify its name over so much of the United States. Within its historic range, almost coextensive in San Diego County with that of the coast live oak, the wren has long patronized birdhouses as well as natural nest holes. But only since the 1990s has it spread into suburbs built over former sage scrub. It is on the increase as a winter visitor or year-round resident too, possibly in response to climatic warming.

Breeding distribution: The House Wren is widespread on San Diego County’s coastal slope, most numerous in oak woodland and riparian woodland with large sycamores. It is common from low elevations (100 in Horno Canyon and along the south fork of San Onofre Creek, D3, 31 May 1998, K. Perry, D. Gould; 135 in Los Peñasquitos and Lopez canyons, N8, 11 April 1999, P. A. Ginsburg et al.) to the higher mountains (13 near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain, E20, 18 June 2000, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt; 25 at Mount Laguna, O23, 13–14 June 1998, C. G. Edwards). The eastern edge of the House Wren’s range follows the eastern edge of the coast live oak’s range almost exactly. The exception is along San Felipe Creek, where the wren extends in riparian woodland east to Sentenac Ciénaga (J23; up to three, all singing males, 14 June 1998, R. Thériault). Also, there is one record of the House Wren nesting in the cottonwoods at Butterfield Ranch in Mason Valley (M23; two on 17 April 1999, P. K. Nelson).

In the city of San Diego the House Wren has begun colonizing eucalyptus groves and urban trees away from natural habitat, using birdhouses, man-made structures,



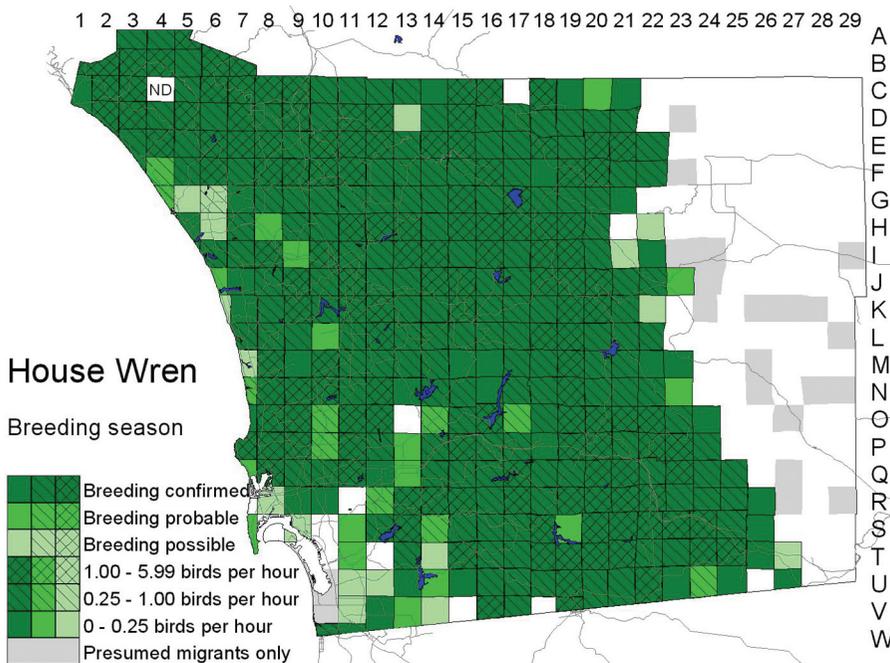
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

and possibly crevices behind loose strips of eucalyptus bark for nest sites. The spread is going from north to south. The largest concentration found in nonnative habitat is in Pottery Canyon, La Jolla (P7), with up to 11 on 27 May 1999 (L. and M. Polinsky). South of Mission Valley House Wrens are still uncommon through the breeding season but probably nesting at Point Loma College (S7; courting pair 10 May 1997, J. C. Worley) and confirmed nesting in the Tijuana River valley (W10; nest with nestlings 8 May 2001, T. Stands, S. Yamagata) and at the west edge of Otay Mesa (V12; male singing while female carried nest material into a horizontal pipe, 13 April 2001, P. Unitt).

Nesting: As a cavity nester, the House Wren takes advantage of a wide variety of nest sites. Most frequently, it uses old woodpecker holes and natural cavities in large trees, especially coast live oaks and western sycamores. Other trees in which atlas observers noted House Wren nests were cottonwood, willow, Engelmann oak, and black

oak. The House Wren is also San Diego County’s leading customer of birdhouses. Electrical boxes, open-ended pipes, and street lamps were other man-made nest sites reported repeatedly. We noted Cliff Swallow nests taken over by House Wrens on three occasions.

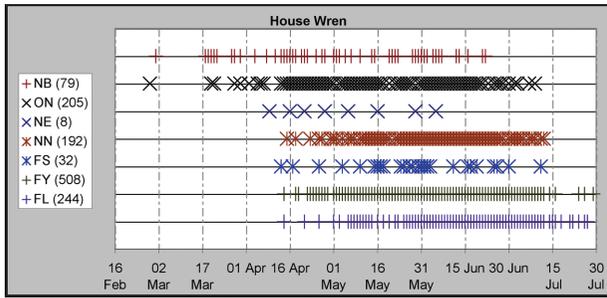
The House Wren offers one of the strongest examples of a breeding season shifting earlier in the year. Fifty-six egg sets collected in San Diego County from 1890 to 1942 range in date from 14 April to 13 June. The range for 119 sets collected throughout California reported by Bent (1948) is 11 April–26 June. Our observations from 1997 to 2001, however, show that House Wrens now begin laying regularly about



House Wren

Breeding season

- Breeding confirmed
- Breeding probable
- Breeding possible
- 1.00 - 5.99 birds per hour
- 0.25 - 1.00 birds per hour
- 0 - 0.25 birds per hour
- Presumed migrants only



1 April. These observations include several of nests with nestlings, adults disposing of fecal sacs, and adults carrying insects as early as 13 April, as well as a nest with eggs in a box along the Sweetwater River near Highway 94 (R13) 9 April 1997 (A. Mercieca). Occasionally the birds may lay even as early as about 16 March, as implied by young already fledged at the upper end of Sweetwater Reservoir (S13) 14 April 1999 (P. Famolaro). The change has taken place only at the beginning of the season, as we observed nests with nestlings as late as 12 July, meaning egg laying as late as about 14 June.

Migration: Because the House Wren occurs in San Diego County year round, its migrations are difficult to define exactly. It is not clear whether the population turns over completely from summer to winter or whether some breeding birds remain as permanent residents. Spring migrants return to their breeding territories at low to moderate elevations in March; even as high as 4400 feet (Upper Green Valley, M21) the birds may be singing and paired as early as 21 March (1997, P. D. Jorgensen). In the Anza-Borrego Desert, away from sites where it winters, the House Wren is recorded as an uncommon migrant from 13 March (1999, two in Borrego Palm Canyon, F23, A. G. Morley) to 13 May (1995, one in Hellhole Canyon, G23, H. A. Wier). The 15 spring migrants reported by Massey at Agua Caliente Springs (M26) 4 April 1994 were

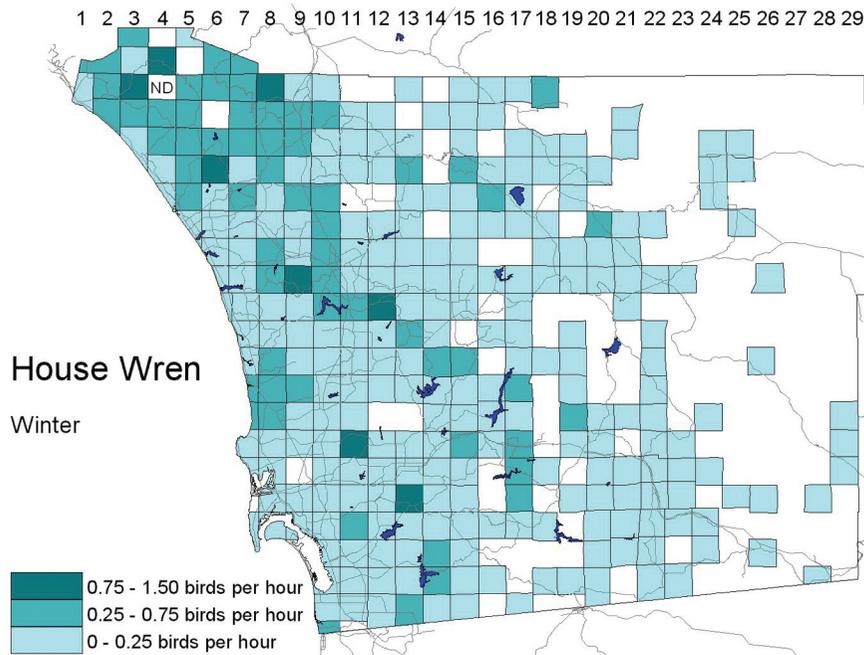
exceptional; from 1997 to 2001 we did not note any concentration in the Anza-Borrego Desert greater than four.

Postbreeding dispersal begins as early as 29 July (1992, one in Culp Valley, H23, M. L. Gabel), though fall migration is generally not obvious until late August.

Winter: Wintering House Wrens are most numerous in the coastal lowland, where daily counts can be as high as 22 along the Santa Margarita River north of Fallbrook (C8) 23 February 2002 (K. L. Weaver), 21 in San Pasqual Valley (K12) 29 December 2001 (C. G. Edwards), and 21 in lower Los Peñasquitos and Lopez canyons (N8) 2 December 2001 (D. K. Adams). With increasing elevation, the birds become scarcer, though as high as 4100 feet elevation we noted numbers up to six around Twin Lakes (C18) 24 January 1999 (P. Unitt). The highest winter House Wren locations were around 5300 feet in the Laguna Mountains (N22, 12 December 1998, G. L. Rogers; P23, 14 January and 21 December 1999, E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer) and at nearly 5500 feet at the Palomar Observatory (D15, one on 20 December 2001, K. L. Weaver).

On the east side of the mountains, wintering House Wrens are regular in San Felipe Valley (up to five near San Felipe, H20, 21 December 1998, I. S. Quon, and 27 February 1999, A. P. and T. E. Keenan). But at lower elevations in the Anza-Borrego Desert they are quite uncommon (no count of more than two per day) and restricted almost exclusively to oases and the irrigated floor of the Borrego Valley.

Conservation: The House Wren's primitive breeding distribution followed that of oak woodland closely, in a pattern much like that of the Oak Titmouse or Acorn Woodpecker. Since the 1970s, breeding House Wrens have become ever more widespread in the coastal strip from which they were once absent. It is unclear why a bird that occupies suburban backyards over much of North America should have been so slow to take advantage of



the city of San Diego. The wren's spread has followed that of the Nuttall's Woodpecker, one of the primary excavators of cavities in which House Wrens nest.

The House Wren's range and numbers have increased considerably in winter as well. In spite of Emerson's (1887) report of one collected and another seen on Volcan Mountain (I20) on 24 and 28 January 1884, and another collected at Witch Creek (J18) 13 December 1904 (FMNH 144799), Willett (1912) and Stephens (1919a) said that only "a few" wintered in the coastal lowland and mentioned no wintering at higher elevations. The House Wren's status as a widespread if uncommon winter visitor in San Diego County's foot-

hills and mountains emerged only as a result of the field work for this atlas. Numbers on San Diego Christmas bird counts have increased, the total per party-hour more than doubling from 0.052 from 1966 to 1975 to 0.132 from 1992 to 2001. The warming of winter low temperatures may be enabling more House Wrens to remain through that season. As a hypothesis for testing, I suggest that an increasing proportion of the breeding population is failing to migrate, and these now permanent residents are responsible for the breeding season shifting earlier in the year.

Taxonomy: Only the grayish western subspecies of the House Wren, *T. d. parkmanii* Audubon, 1839, is known from California. The name *T. aedon* (Vieillot, 1809) has been shown clearly to have been proposed after *T. domesticus* (Wilson, 1808) (Oberholser 1974, Rea 1983, Banks and Browning 1995). Continued use of *aedon* is based on tradition rather than conformity to the international code of zoological nomenclature.