

Hutton's Vireo *Vireo huttoni*

A fairly common resident of San Diego County's oak woodland, Hutton's Vireo is the only nonmigratory member of its family in California. Its mindlessly monotonous song can be heard nearly year round. Beginning breeding early in the spring, before the Brown-headed Cowbird, Hutton's Vireo was able to withstand this parasite's invasion, which decimated San Diego County's other breeding vireos. Hutton's Vireo has even been able to spread into riparian woodland with few or no oaks and to colonize recently regenerated habitat.

Breeding distribution: As a characteristic bird of oak woodland, Hutton's Vireo has a distribution largely following that of the coast live oak. It is most common in oak-dominated woodlands in the foothills, with daily counts of up to 15 in Boden Canyon (I14) 6 June 2000 (R. L. Barber), near Warner Springs (F19) 14 May 1999 (C. G. Edwards), and near Campo (U24) 9 May 1998 (C. R. Mahrtd). But it can be common too in riparian woodland in which oaks are a minority of the trees (16 along the Santa Margarita River north of Fallbrook, C8, 24 May 2001, K. L. Weaver). Furthermore, the vireo approaches the coast more closely in many places, following strips of riparian woodland with few or no oaks, though it is uncommon in such woodland. A few Hutton's Vireos inhabit Balboa Park (R9), with records including an adult building a nest 2 August 1977 (D. Herron),



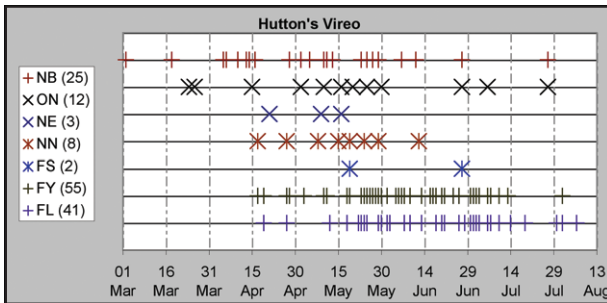
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

one feeding a fledgling at the west end of the Cabrillo Bridge 7 June 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg), a fledgling collected 4 August 1991 (SDNHM 47660), and an adult collected 7 August 1928 (SDNHM 12160). Hutton's Vireo now occurs even in southwesternmost San Diego County, along the Sweetwater River in Bonita (T11; e.g., pair with fledglings 22 May 1997, P. Famolaro) and in the Tijuana River valley (e.g., two singing males along the river east of Hollister St., W11, 19 June and 13 July 1999, P. Unitt).

Hutton's Vireo can be common in lower montane forest mixed with conifers (13 near Pine Hills Fire Station, L19, 24 May 1988, P. Unitt), but it is uncommon between 4500 and 5500 feet elevation and absent from the summits of the county's highest mountains. The eastern limit

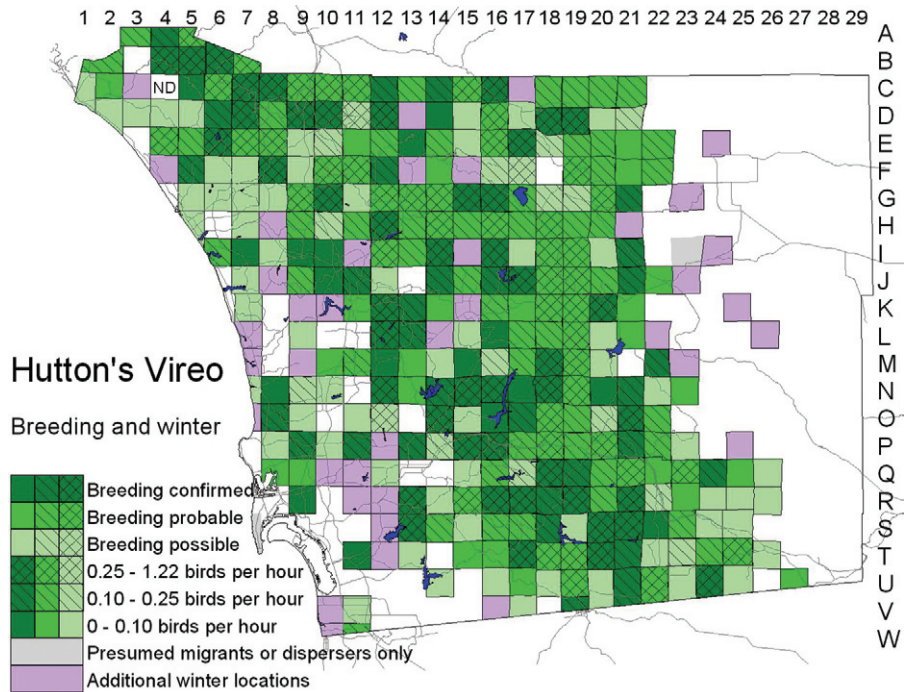
of the range largely coincides with the eastern limit of coast live oaks, but Hutton's Vireo also extends in oakless riparian woodland down San Felipe Valley as far as Scissors Crossing (four, including a pair building a nest, near Paroli Spring, I21, 27 July 2000, J. O. Zimmer; up to three singing males west of Scissors Crossing, J22, 6 May 2002, J. R. Barth).

Nesting: Hutton's Vireo builds a conventional vireo nest, attached to twigs by its rim and suspended from a fork. Three nests described by atlas observers were in the crowns of coast live oaks, as is typical for the species, but one was only 2 feet off the ground in a snowberry, exceptionally low. One of the oak nests was being built directly over busy Highland Valley Road (K13).



Late March to early July is the main season of Hutton's Vireo nesting in San Diego County, but occasional birds start earlier, as illustrated by a pair building a nest near Old Mission Dam (P11) 2 March 1998 (K. J. Burns) and an active nest perhaps still under construction along the Sweetwater River near Highway 94 (R13) 12 March 1999 (J. R. Barth). Eggs have been collected elsewhere in California as early as 10 February, and nest building has been reported from San Diego County as early as the first week of February (Davis 1995). The nests under construction in San Felipe Valley 27 July 2000 and in Balboa Park 2 August 1977 were remarkably late. We saw no suggestion that birds laying after the first week of July actually fledged young.

Migration: Hutton's Vireo is largely resident, but a few birds disperse out of their breeding habitat. The species is occasional on Point Loma (S7); records include one seen 16 October 2000 (V. P. Johnson) and specimens collected 7 January 1932 (SDNHM 15659) and 21 September 1987 (SDNHM 44823). The latter was a vagrant from northern California (see Taxonomy). The only record of a possible migrant in the Anza-Borrego Desert during the atlas



period was of one near the mouth of Sentenac Canyon (I23) 17 April 1998 (P. K. Nelson), only 2 or 3 miles from the nearest point where the species is resident along San Felipe Creek. But there are earlier spring records, from Borrego Springs (G24) and Tamarisk Grove (I24), both 5 May 1991 (A. G. Morley), and one fall record, from Lower Willows (D23) 16 October 1994 (L. Clark, K. Smeltzer).

Winter: We saw only slight spread of Hutton's Vireo away from breeding localities in winter. Most records of winter visitors at nonbreeding locations were of just a single individual. Numbers in the Tijuana River valley, though, were distinctly higher in winter than in summer, with up to seven in the northwest quadrant of the valley (V10) 16 December 2000 (W. E. Haas) and five in the southwest quadrant (W10) 15 December 2001 (G. L. Rogers). In the Anza-Borrego Desert Hutton's Vireo is rare, and most records are from the desert's edge. The only winter records from the desert floor are of one in north Borrego Valley (E24) 21 December 1997 (P. R. Pryde) and two at Tamarisk Grove and Yaqui Well 16 January 2000 (P. E. Lehman), with one still there 20 February (R. Thériault). Also of note are two in pinyon-juniper woodland in the Vallecito Mountains, one in Pinyon Mountain Valley (K25) 11 February 2000, the other on the east slope of Whale Peak (L26) 3 February 2000 (J. R. Barth).

Conservation: Unlike San Diego County's other breeding vireos, Hutton's did not suffer any great population decline after the invasion of the Brown-headed Cowbird. Though Hutton's is a suitable and frequent host of the cowbird (we noted six instances of successful parasitism during observations for this atlas), some aspects of its biology buffer it from cowbird parasitism. Probably most important is that Hutton's Vireo, as a resident species, often begins nesting well before breeding cowbirds arrive and start to lay, generally in late April. Furthermore,

Hutton's Vireo's prime oak woodland habitat has been far less disturbed than the riparian woodlands favored by Bell's Vireo. Hutton's Vireo has, if anything, increased over San Diego County's recorded history. Stephens (1919a) called the species only an "infrequent winter resident and occasional in summer." Most of the species' colonization of coastal riparian woodland outside the oak zone appears to have taken place since the early 1980s (cf. Unitt 1984). Such is certainly the case in the recently regenerated riparian woodland of the Tijuana River valley. This is the habitat largely responsible for increased numbers of Hutton's Vireos on San Diego Christmas bird counts. From 1999 to 2001 the numbers ranged from 11 to 17; on no count before 1999 did the total exceed five.

Taxonomy: Bishop (1905) reported the Hutton's Vireos of southern California to be darker and grayer than those of the central California coast, describing them as *V. h. oberholseri* and selecting a San Diego County specimen from Witch Creek (J18) as the type. Rea (in Phillips 1991) supported the recognition of *oberholseri*, though others had synonymized it with nominate *huttoni*. The specimen from Point Loma 21 September 1987 is conspicuously yellower than the local population and evidently a vagrant of *V. h. parkesi* Rea, 1991, which breeds along the coast of northern California from Humboldt to Marin County.