

Ladder-backed Woodpecker *Picoides scalaris*

The Ladder-backed Woodpecker is characteristic of desert slopes, the hills and alluvial fans well vegetated with large shrubs like the desert apricot, Mojave yucca, and above all the desert agave. In this habitat the Ladder-backed is an uncommon permanent resident. On the desert floor it is rare, even where there are trees like mesquite and desert ironwood large enough to offer nest sites. Field work for this atlas revealed two areas of semidesert scrub inhabited by Ladder-backed Woodpeckers on the county's coastal slope, in Dameron and Oak Grove valleys along the Riverside County line, and in Miller Valley on the Campo Plateau.

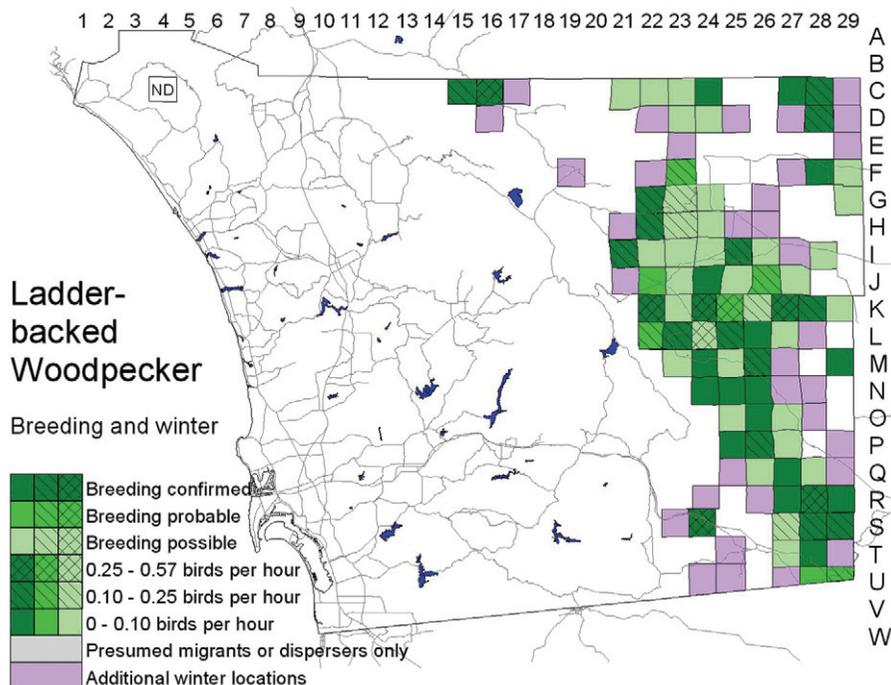
Breeding distribution: The factor accounting for the Ladder-backed Woodpecker's distribution in San Diego County is the availability of agaves and yuccas. On desert slopes where these plants are common, the woodpecker is uncommon. Our maximum daily count in one atlas

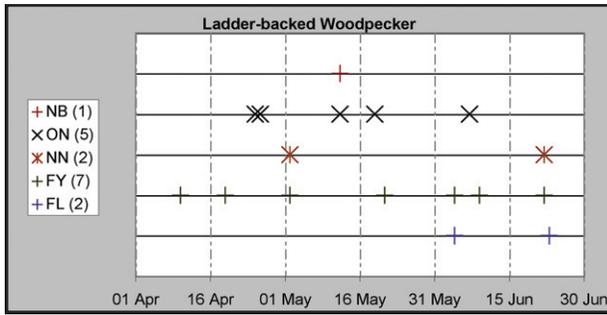


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

square during the breeding season was eight on the east side of Earthquake Valley (K24) 19 May 2000 (L.

J. Hargrove). Rarely, however, did we find more than four. The species ranges as high as 5800 feet elevation in the Santa Rosa Mountains (C27; one bird and one nest hole 4 May 2000, P. Unitt). On the desert floor, or in washes through the badlands, the Ladder-backed Woodpecker is scarce; we found no more than one individual per day in such habitats. Along Fish Creek Wash near the Elephant Knees (M29), we found an old nest hole but never found any birds. Along the western margin of its range, the Ladder-backed Woodpecker drops out as desert-edge scrub merges into chaparral, extending west to Alder Canyon (C21; one on 3 May 2000, G. Rebstock), San Felipe Valley (I21; up to three, including adults feeding young,





on 9 June 2000, J. O. Zimmer), and near Bankhead Springs (T27; two on 23 April 2000, P. Unitt).

In addition, the Ladder-backed Woodpecker occurs in two areas of the coastal slope. From the Aguanga region of Riverside County, it extends into north-central San Diego County into Dameron Valley (C15, up to two males 19 April 1997; C16, up to six, including fledglings, 23 June 2001) and even to the north base of Palomar Mountain near High Point Road (C15, two on 14 June 1997, K. L. Weaver).

In Miller Valley (S24) we found the species in 1998, 1999, and 2000, with up to four, including a pair at a nest, 22 June 2000 (L. J. Hargrove). Though on the coastal slope, both Dameron and Miller valleys have many elements of desert biota, such as the cane or snake cholla and white-tailed antelope squirrel.

Nesting: By far the most frequent site for Ladder-backed Woodpecker nests in San Diego County is the flowering stalk of the desert agave. The soft tissue of the stalk is easy for the birds to excavate, while the rosette of spine-tipped leaves below offers protection from predators. As atlas observers learned of this preference, they found holes in agaves more often than they found the birds themselves. The woodpeckers also excavate in the other large monocots growing in their habitat, the Mojave yucca and Parry's nolina. They use true wood, even if dead, only occasionally. We also noted holes in a mesquite snag, a telephone pole, and a railroad trestle. Massey (1998) reported a nest in a gate post. The one nest found in Miller Valley was in a large willow snag.

If the still unknown incubation and nestling periods for the Ladder-backed Woodpecker are the same as the 14 and 15 days, respectively, reported for Nuttall's (themselves based on minimal data, Lowther 2000a), atlas observations suggest that the Ladder-backed lays at least from late March to late May. Only one egg set was ever collected in San Diego County (6 April). Bent's (1939) range of 11 April–9 May for all of California was based on only seven records.

Migration: The Ladder-backed Woodpecker is nonmigratory, undertaking short-distance dispersal only. The only well-supported record far from the species' breeding range is still of one female in the Tijuana River valley

(W11) 9 October 1974 (J. L. Dunn, P. Unitt, AB 29:122, 1975). Other reports, such as that of one in Vista 22 July 1982 (AB 36:1017, 1982), were almost certainly based on misidentified juvenile Nuttall's Woodpeckers, which then gave observers the erroneous impression that the Ladder-backed was resident in the area.

Winter: In winter, the Ladder-backed Woodpecker is seen in its breeding range in much the same numbers as in the breeding season. Our highest daily count in winter was of nine in Box Canyon (L23) 10 January 1998 (S. D. Cameron, S. M. Wolf). Nevertheless, the species does spread to a modest extent in winter; at that season we noted it in 34 squares where we did not find it during the breeding season. These records included four from Oak Grove Valley on the coastal slope, three on the south-facing slopes north of the valley (C17) where the species is probably resident, plus one on the south side of the village of Oak Grove (D16; 26 January 2002, R. C. Sanger, K. S. Williams) where it is a visitor only. On the Campo Plateau, we found the species repeatedly in Miller Valley and also on nine occasions at other scattered locations, west to La Posta Valley (S23; one on 14 February 1999, L. J. Hargrove) and Campo Creek 4.1 miles east-northeast of Cameron Corners (U24; one on 5 January 2001, J. R. Barth).

Conservation: No trends in Ladder-backed Woodpecker numbers in San Diego County are known, though quantitative data from its range are minimal. Most of the species' habitat is protected within the Anza–Borrego Desert, but development threatens the outlying population in Dameron Valley. A trend toward a drier climate could constrict the woodpecker's range in the Anza–Borrego Desert but enable it to spread west into new areas. This may be happening already to the north of San Diego County in the San Bernardino Valley (E. A. Cardiff pers. comm.). In May 2000 a pair apparently nested along the Santa Ana River near Mentone, about 18 miles northwest of the traditional edge of the species' range in San Geronimo Pass at Banning (D. R. Willick, NAB 54:423, 2000).

Taxonomy: Ladder-backed Woodpeckers throughout southeastern California are *P. s. cactophilus* Oberholser, 1911, with pale buffy-gray underparts, not distinctly brown as farther south in Baja California.

Hybridization between the Ladder-backed and Nuttall's Woodpeckers is frequent in Baja California (Short 1971), and regular at some places in Alta California such as Warner Pass and Morongo Valley, but rare in San Diego County. The species are segregated by habitat in their narrow zone of overlap, the Ladder-backed in desert-edge scrub on slopes, Nuttall's in riparian trees in canyon bottoms. Lori J. Hargrove suspected that a Ladder-backed in Borrego Palm Canyon (F23) 5 July 2001 was paired with a Nuttall's; G. L. Rogers reported one near Warner Springs (F19) 17 December 2001, well outside the Ladder-back's breeding range, as a possible hybrid.