

Lazuli Bunting *Passerina amoena*

The male Lazuli Bunting is one of San Diego County's most colorful birds, but the species is of interest for more than just pretty plumage. Typical of riparian woodland edges and mountain meadows, the Lazuli Bunting is also a fire follower. It colonizes burned chaparral in recovery, during the stage when wildflowers—and insects that feed on them—can proliferate before the resprouting shrubs take over again. The Lazuli Bunting is common in San Diego County as both a breeding bird and a migrant, but it is absent in winter.

Breeding distribution: Though not linked to oak woodland, the Lazuli Bunting has a distribution similar to that of several species characteristic of this habitat. That is, the bunting is widespread as a breeding bird over the coastal slope but not along the coast itself. The distribution approaches the coast in the north, then retreats inland toward the south. Macario Canyon near Agua Hedionda Lagoon (I6) is the southernmost known nesting site near the coast (active nest 4–11 May 1999, W. E. Haas). In the



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

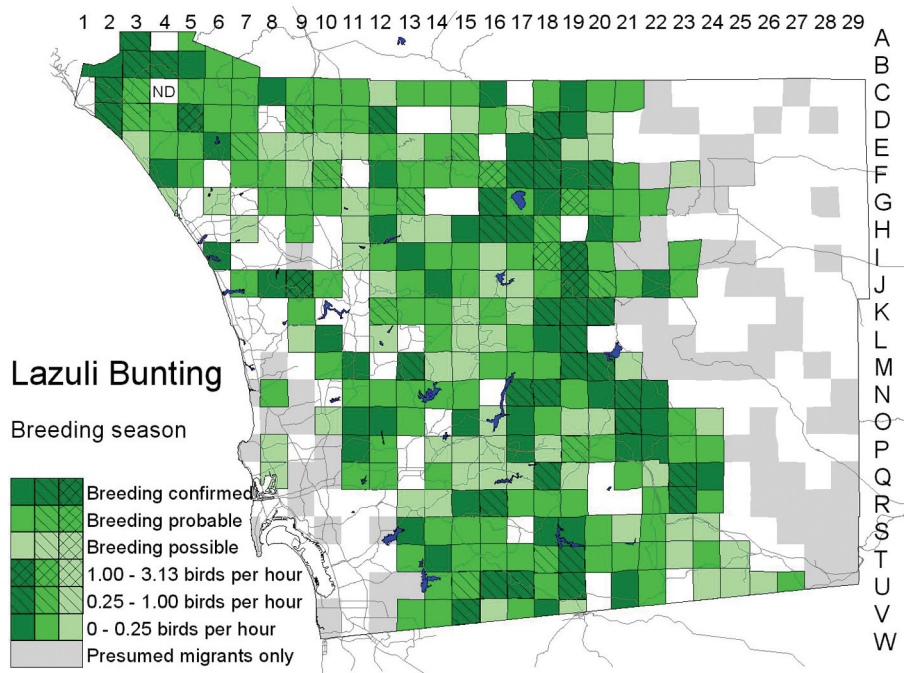
southern half of the county, a pair in Los Peñasquitos Canyon (N8) 6 June 1999 (M. Baumgartel) and eight individuals in Tecolote Canyon (Q8) 10 June 1999, dropping to one four days later (J. C. Worley), are outliers. On the east slope of the mountains, Lazuli Buntings breed possibly at 2200 feet elevation in Borrego Palm Canyon (F23; singing male 5–8 July 2001, L. J. Hargrove), defi-

nately along San Felipe Creek, in wet years probably down to the mouth of Sentenac Canyon (I23, pair 26 May 1998, P. K. Nelson), and probably east to near Bankhead Springs (U27, pair regular in April and May 1997, F. L. Unmack). Any breeding east of Campo (U22), though, is tenuous; all records there are within the period of spring migration.

Lazuli Buntings are usually most abundant in the inland valleys and lower mountains where low herbs grow near thick shrubbery. Daily counts of breeding birds run very exceptionally up to 150, as in the Nature Conservancy's Edwards Ranch northeast of Santa Ysabel (I19) 30 June 2001 (D. W. Au, S. E. Smith). The species' distribution is rather patchy, though, and somewhat irregular from year to year. This irregularity arises in part because one of the Lazuli Bunting's prime habitats in San Diego County is successional: recovering burned chaparral in which low herbaceous growth still dominates. Its preference for low herbaceous growth also means that more habitat will be suitable after wet years than after dry ones. Michael A. Patten (pers. comm.) found the bunting widespread as a breeding species in sage scrub on the periphery of San Diego in 2001, when rainfall was near average, but virtually absent in 2002, when rainfall was at a record low. Perennial habitats are riparian woodland and scrub and mountain meadows, especially where there are thickets of California rose.

Nesting: The Lazuli Bunting usually hides its cup nest in dense, low vegetation. Atlas observers described or inferred four nests in rose thickets, two in white sage, two in California sagebrush, one in San Diego sunflower, one in a willow, and one in a laurel sumac in a burned area. Clearly the buntings recognize the ability of rose thorns to deter predators.

Lazuli Buntings generally begin nesting in late April or early May. In the wet spring of 1998, they apparently began a bit early. Observations of adults carrying insects

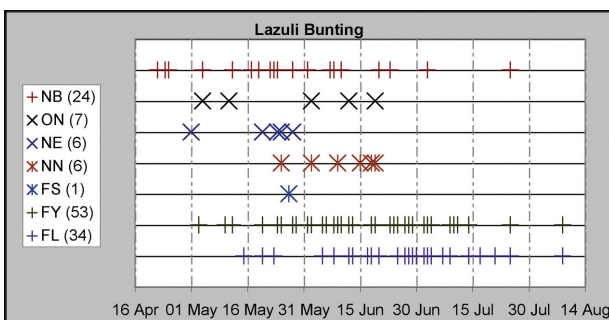


that year began as early as 3 May in Sycamore Canyon (O12; I. S. Quon), of fledglings, as early as 15 May (J9; J. O. Zimmer), implying egg laying no later than 21–23 April. Adults fed fledglings far into July, even to 8 August in Cuyamaca Rancho State Park (N21) in 2000 (P. D. Jorgensen). Early or failed breeders, though, depart earlier, in mid July.

Migration: Spring arrival of the Lazuli Bunting is typically in early April. From 1997 to 2001, the first report of the spring varied only from 27 March (1997, one at Upper Willows, Coyote Creek Canyon, C22, P. D. Jorgensen) to 3 April. Arrival even a day or two before 1 April, however, is rare. Migrants are widespread throughout the county, including coastal and desert areas where the species does not nest. High concentrations of migrants run up to 40 around Scissors Crossing (J22) 13 April 1998 (E. C. Hall) and 25 at Carrizo Marsh (O29) 4 May 1999 (P. D. Jorgensen). In most years, migrants headed farther north have continued on by the third week of May; our latest such date 1997–2001 was 23 May 2000 (two in Goat Canyon, W10, W. E. Haas). In other years, stragglers have been seen as late as 15 June (1977, Point Loma, S7, P. Unitt). Fall migration takes place primarily in August and early September. By late September the Lazuli Bunting is rare; 4 November (1962, one in the Tijuana River valley, G. McCaskie) is still the latest known date.

Winter: Although the Lazuli Bunting winters regularly as close to California as southeastern Arizona and southern Baja California, there are no well-supported winter records for San Diego County.

Conservation: The Lazuli Bunting does not adapt to urbanization. A few holes in its distribution are likely due to habitat loss, as around Vista, San Marcos, Escondido, and El Cajon. The core of its range in San Diego County, though, is at higher elevations little threatened by devel-



opment. In some parts of its range the Lazuli Bunting is parasitized heavily by the Brown-headed Cowbird (Greene et al. 1996). In San Diego County cowbird parasitism seems not to have been a significant factor, as implied by the bunting's not clearly decreasing after the cowbird's invasion, the lack of cowbird eggs among

collected sets of the bunting, and atlas observers' not reporting any parasitism 1997–2001. The inevitability of fire in chaparral implies that the Lazuli Bunting will persist, shifting from burn to burn, as long as chaparral dominates San Diego County's landscape.