

Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolnii*

Though often overlooked, hidden in dense, low vegetation, Lincoln's Sparrow is not rare. It is uncommon, even fairly common, in riparian scrub, riparian edges, and damp weedy areas. One must learn its juncolike "tup" and buntinglike buzz calls to appreciate Lincoln's Sparrow's actual numbers. Lincoln's Sparrow occurs in San Diego County as a migrant and winter visitor only. Though the southern tip of its breeding range is as close as the San Jacinto Mountains of Riverside County, there is only one summer record for San Diego County.

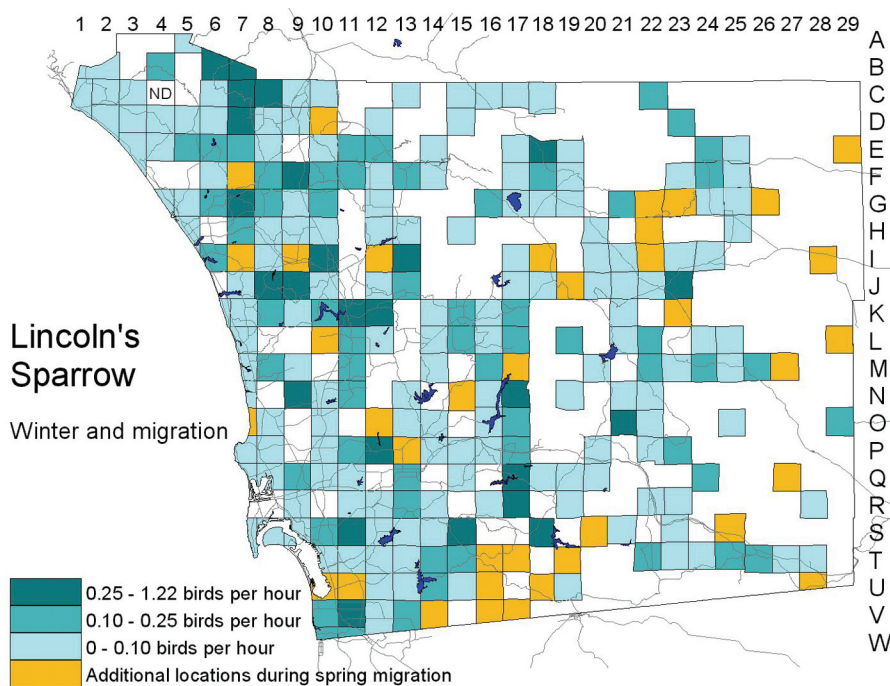
Winter: Lincoln's Sparrow is widespread in the coastal lowland, where the damp thickets the birds prefer are most frequent. During the atlas period, daily counts ran to a maximum of 35 at the south base of Cerro de las Posas, San Marcos (J8), 24 December 1997 (J. O. Zimmer) and 26 in the San Pasqual Valley (K12) 2 January 2000 (C. G. Edwards). In wet years even higher numbers occur in the thick ruderal vegetation along Santa Ysabel Creek in the San Pasqual Valley (K. L. Weaver). Seldom, though, are more than 10 individuals counted in a day, even in good habitat. And the species was missed entirely in a few atlas squares with substantial riparian habitat where it



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

should be expected. Other gaps at low elevations are due to dearth or lack of habitat. At higher elevations, in more rugged terrain, wintering Lincoln's Sparrows become progressively scarcer and more localized. A few individuals occur as high as 5300 feet elevation, such as one near the Palomar Fire Station (D15) 4 December 1998 (K. L. Weaver) and two at Cuyamaca Lake (M20) 22 February 1999 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan).

In the Anza-Borrego Desert, Lincoln's Sparrow is uncommon at oases and in developed areas with irrigated



shrubbery. Desert numbers range up to 21 in Borrego Springs (F24) 20 December 1998 (R. Thériault), six at Lower Willows (D23) 19 December 1999 (P. R. Pryde), and five at Agua Caliente Springs (M26) 28 January 1998 (E. C. Hall). We noted only five scattered individuals in dry desert habitats, and three of these were in the wet winter of 1997–98.

Migration: Lincoln's Sparrows arrive in mid to late September, then depart in April. Scattered birds are seen in late March and April at locations where the species does not winter, rarely even in sparsely vegetated desert. By the first of May the species is rare. The only spring records after 5 May are of single birds near Puerta La Cruz (E18) 12 May 2001 and near Angelina Spring (I22) 16 May 1999 (both P. K. Nelson). The single summer record is of one along Doane Creek, Palomar Mountain

State Park (E14), 7 July 1986 (K. L. Weaver, E. J. McNeil)—the wet meadow at this site is the closest approximation to Lincoln's Sparrow's breeding habitat in San Diego County.

Conservation: No trend in Lincoln's Sparrow numbers in San Diego County is obvious. Christmas bird count results suggest much variability from year to year, but, among the county's six counts, these variations do not run in phase. Importation of water benefits Lincoln's Sparrow; even the weedy dry beds of reservoirs exposed during droughts are good Lincoln's Sparrow habitat. But the development of floodplains—channelizing, landscaping, paving—disfavors this bird so partial to uncontrolled dense undergrowth.

Taxonomy: Two subspecies of Lincoln's Sparrows are generally recognized, *M. l. gracilis* (Kittlitz, 1858), breeding in southeastern Alaska and coastal British Columbia, and *M. l. lincolnii* (Audubon, 1834), breeding in the rest of the species' transcontinental range. The two still need to be better defined; the characters of *gracilis*, small size and heavier black streaking on the upperparts, are not always correlated. As might be expected from its much wider range, nominate *lincolnii* is the common subspecies in San Diego County, but some examples of *gracilis* (core winter range central and northern California) reach us as well. Of the 30 Lincoln's Sparrow specimens in the San Diego Natural History Museum, three appear to qualify as *gracilis* on both characters: National City (T10) 10 January 1924 (SDNHM 9216), Tijuana River valley 25 October 1974 (SDNHM 38983), and Point Loma (S7) 19 March 1990 (SDNHM 46540).