

### **Northern Mockingbird *Mimus polyglottos***

The Northern Mockingbird has become such a fixture in southern California's domesticated landscape that it now seems out of place in natural habitats. From inner-city neighborhoods to rural ranches it is common year round. Nevertheless, mockingbirds still occur also in desert washes and in open sage scrub with scattered large shrubs or cacti. Field work for this atlas revealed that in the Anza-Borrego Desert the mockingbird nests widely in wetter years, retreating to towns and oases in dry ones.

**Breeding distribution:** The mockingbird is widespread in San Diego County, but its breeding distribution is neatly divided into two blocks. It is common in agricultural and urbanized areas throughout the coastal lowland and lower foothills and lacking only from the north side of the Santa Margarita Mountains, where development so far is almost nil. It is generally absent from unbroken chaparral. Its upper elevational limit is about 4000 feet, where it is rare (one near Julian, J20, 24 June 2001, A. P. and T. E. Keenan; one in Pine Valley, P21, 29 June 1997, J. K. Wilson).

The mockingbird's primitive habitat along the coast was probably open sage scrub with scattered large shrubs and cactus thickets. The birds are still common in this now rare habitat wherever it remains, as in the San Diego Wild Animal Park (J12/J13) and along the western and northern slopes of Otay Mesa (V12/V13).

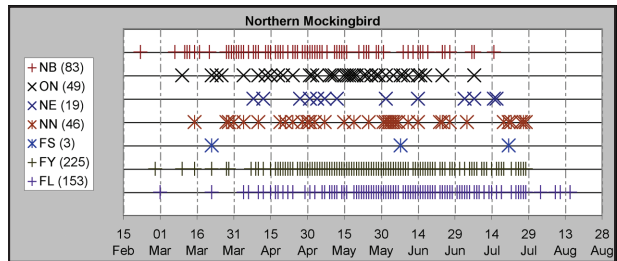
The mockingbird also occurs throughout the Anza-Borrego Desert, at least in wet years. It is common around houses and mesquite thickets, competing with the Phainopepla for mistletoe berries. From the desert, it ranges west in small numbers onto the coastal slope in Warner Valley and on the Campo Plateau. The narrow gap in the Mockingbird's range is due to the zone of thick chaparral as well as to the forests of the higher mountains.

The most interesting thing we observed about the mockingbird from 1997 to 2002 was its response to variation of rainfall in the Anza-Borrego Desert. In this area, away from the town of Borrego Springs, the number recorded per hour in the wet year 1998 was 67% higher than in the year with the next highest number, 2001. And the hourly count in 2001 was over twice that in 1997, 1999, or 2000. The jump from 1997 to 1998 was by a factor of over 8. The pattern parallels that of the Horned Lark and some wintering sparrows. It recalls the scenario observed by Gale Monson in southwestern Arizona in 1952 and 1958, when, after wet winters, "Mockingbirds, Western Meadowlarks, and other species appeared 'from nowhere' and nested abundantly" (Phillips et al. 1964).

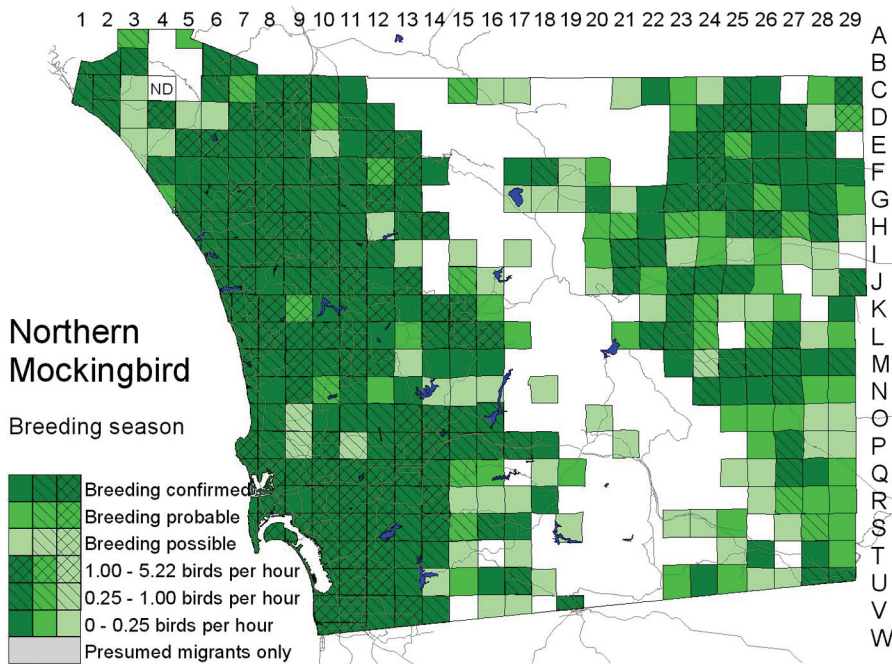
**Nesting:** Mockingbirds build their nests in trees or shrubs with dense screening foliage or protective thorns. As expected of a bird so well adapted to the urban landscape, it uses ornamental plants freely. Garden plants with both dense foliage and thorns, such as pyracantha and bougainvillea, are particularly attractive nest sites. Prickly pear cacti are favored sites as well. In the desert,



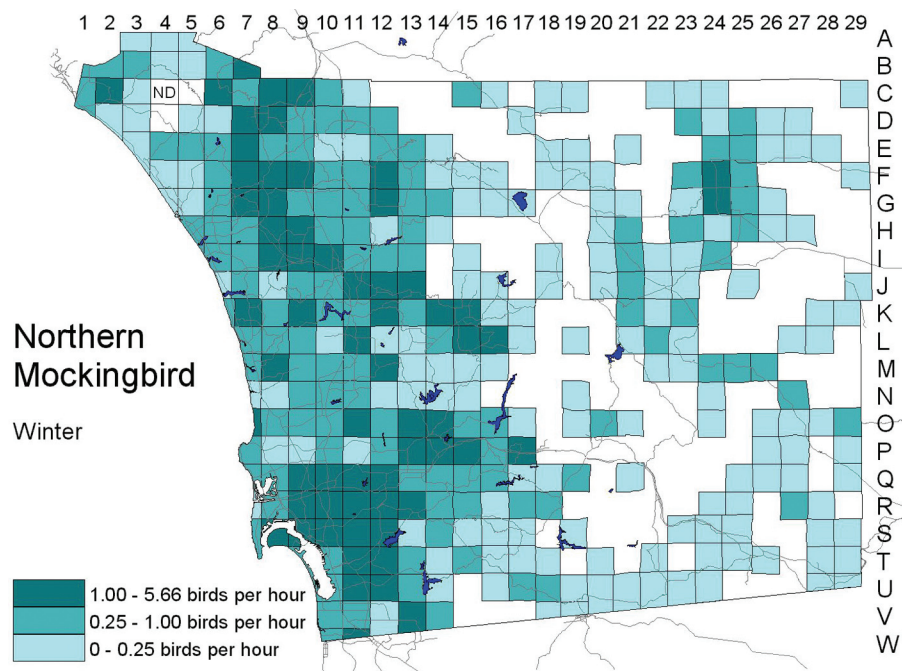
Photo by Anthony Mercieca



use of mesquite is common; mesquite often hosts mistletoe, which offers the mockingbird a staple food as well as an ideal nest site. In more sparsely vegetated desert, we noted nests in ocotillo, placed in the "cage" formed by the multiple spreading thorny branches at the plant's base.



The Northern Mockingbird enjoys an unusually long breeding season, commonly raising two broods per year, rarely three (Bent 1948). Observations of adults carrying food to a nest as early as 10 March imply egg laying by 26 February; we found nests with eggs as late as 16 July. Our earliest observations of nesting activity were from Borrego Springs, but some along the coast followed just a few days later. Interestingly, our latest records of eggs were also from Borrego Springs, in mid July when high temperatures were reaching 116° F. Collected egg sets extend the nesting season we observed even further; Bent (1948) reported California egg dates ranging from 16 February to 2 September.



**Migration:** Though the mockingbird is a permanent resident in San Diego County, whether or not individual birds are sedentary probably varies by habitat. Birds living in urban areas may have no need to move. At my home in the Hillcrest area of San Diego (R9), one pair of mockingbirds maintained the same territory year round for four years; the female was recognizable as the same individual by an injury to one foot. The species' irregularity in the Anza-Borrego Desert, however, suggests that many mockingbirds move opportunistically as conditions demand.

**Winter:** The mockingbird's distribution in San Diego County in winter shows interesting differences from that in spring and summer. On the coastal side, the species is still widespread and clearly concentrated in the agricultural areas of the north county and the urbanized area of metropolitan San Diego. In the Anza-Borrego Desert, however, the mockingbird is much more restricted in winter than in spring to developed areas and oases. Even in the wet winter of 1997–98 we did not find it over much of the sparsely vegetated desert, so the winter distribution shows large gaps where the breeding distribution appears nearly continuous. In the upper foothills and lower mountains we found the Mockingbird in winter

rarely but, surprisingly, more frequently and more widely than in summer. Winter numbers in these areas were generally small, three or fewer per day, but up to five were at Santa Ysabel (J18) 17 December 2001 and seven were in La Jolla Indian Reservation (F15) 21 January 2000 (W. E. Haas et al.). Winter records also are all from about 4000 feet elevation and lower, except for one about 4900 feet elevation near San Ignacio, Los Coyotes Indian Reservation (E21), 19 December 1998 (K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt).

**Conservation:** The mockingbird adapted to the urbanization of southern California as soon as it began. Grinnell (1911) noted the suitability of orange

groves as nesting habitat and estimated that suburban development plus the planting of orange groves allowed the Mockingbird population of Los Angeles County to increase by a factor of five. More recent data, such as Christmas bird counts, show no consistent trend, though the species' numbers probably continue to increase in tandem with increase in the extent of development. Because of lack of early data, the mockingbird's history in the Anza-Borrego Desert is unclear; there has been no obvious change since the 1960s. The opportunistic breeding we observed suggests that the Mockingbird has always been an irregular species in this area. Yet the species was absent from the nearby Salton Sink at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, colonizing only after the area was turned to farmland (Arnold 1935, 1980).

**Taxonomy:** An eastern and a western subspecies of the Northern Mockingbird are commonly recognized, but Phillips et al. (1964) ascribed the color difference to soot and fading; the figures in Ridgway (1907) suggest the measurement differences are insufficient to diagnose the subspecies either. So all Northern Mockingbirds of mainland North America are best called *M. p. leucopterus* (Linnaeus, 1758).