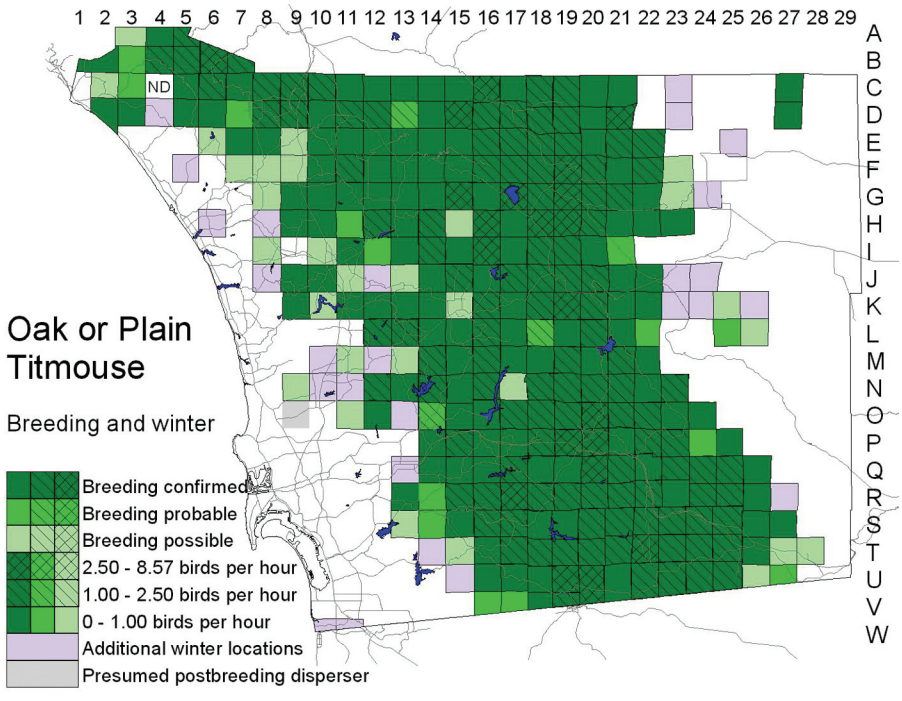
### Oak or Plain Titmouse *Baeolophus inornatus*

A plain gray bird ornamented only with a crest, the Oak Titmouse was long known as the Plain Titmouse, and as the San Diego Titmouse in the days when each subspecies was called by its own English name. It is indeed most common in oak woodland, though common also wherever there are trees in San Diego County's foothills and mountains. A year-round resident, the titmouse is familiar to many because of its tameness around campgrounds and picnic tables and because of its patronizing bird feeders and birdhouses. But in spite of this familiarity with humanity it has not spread into cities now landscaped into urban forest.

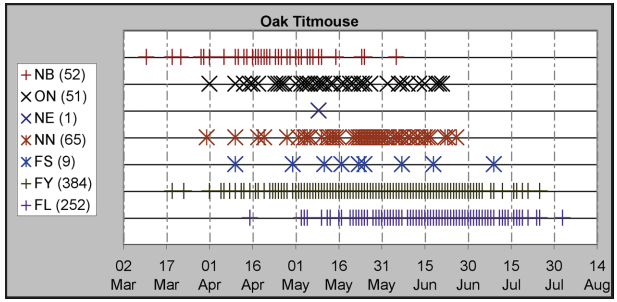
*Photo by Anthony Mercieca*

**Breeding distribution:** The Oak Titmouse's range is the prime exemplar of a pattern typical of birds of oak woodland. The distribution of species following this pattern covers most of the coastal slope but does not reach the coast itself. The range approaches the coast most closely in the north (within 3 miles along San Onofre Creek in the northeast corner of square D2), then retracts inland with increasing distance to the south. The Oak Titmouse thus extends west to Talega Canyon (B2; up to nine on 28 May 2001, P. Unitt) and San Onofre Creek (D2; six on 17 June 2001, R. E. Fischer) in Camp Pendleton. Along the Mexican border, however, the westernmost site for the titmouse is 20 miles inland at Marron Valley (V16; up to seven on 11 May 2000, B. E. Kus).

Titmice reach their maximum abundance around 3000–4000 feet elevation with up to 80 in Matagual Valley (H19) 18 June 2000 (S. E. Smith), 79 near Warner Springs (F19) 14 May 1999 (C. G. Edwards), and 75 around Descanso (P19) 28 April 2001 (M. and B. McIntosh). They occur in smaller numbers in conifer-dominated woodland up to the tops of San Diego County's highest peaks (up to 10 near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain, E20, 19 May 2001, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrdt). Chaparral offers titmice foraging habitat, and they occupy it where there are only scattered oaks affording nest sites. They extend some distance down the desert slope as long as there are some components of chaparral, as in Culp Valley (H23; three on 16 June 1999, M. L. Gabel). The Oak Titmouse also occurs uncommonly in the pinyon–juniper woodland of the Santa Rosa Mountains (C27; up to four on 2 June 1999, P. D. Jorgensen) and the Vallecito Mountains (up to 10 on the north slope of Whale Peak, L25, 25 June 1998, R. Thériault). The desert scrub oak is an important component of this habitat, but old Ladder-backed Woodpecker holes in Mojave yucca or Parry's nolina are probably the essential feature allowing titmice to occupy these areas.




**Nesting:** The Oak Titmouse typically nests in cavities in trees, either natural hollows or old woodpecker holes. Coast live oak, Engelmann oak, and sycamore were the usual sites atlas observers reported in San Diego County. Nevertheless, the titmouse exemplifies the resourcefulness of most secondary cavity nesters in selecting a home. On the desert slope, we twice confirmed it using old holes of the




Ladder-backed Woodpecker in yuccas. Titmice nest commonly in man-made structures like birdhouses and metal fence posts. A crack in a building's stucco may create a nest cavity, as at Tierra del Sol (U25) 6 May 2001 (J. R. Barth). The most unusual titmouse nest noted was in an old Cliff Swallow nest on a house in Rancho Cuca (F14) 7 June 1998 (P. Unitt).

Cicero (2000) reported that eggs of the southern California subspecies of the Oak Titmouse had been collected from 19 March to 31 May, and our observations in San Diego County reflect this interval almost exactly. A nest with nestlings near Mocogo Ranch (U16) 31 March 2001 (P. Unitt) implies egg laying by 17 March, while an adult disposing of a nestling's fecal sac along Klondike Creek (M15) 9 July 2001 (P. K. Nelson) implies it as late as 8 June.

**Winter:** Wandering of the Oak Titmouse outside its breeding range in winter is rare. Nevertheless, the species has reached the Tijuana River valley (W10, one on 1 December 2001 and 6 January 2002, G. L. Rogers, M. Billings; W11, one on 8 December 2001, C. G. Edwards), in the longest possible dispersal within San Diego County toward the coast. In the Anza–Borrego Desert the titmouse is occasional at Lower Willows along Coyote Creek (D23; one on 21 February 2001 and 16 December 2001, M. L. Gabel, P. R. Pryde) and has been recorded a few times even on the floor of the Borrego Valley (G24, one on 17 December 2000, S. and J. Berg; E25, one on 21 January 2001, P. D. Ache). Massey (1998) noted one sighting in the valley's mesquite bosque (G25) and that the species was rare in fall and winter at Yaqui Well and Tamarisk Grove (I24). Multiple winter records from Earthquake Valley (J23/K23) suggest the disjunct population in the Vallecito Mountains is not isolated, with titmice dispersing across the gap in winter.

**Conservation:** On the basis of the Breeding Bird Survey (Sauer et al. 2003) the Oak Titmouse has been reported as in decline, but no decline is obvious in San Diego County. The species' range here has remained stable over the past century, in spite of many changes in the county's environment. Several other species that once shared the titmouse's pattern of distribution, primary and secondary cavity nesters as well as open-cup builders, have spread coastward by taking advantage of urban trees. But for unknown reasons the titmouse itself still remains static, though it thrives around rural homes, capitalizing on bird feeders and birdhouses.

**Taxonomy:** The subspecies *B. i. affabilis* Grinnell and Swarth, 1926, darker than other Oak Titmice and with a more deeply scoop-shaped mandible, has a range coextensive with the San Diegan District in southwestern California and northwestern Baja California. It was originally described as *B. i. murinus* by Ridgway (1904), and the substitution of *affabilis* was necessitated when the genus *Baeolophus* was lumped with *Parus*, in which the name *murinus* had already been used. When the genera were split again (AOU 1997) the name did not revert to Ridgway's original because of a provision in the latest version of the code of scientific nomenclature that conserves such changes if they happened before 1961.