

NUTHATCHES — FAMILY SITTIDAE

Red-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta canadensis*

The Red-breasted Nuthatch is one of those mountain birds whose elevational range is barely touched by the tops of San Diego County's highest peaks. It is a rare resident in deep forest on the north slopes of the Palomar, Hot Springs, Volcan, and Cuyamaca mountains. The Red-breasted is by far the most dispersive of California's nuthatches, occurring widely outside its breeding range as an irregular winter visitor. These visitors seek conifers, being seen in other trees only if no conifers are near. Invasions may plant new isolated breeding populations at low elevations, such as the one on Point Loma.



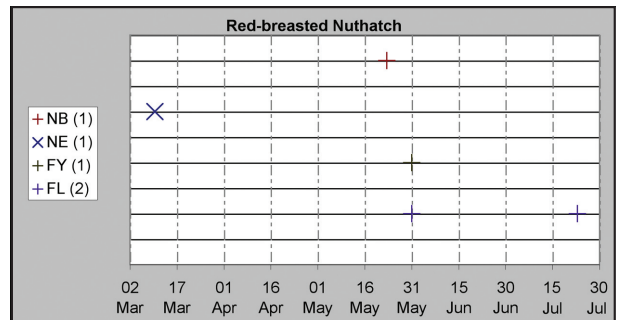
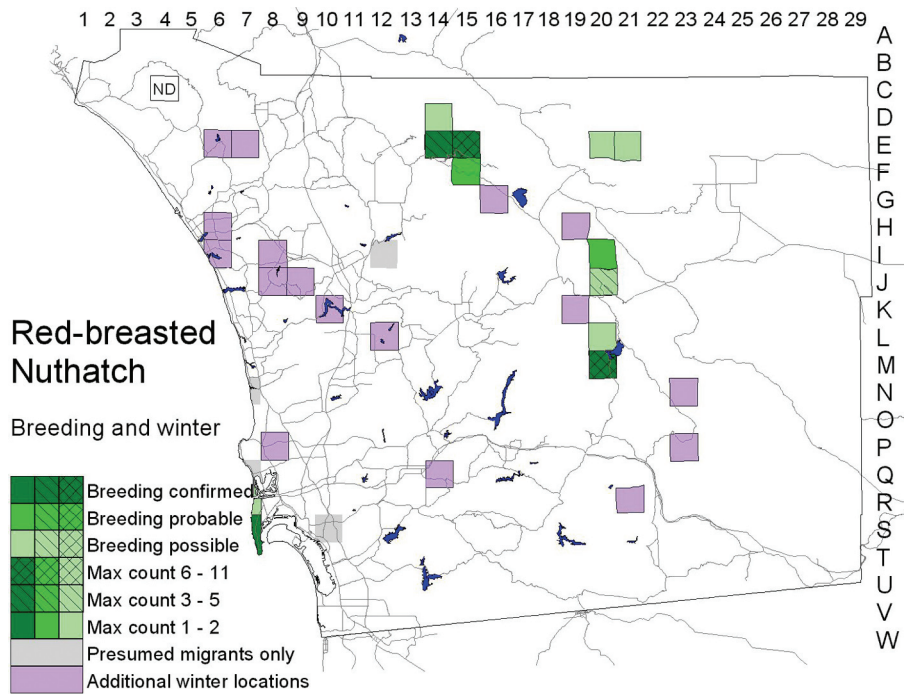
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Breeding distribution: From 1997 to 2002, we found the Red-breasted Nuthatch regularly and most numerous on Palomar Mountain. Its habitat there is forest dominated by the big-cone Douglas fir between 4500 and 5700 feet elevation, from Pauma Creek (D14) southeast to Dyche Valley (F15), mainly on the north-facing slopes of the southwestern of the mountain's two parallel ridges. In this area the species is uncommon, with maximum daily counts of five or fewer, except for 11 (including fledglings) along Highway S6 near Fry Creek 31 May 2000 (E15, E. C. Hall, C. R. Mahrtdt). It is regular on Middle Peak and the northeast slope of Cuyamaca Peak (M20) above 5200 feet elevation. During the atlas period the high count in the Cuyamaca Mountains was nine on Middle Peak (M20) 19 May 1998 (R. E. Webster); previously, as many as 20 were noted in the same area 19 July 1987 (AB 41:1488, 1987). There is one report from North Peak (L20), of two about 5200 feet elevation on the northwest slope 14 July 2000 (J. R. Barth).

On Hot Springs Mountain the Red-breasted Nuthatch has been known since the peak's avifauna was first explored in 1980 (Unitt 1981), with a maximum of six 19 July 1986 (R. E. Webster, AB 40:1256, 1986). During the atlas period, however, K. L. Weaver and C. R. Mahrtdt found it in the breeding season only twice, single individuals in square E20 on 9 June 2001 and in E21 on 19 June 1999. Atlas observers found it during the breeding season on Volcan Mountain for the first time, with two on Oak Ridge (I20) 22 July 1999 (L. J. Hargrove), a pair near Catfish Spring (I20) 16 June 2000 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan), and three at 5100 feet elevation 0.35 mile south of Simmons Flat (J20) 16 July 2001 (J. R. Barth).

On Point Loma (S7), mainly on and near the campus of Point Loma Nazarene University, the Red-breasted Nuthatch has been an uncommon resident since it colonized after the invasion of 1963. It may have died out in the mid 1990s, only to recolonize again after the invasion of 1996. Virginia P. Johnson netted a female with a brood patch on 10 March 1997.

Nesting: Like the other nuthatches, the Red-breasted nests in tree cavities. It may use a preexisting cavity or may excavate or enlarge its own. It is famous for smearing the nest entrance with pitch, deterring predators. Nesting in San Diego County, however, is still little known. One nest at Point Loma was in a hole in the sawed-off leaf base of a Canary Island date palm 2 June 1978 (Unitt 1984). Nesting confirmations in the mountains were of nest building on Cuyamaca Peak 23 May 1998 (G. L.



Rogers) and of fledglings on Palomar 31 May 2000 (E. C. Hall) and 23 July 2000 (J. R. Barth). Nesting in the coastal colony at Point Loma may begin considerably earlier, as implied by the female with a brood patch on 10 March.

Migration: Red-breasted Nuthatch incursions are notoriously irregular. In San Diego County the species has been recorded away from breeding locations from 27 August (1998, one at O'Neill Lake, E6, P. A. Ginsburg) to 4 May (1997, three in Greenwood Cemetery, S10, P. Unitt). The largest numbers are seen in October and November, some invasions petering out as the winter wears on. Red-breasted Nuthatches have occurred in all regions of San Diego County, but records for the Anza-Borrego Desert are few, with one in "San Felipe Canyon" 2 October 1908 (F. Stephens, MVZ 3880; Grinnell and Miller [1944] reported this specimen as from Vallecito Creek), one at Tamarisk Grove Campground (I24) 4 November 1973 (P. Unitt), one in planted pines in Borrego Springs (F24) 30-31 October 1996 (P. D. Jorgensen), one on Villager Peak (C27) 19 October 1998 (P. D. Jorgensen), and one in Nolina Wash, Pinyon Mountains (K25) 15 October 1999 (D. C. Seals, S. Peters).

Winter: The Red-breasted Nuthatch is one of the more frequent montane invaders, with a few recorded in San

Diego County in most winters, including every year from 1997 to 2002. But the larger incursions, during which the species would be rated as uncommon rather than rare, are sporadic. The falls and early winters of 1963, 1969, 1972, 1975, 1983, and 1996 saw the largest. San Diego County Christmas bird counts in December 1996 and January 1997 yielded a total of 26, more than in any previous year. Thus the five-year atlas period began with the winding down of a major invasion, accounting for several records of stragglers remaining into spring 1997. Numbers over the next five winters were small, with the maximum daily count of six near the San Luis Rey Picnic Area (G16) 22 January 2001 (W. E. Haas).

Conservation: The magnitude of Red-breasted Nuthatch invasions is controlled by factors outside San Diego

County (Koenig 2001, Koenig and Knops 2001), but the planting of ornamental conifers has made conditions more amenable to the birds when they arrive. Certainly the species never would have colonized Point Loma if the area had not been heavily planted with pines. Its colonization of San Diego County's mountains, however, may also be fairly recent, as it was not reported there in the breeding season until 1970. And its population may be increasing gradually; numbers reported from Palomar Mountain 1997–2001 were greater than known there previously, though coverage was much more thorough. Nevertheless, the areas of forest suitable for breeding Red-breasted Nuthatches are so small that a fire could eliminate these isolated populations.