

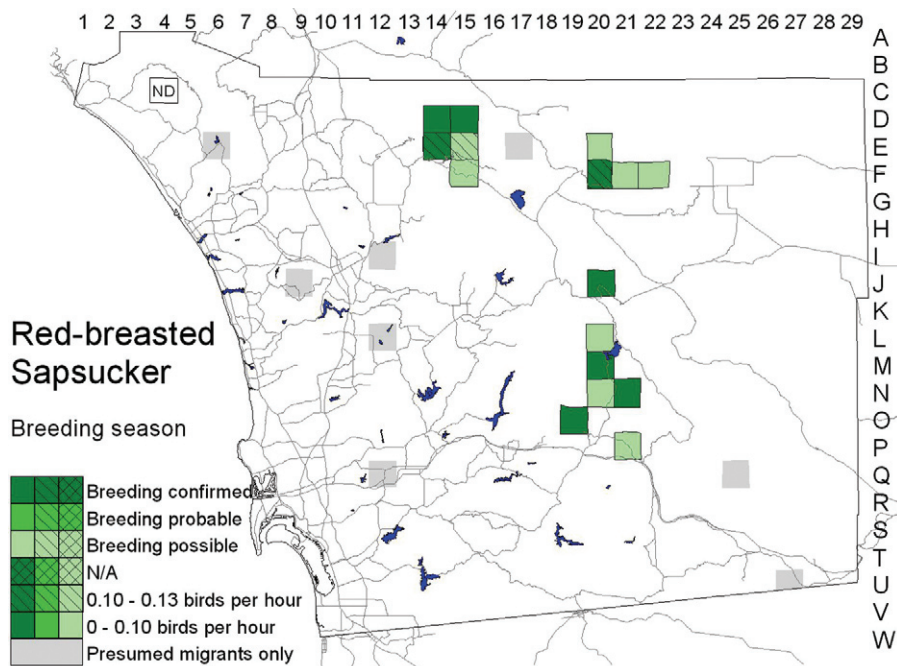
Red-breasted Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus ruber*

The Red-breasted Sapsucker occurs in San Diego County in two roles. As a winter visitor it is widespread but uncommon, found mainly in oak and coniferous woodland, as well as in nonnative trees, especially pepper and eucalyptus. In these trees the sapsuckers drill rows of holes, tapping the sap. The scars on the trees last for decades, long after the birds have gone. As a breeding species the Red-breasted Sapsucker is rare and confined to coniferous forest. Curiously, the species is spreading as a breeding bird at the same time the number of winter visitors is shrinking.

Breeding distribution: Breeding Red-breasted Sapsuckers are best known in San Diego County from Palomar



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

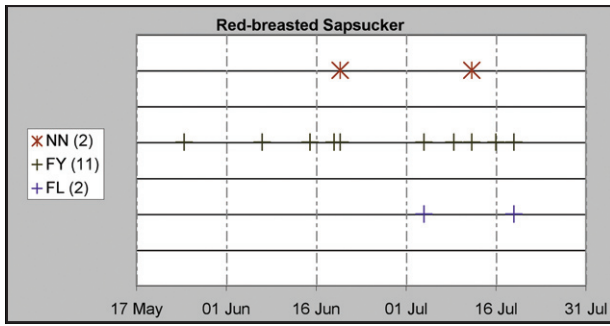


Mountain. During the atlas period they were widely distributed on Palomar at elevations from 4600 to 6000 feet with at least 10 pairs. We recorded them on Hot Springs Mountain on eight occasions, with up to four at 5800 to 6000 feet elevation along the road leading north from San Ysidro (F20) 25 May 2001 (M. and B. McIntosh).

The Red-breasted Sapsucker was found for the first time on Volcan Mountain in 2001 with single birds around the south base of the mountain (J20) 7 June (M. B. Stowe) and 15 June (E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer).

With 11 reports during the atlas period in the Cuyamaca Mountains, we found the Red-

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breasted Sapsucker more frequently than expected in that range. All observations were of just one or two birds, except for a family group of four along the Sweetwater River at Hulburt Grove (O19) 4 July 2000 (J. R. Barth). At 3400 feet, this site represents the lowest elevation at which the Red-breasted Sapsucker has been known to breed in San Diego County and the southernmost point of recorded breeding in the species' entire range. One at Pine Valley (P21) 19 May 2001 (M. B. Mulrooney) was even farther south, also at an unexpectedly low elevation (3680 feet), and also at the lower limit of the pines.

Nesting: Little is yet known of Red-breasted Sapsucker nesting in San Diego County. The two nest sites described by atlas observers were in a black oak and in an ornamental deciduous tree on the grounds of the Palomar Observatory. Our observations of breeding activity imply the birds lay at least from mid May to early June; 13 egg sets from throughout California range from 12 May to 21 June (Bent 1939).

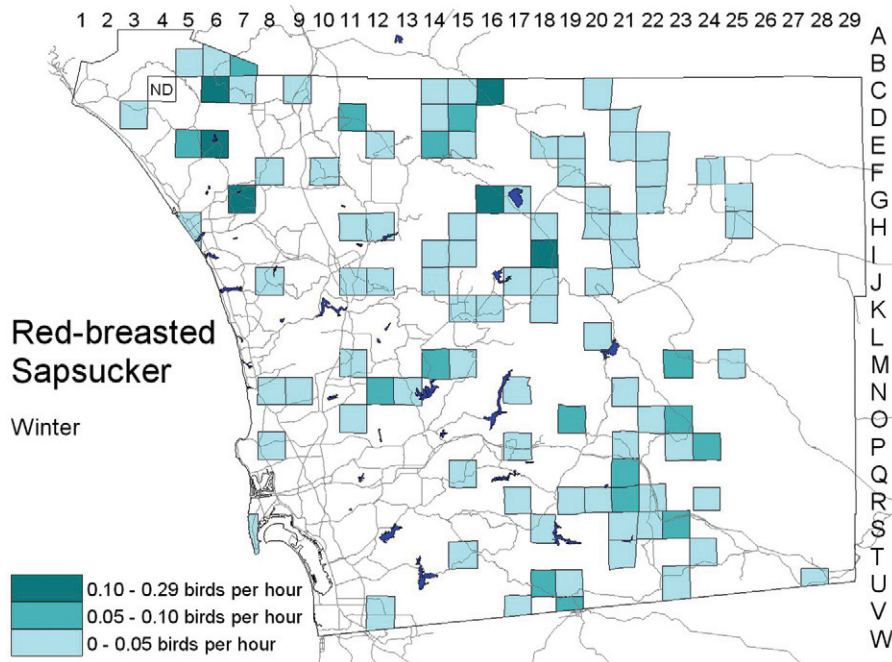
Migration: The Red-breasted Sapsucker occurs as a winter visitor to San Diego County mainly from October through March. Dates of such migrants range from 19 September (1994, one at O'Neill Lake, E6, P. A. Ginsburg) to 29 March, except for three stragglers in May. One was

at Point Loma (S7) 5 May 1982 (R. E. Webster, AB 36:894, 1982), one was at Cottonwood Campground (Q25) 6 May 2001 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan), and one was near Deadman Hole (E17) 19 May 2001 (J. D. Barr). The last two were at elevations of 3100 to 4300 feet in oak woodland and may have been pioneers scouting for breeding territories.

Winter: As a winter visitor the Red-breasted Sapsucker is widely but thinly distributed over the county's coastal slope from sea level to 6000 feet in the mountains. Its numbers in the coastal lowland decrease from north to south. Though the birds feed on a variety of native trees, they are more frequent around some exotic ones, especially the Peruvian pepper. The abundance of pepper trees in the landscaping of the campgrounds at O'Neill Lake and Guajome Lake (G7) accounts for the sapsucker's being recorded more frequently at these sites than at any others. Our highest daily count in one atlas square in winter, of four on 1 December 1998, was at O'Neill Lake (P. A. Ginsburg).

In the Anza-Borrego Desert the Red-breasted Sapsucker is rare, recorded mainly from exotic planted trees in the Borrego Valley or the cottonwoods planted at Butterfield Ranch (M23). From 1997 to 2002 we noted single individuals in the desert on only six occasions, and only one of these was in native vegetation, the mesquites at Vallecito County Park (14 January 2000, M. C. Jorgensen).

Conservation: Despite its frequent use of ornamental trees, the Red-breasted Sapsucker may be on the decrease as a winter visitor to San Diego County. Numbers on the San Diego Christmas bird count averaged 3.9 per year from 1975 to 1988 but 0.8 per year from 1989 to 2001 and only 0.4 per year from 1997 to 2001. Before 1975 the numbers of the Red-breasted and Red-naped on the count were usually combined and reported as Yellow-bellied. But the average per count of the combined species from 1954 to 1974 was 6.5, so the trend may go back even further.



Old sap wells on eucalyptus trees throughout metropolitan San Diego remain as mute testimony to the former widespread occurrence of sapsuckers in an area where we noted only four individual Red-breasted over the five-year atlas period. Figures from the county's Christmas bird counts other than San Diego, however, do not show so clear a trend. The species' winter range could be retracting northward as the trend toward warmer winters compels less migration.

On the other hand, as a breeding bird the Red-breasted Sapsucker is spreading. Early naturalists did not report it in the county in summer; the first record at this season was from Palomar Mountain in 1957 (A. G. Morley

in Devillers 1970a). By 1981 there were at least five pairs on Palomar (R. Higson in Unitt 1984). On Hot Springs Mountain I found one on 8 June 1985 but none over three visits in 1980 (Unitt 1981). The first breeding-season reports from the Cuyamaca Mountains were in 1974 (Unitt 1984) and 1983 (C. G. Edwards, AB 37:1028, 1983). It is in these last two areas where the species' establishment and increase since 1980 have been most noticeable.

Taxonomy: The Red-breasted Sapsucker consists of two subspecies, *S. r. ruber* (Gmelin, 1788), breeding in the Pacific Northwest, and *S. r. daggetti* Grinnell, 1901, breeding mainly in California. *S. r. daggetti* accounts for almost all the winter visitors as well as the breeding popu-

lation. The one specimen of *ruber*, from 5 miles northeast of Lakeside (N14) 9 November 1957 (SDNHM 30061), is the southernmost of this largely nonmigratory subspecies. *Sphyrapicus r. ruber* differs from *daggetti* mainly in its brighter red head (in fresh plumage scarlet rather than crimson), less extensive white head stripe, and smaller yellow-tinged spots on the back.

The Red-breasted, Red-naped, and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are closely related, apparently barely over the threshold as species. The Red-breasted and Red-naped hybridize to some extent, chiefly along the eastern flank of the Sierra Nevada, and hybrids have been collected as winter visitors in San Diego County (Devillers 1970a).