

Redhead *Aythya americana*

Hundreds of Redheads winter in Mission Bay. Flocks appear occasionally on lakes and lagoons elsewhere, but nowhere away from Mission Bay is the species consistently common. Though a diving duck, the Redhead prefers rather shallow water. It is mainly a winter visitor but also breeds in small numbers along the county's north coast. San Diego County represents the southern tip of the species' breeding range along the Pacific coast of North America.

Breeding distribution: From 1997 to 2001 the only sites where we confirmed Redheads nesting were sewage ponds along the Santa Margarita River between Pueblitos Canyon and Rifle Range Road (F5; 19, including chicks, 28 June 2000, R. E. Fischer, J. Morlan) and at Stuart Mesa Road (G5; 24, including chicks, 20 June 1999, R. E. Fischer). Other sites where the species is known to have bred are Whelan Lake (G6; chicks photographed 18 May 2003, J. C. Daynes), "San Luis Rey Valley" (eggs collected 11 May 1933, Willett 1933), Guajome Lake (G7; eggs collected 11 May 1936, WFVZ 2564), Santa Margarita River estuary (G4), Buena Vista Lagoon (H5/H6), Batiquitos Lagoon (J6/J7), San Elijo Lagoon (L7), and Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7; Unitt 1984). During the atlas period we saw Redheads, often in pairs, through the breeding season at all these sites except Los Peñasquitos. O'Neill Lake (E6; up to six on 2 July 1999, P. A. Ginsburg) and the mouths of Las Flores (E3; up to four on 17 May 1998, R. and S. L. Breisch) and Aliso (F4; pair on 1 July 2001, B. C. Moore) creeks are new sites of possible breeding. Numbers at all sites of possible breeding were usually five or fewer. The records with chicks excluded, our highest counts during the breeding season were of 15 in the east basin of Buena Vista Lagoon 16



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

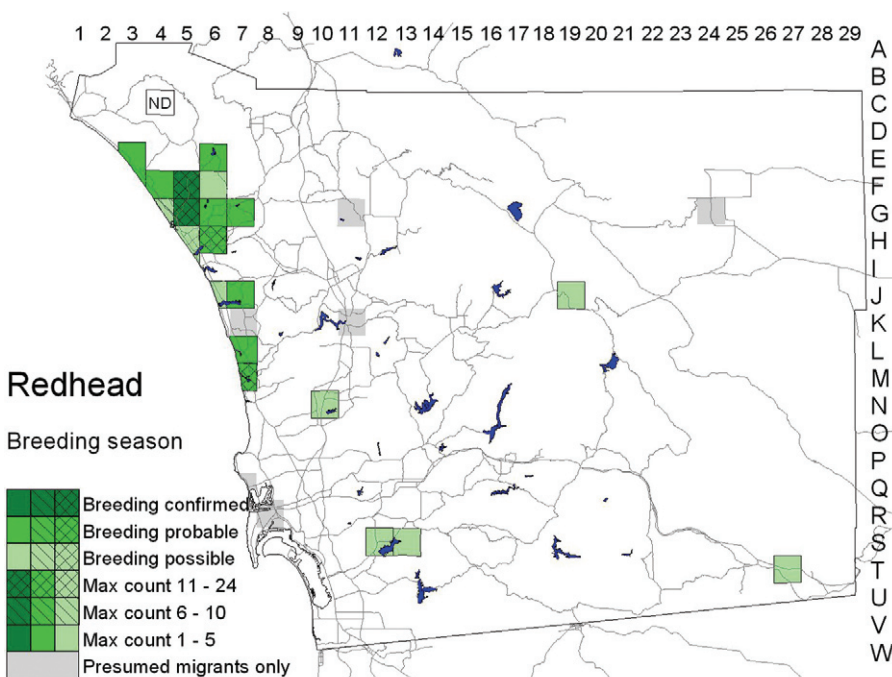
May 1999 (L. E. Taylor) and 20 in the San Dieguito River estuary (M7) 10 July 1999 (D. R. Grine). The Redhead appears to be irregular at many of these sites.

A few late spring records elsewhere suggest the Redhead could nest occasionally in other parts of San Diego County. Two were at Turner Lake, Valley Center (G11), 15 May 1997 (L. Seneca), one was at Wynola (J19) 12 March–19 July 1999 (S. E. Smith), one was at Sweetwater Reservoir (S12) 4 May 1998 (P. Famolaro), and three were at Tule Lake (T27) 6 June 2001 (J. K. Wilson).

Nesting: Redhead nests are usually within dense marshes, often over water. Besides the two egg sets collected on 11 May, evidence for the Redhead's nesting schedule in San Diego County comes from sightings of chicks, which range from 24 May to 27 August (A. Fries in Unitt 1984).

Migration: In fall, Redheads return in numbers by late October (68 at Batiquitos Lagoon 27 October 1997, Merkel and Associates 1997). In spring, they depart in March and early April. Forty were still in the San Diego River flood-control channel (R8) 15 April 1999 (J. R. Barth). Sixteen in northwest Mission Bay (Q7) 21 April 2000 (L. Polinsky) and three at Miramar Lake (N10) 26 April 1998 (P. Unitt) were late stragglers. Ten records from the Borrego Valley range from 11 November (1990, two at the Roadrunner Club, F24, E. H. Monsees) to 28 March (1999, one at Borrego Springs, G24, P. D. Ache).

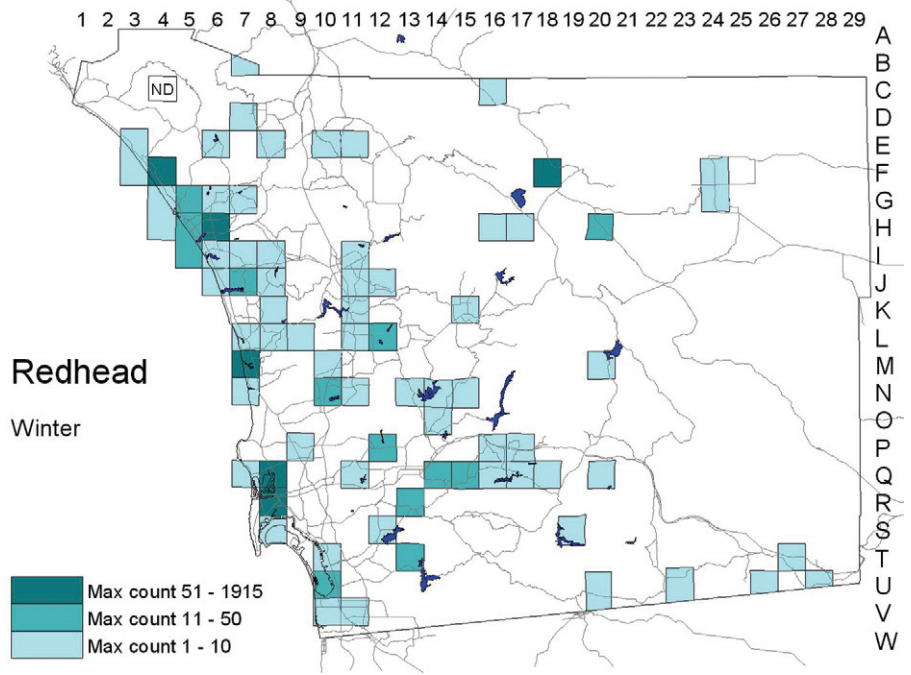
Winter: Currently, Mission Bay is the center for wintering Redheads in San Diego County. Often the birds congregate in the low hundreds in the south-



east corner of the bay at the mouth of Tecolote Creek (R8). But they move around. Our highest count, of 1915 on 7 December 1998, was in the northeast quadrant of the bay (Q8; J. C. Worley). Sometimes the birds move across Sea World Drive to the San Diego River flood-control channel (up to 450 on 9 December 2000, P. A. Ginsburg).

At other places numbers of wintering Redheads vary wildly. Buena Vista and Batiquitos lagoons are among the more regular sites, and numbers there are sometimes large, with up to 722 at Batiquitos 7 January 1997 (Merkel and Associates 1997). But numbers on Oceanside Christmas bird counts, which include both these lagoons, have varied from a high of 442 in 1996 to a low of two in 1979. Similarly, numbers on the Rancho Santa Fe count, which encompasses San Elijo, San Dieguito, and Los Peñasquitos lagoons, have varied from 97 in 1987 down to one in 1980 and 2001.

Farther inland the Redhead is even more sporadic. Miramar Lake (N10) was the only inland site where we found the species regularly (up to 25 on 1 February 2000, G. Grantham). Since the inception of the Lake Henshaw Christmas bird count in 1981, the Redhead has been recorded on fewer than 50% of the counts. Yet our largest inland flock during the atlas period, 100 at Swan Lake



(F18) 21 December 1998 (G. L. Rogers), gave this count its only total greater than ten.

Conservation: The sharp fluctuations from year to year in numbers of Redheads on San Diego County Christmas bird counts are not coordinated among the counts. The variations could thus be due as much to flocks shifting from site to site within the county as to annual variation in the numbers migrating into the county from the north. The breeding population has remained at a low level for decades without conspicuous change.