

Rock Wren *Salpinctes obsoletus*

Like the Canyon Wren, the Rock Wren is a bird of rocky canyons and boulder-covered slopes. But the Rock Wren is more flexible, living also in badlands of eroded earth, the beds of partially filled reservoirs, and sparsely vegetated areas of little relief. It is more dispersive than the Canyon Wren, wintering regularly if uncommonly in small rock outcrops and expanses of disturbed bare dirt where it does not breed. From 1997 to 2002 we saw this more opportunistic lifestyle illustrated by striking fluctuations in numbers in the Anza–Borrego Desert. Rock Wrens increased sharply during the wet winter of 1997–98, remained common for one year, then decreased in the following dry years.

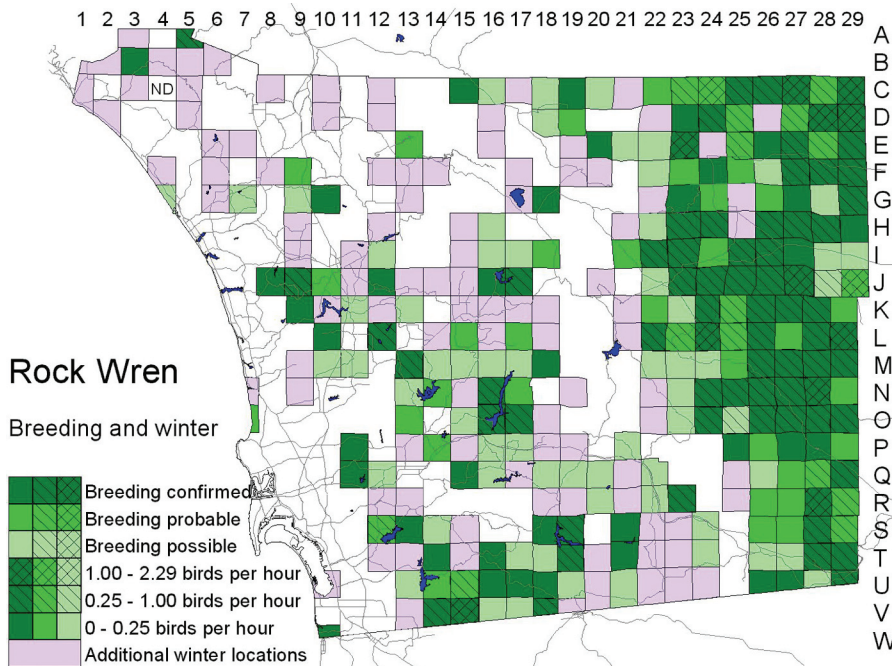
Breeding distribution: The Rock Wren is most widespread and numerous in the Anza–Borrego Desert, especially on rocky slopes. Daily counts in the breeding season ranged up to 50, including 30 singing males, around Indian Hill and Carrizo Palms (R28) 6 May 1998 (J. O. Zimmer), 40 on a bajada southwest of Halfhill Dry Lake (J29) 10 April 1998 (L. J. Hargrove), and 40 at Split Mountain (L29) 18 April 1998 (G. Rebstock, K. Forney). The convergence of these high counts in a single year is no coincidence but followed a winter of unusually plentiful rain. The number of Rock Wrens reported per hour in the eastern third of San Diego County was at least 50% greater in 1998 than it was in any other of the atlas period’s five years. In 1998, Rock Wrens were common



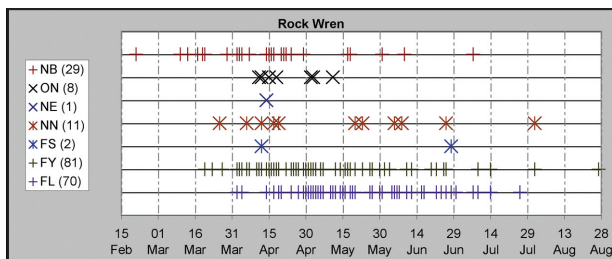
Photo by Jack C. Daynes

also in the Borrego and Carrizo badlands (25 near Five Palms Spring, G29, 16 May 1998, G. Rebstock, K. Forney; 29 in Arroyo Seco del Diablo, N28, 16 May 1998, R. and S. L. Breisch). Even on the flat floor of the Borrego Valley (F24) Rock Wrens breed occasionally (four, adults feeding young, 27 May 2001, M. L. Gabel).

On the coastal slope Rock Wrens are more localized, but their numbers are more consistent from year to year. Here they are most numerous in the rocky foothills near the Mexican border, then decrease toward the northwest. The largest number reported from the coastal slope was 20 on the south side of Otay Mountain (V15) 25 May 1999



(D. C. Seals). In northwestern San Diego County the only sites of reports of more than three Rock Wrens in a day were on the southwest slope of Double Peak (J9; 12 on 14 March 1998, four on 15 May 1998, J. O. Zimmer) and near Willow Spring (A5) on the Riverside County line (six on 10 and 22 June 1999, K. J. Winter). We seldom found the Rock Wren above 4000 feet elevation, but the record at the highest elevation was of a nest with nestlings near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain (E20) 8 June 2001 (K. L. Weaver). The Rock Wren is rare along the coast, where the only records in the breeding season are of a singing male 1 mile inland from the Santa Margarita River mouth



(G4) 16 April and 1 May 1999 (P. A. Ginsburg), a pair at Torrey Pines (O7) 22 April 1997 (D. G. Seay), and two pairs, each with one fledgling, in Goat Canyon (W10) 12 June 1999 (W. E. Haas).

Nesting: Rock Wrens usually nest in crevices among or under rocks, sometimes in rodent burrows in earthen banks. Several nests reported by atlas participants were furnished with the “porch” of small rock chips, unique to this species. Most nests were in rock piles, banks, or road cuts; one at Morena Dam (T21) 12 April 1997 was in a hole in the dam’s concrete (R. and S. L. Breisch).

Our observations from 1997 to 2001 imply egg laying beginning in early March (fledglings in Blair Valley, L24, 2 April 1998, R. Thériault) and continuing through early June (adult disposing of nestling’s fecal sac between San Dieguito Reservoir and Mount Israel, K9, 28 June 1998, L. E. Taylor), exceptionally to early July (nest with nestlings at upper end of El Capitan Reservoir, N16, 1 August 2000, J. R. Barth). The span falls well within the range 5 February–28 July given for 77 California egg sets by Bent (1948). The wide range suggests multiple broods when the food supply is favorable.

Migration: The Rock Wren shows up in only small numbers away from sites where it could breed, so its migration is inconspicuous. On Point Loma (S7), where it is unknown as a breeding bird, it is recorded from 16

September to 22 February (Unitt 1984). From 1997 to 2001, the latest record from an atlas square where the species was not found during the breeding season was of one at Torrey Pines State Reserve (N7) 3 March 1999 (K. Estey).

Winter: Any winter influx of Rock Wrens into San Diego County is only slight. Numbers in winter are not conspicuously higher than in the breeding season (maximum count 40 near Indian Hill 8 February 1998, J. O. Zimmer). The winter distribution follows a pattern similar to the breeding distribution. We found the species in winter in 99 atlas squares where we did not find it during the breeding season, however, so there is at least considerable dispersal of the local population. The species still occurs rarely at high elevations (one near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain 13 February 1999, K. L. Weaver; one at Mount Laguna, O23, 21 January 2002, E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer). It is appreciably more frequent in northwestern San Diego County in winter but still rather rare along the coast, with only 13 records 1997–2002, none of more than two birds.

The Rock Wren’s fluctuations in abundance in the Anza–Borrego Desert in winter were similar to those in the breeding season. The number reported per hour in the last three winters of the project was only one third that in 1997–98.

Conservation: No changes through history in the Rock Wren’s status in San Diego County are known. The Rock Wren benefits to a small degree from human modifications of the environment, using road cuts, riprap, quarries, and areas of disturbed bare dirt—more in winter than in the breeding season.

Taxonomy: Rock Wrens in San Diego County, as throughout the mainland of North America north of southern Mexico, are *S. o. obsoletus* (Say, 1823).