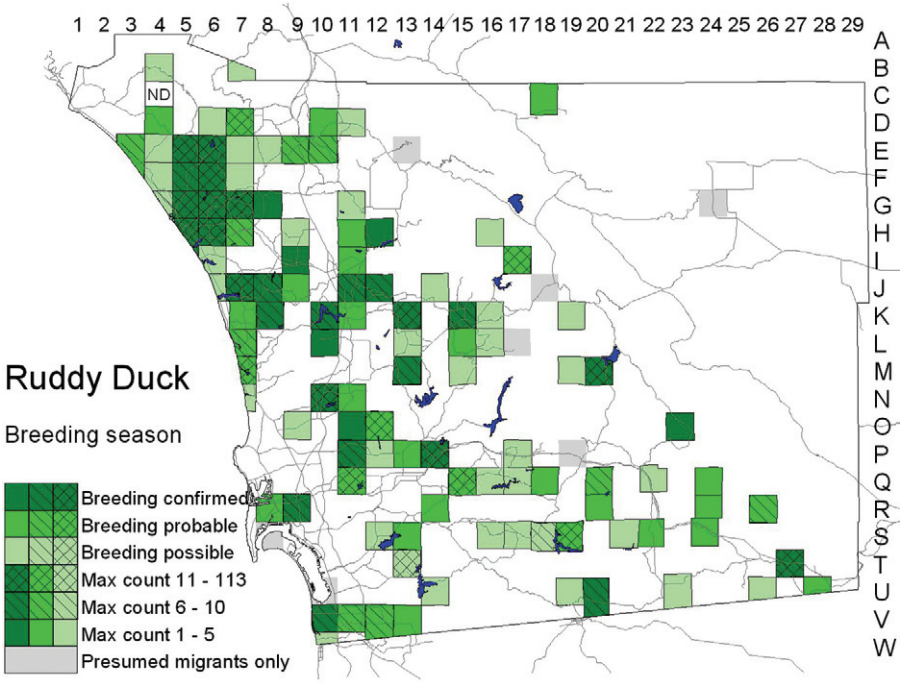
Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis*

The Ruddy Duck, North America's only representative of the stiff-tailed ducks, is locally common as a breeding bird and abundant as a winter visitor in brackish lagoons and freshwater lakes and ponds in San Diego County. Indeed, at many places, it is the most abundant wintering duck, though less conspicuous than others because of its small size, reluctance to fly, and, in winter, drab colors.

Breeding distribution: Nesting locations for the Ruddy Duck are scattered throughout San Diego County's coastal slope but are most concentrated in the northwest, in the coastal lagoons and in the valleys of the lower Santa Margarita and San Luis Rey rivers. The largest concentration is at Buena Vista Lagoon, with up to 150 in the east basin (H6) 25 April 1999 (L. E. Taylor) and 113 in the west basin (H5) 12 August 1997 (D. Rorick). Among other important sites are the Santa Margarita estuary, including nearby sewage ponds (G4/G5; up to 50, including juveniles, 1 August 1999, R. E. Fischer), Whelan Lake (G6; up to 77 on 16 July 1997, D. Rorick), and Batiquitos Lagoon (J6/J7; up to 37 on 10 July 1997, Merkel and Associates 1997).

Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Away from the north coastal area breeding Ruddy Ducks are more scattered and less common. High counts were up to 22 on Lake Murray (Q11) 1 May 1998 (N. Osborn), 21 at Upper Otay Lake (T13) 13 May 2001 (T. W. Dorman), and 27 at Barrett Lake (S19) 19 May 2001 (R. and S. L. Breisch). In southeastern San Diego County breeding sites extend a short distance onto the desert slope, east to Tule Lake (T27; up to 20 on 6 June

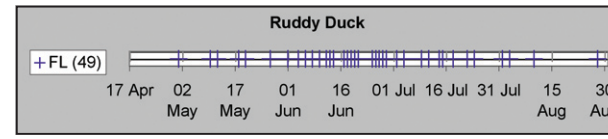


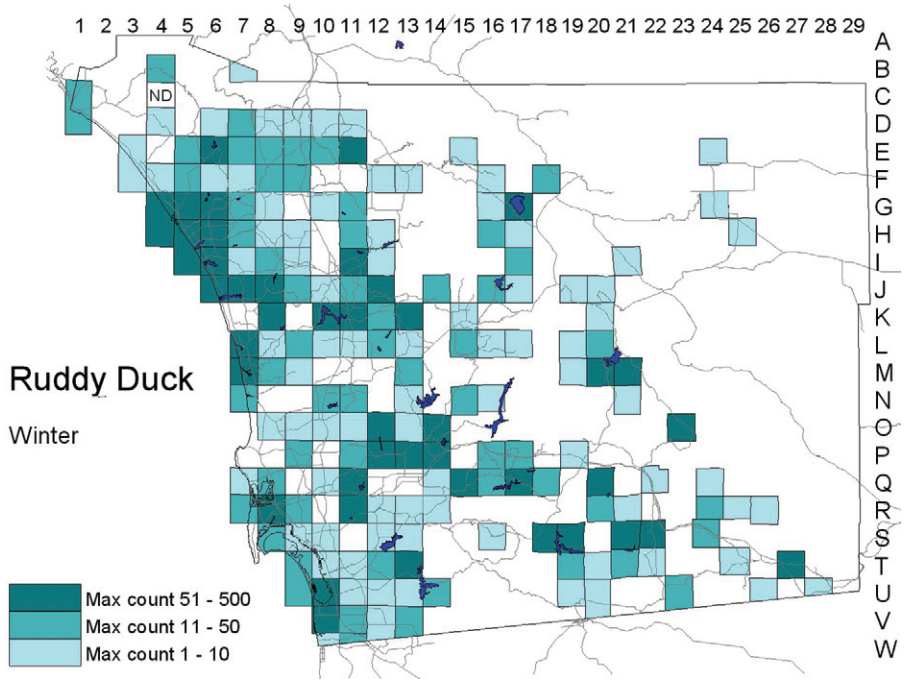
2000; chicks on 6 June, J. K. Wilson) and Jacumba (U28; up to four, birds paired, on 19 May 1999, J. K. Wilson). Ruddy Ducks nest at San Diego County's highest lakes, Cuyamaca (M20; up to 12, including chicks, 26 June 1999, A. P. and T. E. Keenan) and Big Laguna (O23; up to five, including chicks, 24 July 1998, E. C. Hall).

Nesting: Ruddy Duck nests are well hidden in marshes; many are screened by a canopy built above them. The chicks leave the nest, however, within a day after hatching, swimming with their mother but feeding themselves. As a results, all our breeding confirmations of the Ruddy Duck were of chicks. These range in date from 1 May to 28 August, suggesting egg laying from about 7 April to about the third week of June.

Migration: Wintering Ruddy Ducks arrive in October and November and depart in March and April. In the south San Diego Bay salt works, Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) found dozens to hundreds from November to March but few or none from April to October. King et al. (1987) found large numbers remaining at San Elijo Lagoon (L7) into April, recording their 10-year maximum of 970 on 6 April 1975. During the atlas period we found the same at many sites such as Lake Hodges (50 at the lake's east end, K11, 27 April 1997, E. C. Hall) and the flood-control channel at the San Diego River mouth (R8; 100 on 15 April 1999, J. R. Barth; 50 on 27 April 1999, M. B. Stowe).

Although tens of thousands of Ruddy Ducks winter on the Salton Sea a few miles to the east, in the Anza–Borrego Desert the Ruddy Duck is uncommon, occurring on artificial ponds in the Borrego Valley. The only one reported elsewhere was found on the ground with an injured leg at Tamarisk Grove Campground (I24) 6 November 1960 (ABDSP database). Anza–Borrego records range from 30 September (1992, two on the Borrego Springs sewage ponds, H25, A. G. Morley) to 9 May (2001, four on golf-course ponds





in Borrego Springs, G24, P. D. Ache). Twenty in the Ram's Hill development (H25) 3 October 1987 (P. R. Johnson) were the only recorded desert flock of more than eight.

Winter: San Diego County's population of the Ruddy Duck is augmented greatly in winter by migrants from the north and northeast. Winter counts during the atlas period ranged as high as 500 at O'Neill Lake (E6) 4 December 1999 and 20 January 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg), 417 at San Elijo Lagoon 26 December 1999 (R. T. Patton), 440 at Corte Madera Lake (Q20) 21 February 1999 (R. T. Patton), and 430 at Barrett Lake

(S19) 5 February 2000 (R. and S. L. Breisch). Wintering birds are uncommon on the salt water of Mission Bay and most of San Diego Bay but abundant in the salt works, presumably because of the concentration of invertebrates in the hypersaline water. Weekly censuses there 1993–94 averaged about 240 in January and occasionally reached about 430 (Stadtlander and Konecny 1994). Wintering Ruddy Ducks occupy many lakes and ponds where breeding birds are absent and are not restricted by elevation, sometimes occurring in large numbers on Cuyamaca Lake (up to 300 on 28 January 1999, M. B. Stowe) and Big Laguna Lake (up to 75 on 18 January 1998, P. Unitt). They are regular in small numbers in the Borrego Valley (maximum eight in Borrego Springs 21 January 2001, P. D. Jorgensen).

Conservation: Across North America, Ruddy Duck numbers through the second half of the 20th century were on an increase, punctuated by many peaks and troughs (Brua 2002). In San Diego County Christmas bird counts suggest no consistent trend in the numbers wintering here. During the atlas period, however, we recorded no counts approaching the 2000 at Lake Henshaw 1 April 1978 (G. McCaskie) or 1100 at the upper end of Lake Hodges 11 December 1983 (K. L. Weaver). The installation of reservoirs created much new habitat for Ruddy Ducks, but the lakes must have adequate fringing marshes to support the birds. Where marshes are essentially lacking, as at San Vicente and El Capitan reservoirs, the duck is rare to absent.

Taxonomy: *Oxyura j. rubida* (Wilson, 1814) is the subspecies of the Ruddy Duck throughout North America; its distinctness from nominate *O. j. jamaicensis* (Gmelin, 1789) of the West Indies has been questioned.