

Scott's Oriole *Icterus parisorum*

No bird symbolizes high desert more than Scott's Oriole, and few birds are as strongly linked to specific plants in San Diego County as Scott's Oriole is to the desert agave and Mojave yucca. The birds are distributed sparsely even in prime habitat, so they are uncommon over most of their range: the mountains and bajadas of the Anza-Borrego Desert and arid chaparral of the Campo Plateau. A few birds are scattered farther west. Scott's Oriole is mainly a summer visitor, but the species winters in small numbers as well, mainly at lower elevations in the Anza-Borrego Desert and in a few large stands of prickly pear on the coastal slope.

Breeding distribution: In San Diego County Scott's Oriole's distribution centers on the rim of the Anza-Borrego Desert: the east slope of the Peninsular Ranges mainly between 1000 and 5000 feet elevation. Even there the species is generally uncommon; maximum daily counts are 10 in lower Grapevine Canyon (I23) 7 April 1998 (P. K. Nelson) and 12 between Table Mountain and In-Ko-Pah County Park (T29) 16 April 1999 (D. C. Seals).

Field work for the atlas revealed nesting Scott's Orioles extending in smaller numbers into low desert on alluvial slopes and washes, rarely into gardens on valley floors

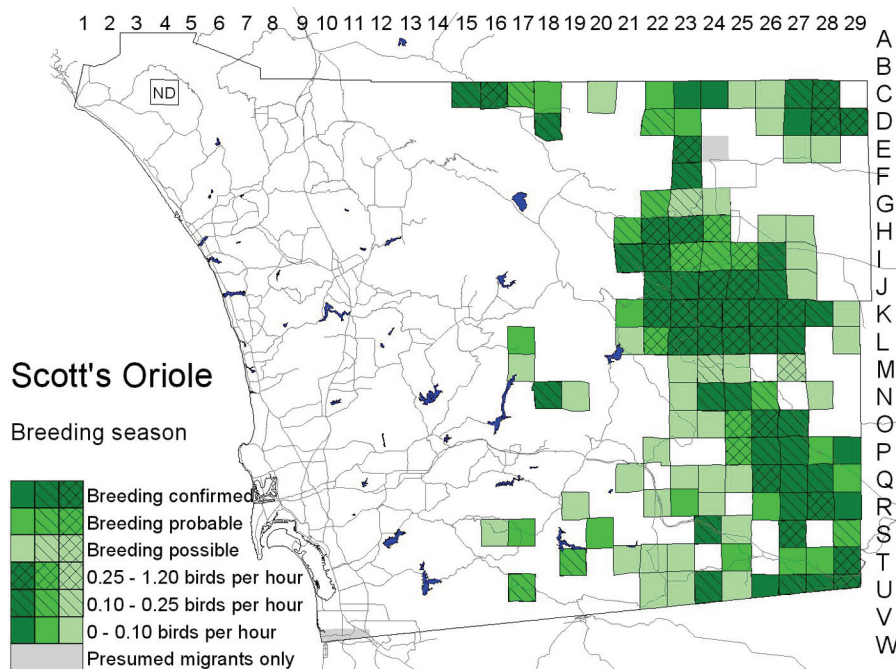


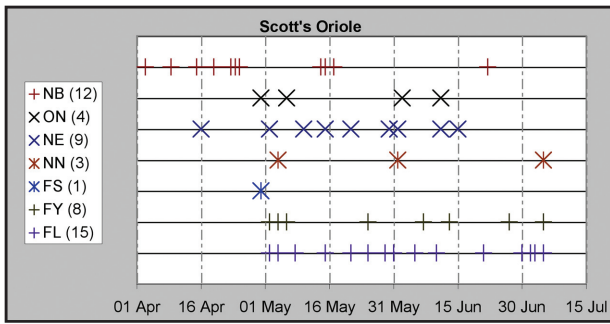
Photo by Jack C. Daynes

(single singing males in Borrego Springs, G24, 11 June 1999, R. Thériault, and at the Borrego Air Ranch, H26, 12 July 1998, M. L. Gabel). The orioles may be able to spread to lower elevations only after wet winters; in the drought-plagued later years of the atlas' term we found only old nests in low desert.

Another surprise was that Scott's Oriole breeds in small numbers on the Campo Plateau, especially in patches of semidesert habitat like Miller Valley (S24; pair, female collecting yucca fiber, 22 June 2000, L. J. Hargrove). A few pairs are scattered in chaparral with chaparral yucca but no Mojave yucca, as along the Noble Canyon Trail 1.8 miles north-northeast of Pine Valley (P22) 24 April–16 May 1997 (R. A. Hamilton). A few extend west of Pine Valley and Campo, south of Interstate 8, as far as Lee Valley (S16; one coming to hummingbird feeder 15 June 1999, J. R. Barth) and near Dulzura between Marron Valley Road and Dulzura Summit (U17; apparently two pairs 17 May–20 July 1998, D. W. Povey).

Two other small populations on the coastal slope correspond to enclaves of semidesert habitat.





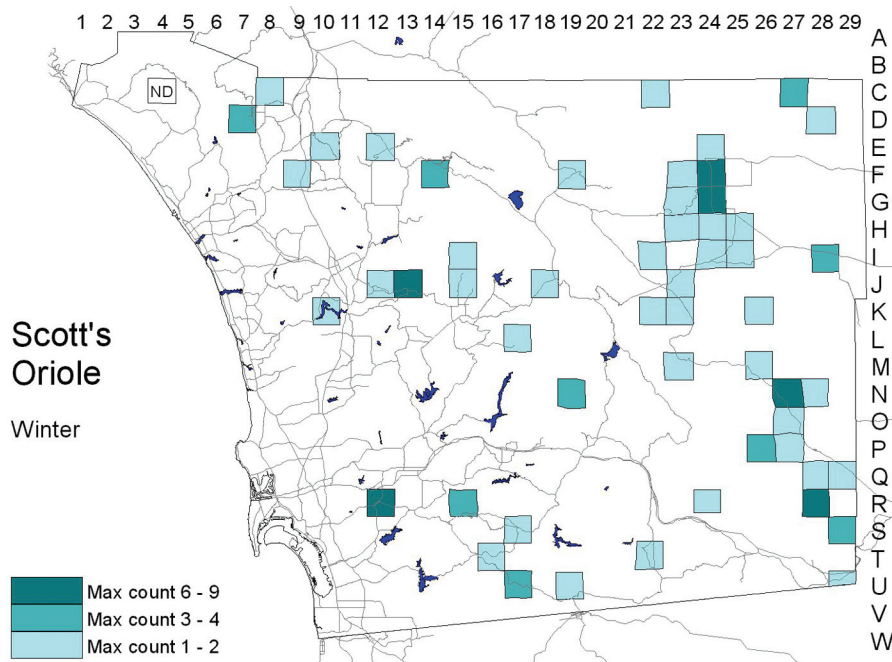
One is in the gorge of the San Diego River above El Capitan Reservoir (L17/M17; up to two singing males 22 May 1999, R. C. Sanger), extending southeast to near Tule Springs (N18; six, including fledglings, 2 July 2001, E. C. Hall) and upper Conejos Creek (N19; singing male 27 June 2001, J. R. Barth). The other is presumably an extension from the Aguanga area of Riverside County, running from Dameron and Oak Grove valleys (C15/C16/C17) to Chihuahua Valley (C18) and Rocky Mountain (D18). In this region the birds are rare except in Dameron Valley (C16; maximum seven on 27 June 1998, K. L. Weaver).

Nesting: Scott's Oriole's baglike nest resembles that of the Hooded and Bullock's Orioles. Most commonly, Scott's Oriole attaches its nest under the leaves of a Mojave yucca, at the base of the clump of living leaves. Eighteen of 30 nests atlas observers described were in yuccas. Paul Jorgensen notes that the birds typically select the tallest Mojave yucca in their territory as a nest site. Yucca fibers are the staple nest material. Where agaves offer good foraging but there are no yuccas, the orioles nest in a variety of other plants, selecting sites that offer the greatest shelter and concealment. Such sites were in mistletoe clumps in paloverde (3), catclaw (2), mesquite (1), smoketree (2), indigo bush, jojoba, and California fan palm (1 each). Where there is no yucca, vine tendrils provide nest material.

Because only one set of Scott's Oriole eggs was ever collected from San Diego County, atlas data provide the best information to date on the species' nesting schedule in this area. The nine dates of nests with eggs range from 16 April to 15 June. A fledging at Hapaha Flat (L26) 2 May 2001 (D. C. Seals) indicates egg laying can take place as early as the first week of April, while the female nest building in Miller Valley 22 June 2000 suggests it can take place as late as the last week of June. Very likely there is substantial variation in the timing of breeding with local conditions of vegetation, rainfall, and elevation.

Migration: The schedule of Scott's Oriole migration is now clouded by birds wintering in breeding habitat. From 1997 to 2001, arrival dates varied from 27 February to 16 March, though the earliest of these records, of a singing male near Yaqui Well (I24) 27 February 1997 (P. K. Nelson), was from a site where the species winters occasionally. Scott's Oriole may be a short-distance facultative migrant, moving to take advantage of seasonal food supplies, rather than a longer-distance calendar-driven migrant like the Hooded and Bullock's Orioles. September and October reports from Culp Valley (G23/H23; Massey 1998) mean that some birds occur in breeding habitat at an elevation of 3000 feet in every season of the year. The schedule of wintering birds is still poorly known; they may arrive by 3 November (1999, one in Borrego Springs, G24, R. Thériault) and depart as late as 18 April (1998, one in north Borrego Valley, E24, P. K. Nelson), though there are few reports from the Borrego Valley after 1 March. On the coastal slope, at sites where the species is not known to breed, there were no records during the atlas period after 27 February (2000, one at Rancho Cuca, F14, P. Unitt), yet in the 1970s in Pauma Valley (E12) Eleanor Beemer noted Scott's Orioles repeatedly as late as mid May (Unitt 1984). Again, substantial annual variation seems likely.

Along the coast Scott's Oriole is very rare, as both a migrant and winter visitor. The only ones noted 1997–2001 were along the south side of the Tijuana River valley (W11, one on 12 March 2000, P. Unitt; W10, one 9 April–16 July 2000, G. Hazard; W10, one on 22 April 2001, P. R. Pryde).



Winter: Scott's Oriole winters uncommonly in the Anza-Borrego Desert, mainly in date palms and ornamental shrubbery around houses (up to nine in Borrego Springs, G24, 14 December 1997, P. D. Ache; seven at Canebrake, N27, 8 January 2000, R. and S. L. Breisch; four at Ocotillo Wells, I28, 20 December 1999, P. Unitt) and at native palm oases (up to seven at Carrizo Palms, R28, 6

January 2000, J. O. Zimmer; four at Mortero Palms, S29, 25 February 1999, A. Young). In typical breeding habitat with yucca and agave, wintering Scott's Orioles are rare but recorded as high as 5350 feet elevation in the Santa Rosa Mountains 1.2 miles north-northwest of Villager Peak (C27; three on 19 January 2000, P. Unitt). Totals on Anza-Borrego Christmas bird counts have ranged from 4 to 23 (2 January 1993). On the Lake Henshaw count, which extends into desert scrub in San Felipe Valley, the species is irregular with only one or two per year, except on 20 December 1993 when there were 26. Atlas data reveal substantial annual variability as well: more than three times as many Scott's Orioles were reported in the winter of 1999–2000 than in any other winter of the project's five-year term.

On the coastal slope south of Interstate 8, Scott's Oriole is rare in winter (11 records 1997–2002). At least some of the birds were at the same sites as those in the breeding season and probably year-round residents (e.g., up to three near Dulzura Summit, U17, 5 February 2001, D. W. Povey). Others were taking advantage of temporary food sources like prickly pears near Bancroft Point (R12; six on 12 January 2000, N. A. Inman) or flowering eucalyptus in North Jamul (R15; three on 1 January 2000, P. Unitt). On the coastal slope north of Interstate 8, winter occurrences appear even more strongly tied to fruiting prickly pears. The primary site there is the grounds of the Wild Animal Park and adjacent San Pasqual Battlefield State Historical Monument (J12/J13), where the thickets of prickly pears are large. The maximum count in a single atlas square 1997–2002, nine on 2 January 2000 (J13; K. L. Weaver), was also the highest total for the area on an Escondido Christmas bird count. Other cactus-dominated sites of more than a single wintering Scott's Oriole include the Fallbrook Naval Weapons Station (D7; four on 11 February 2000, K. L. Weaver), Pauma Valley (E12; two on 15 February 2001, K. Fischer), Rancho Cuca (F14; up to four on 27 December 1999, S. Berg), Pamo Valley (I15/J15; two on 2 January 2000, W. E. Haas), and Sherilton Valley (N19; three on 17 and 18 December 1999, G. and

R. Wynn). Where the supply of fruit was small, as in Sherilton Valley, the birds moved on after exhausting it. Wintering Scott's Orioles often occur in small flocks.

Conservation: Most of Scott's Oriole's breeding habitat in San Diego County lies in rugged wildernesses conserved in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park or under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management. In Dameron Valley, however, the habitat is privately owned and undergoing piecemeal development, possibly eliminating not only the Scott's Orioles but also one of the most biogeographically interesting sites in San Diego County, a patch of semidesert scrub with many desert plants and animals isolated on the coastal slope. Scott's Orioles once bred to some extent in the coastal sage scrub now replaced by metropolitan San Diego. Only two locations were reported, Balboa Park (R9/S9; several spring/summer records 1901–15, K. Stephens 1906, Grey 1915, Stephens 1915) and Telegraph Canyon (U11/U12/T13; nest 16 May 1890, Browne 1891), but the Mojave yucca was once common on south-facing slopes.

The regularity of Scott's Oriole in winter became clear only in the 1980s, more likely as a result of the establishment of the Escondido and Anza-Borrego Christmas bird counts than from a change in status. The historic winter range of Scott's Oriole lies not far south of San Diego—both Anthony (1894) and Huey (1926a) found it in January and February near San Quintín, just 150 miles south of the border. The date palms and gardens in the Borrego Valley are a new habitat that the birds only recently learned to exploit. But the palm oases and prickly pear thickets are native habitats, and records for each dating back to 1968 and 1947, respectively (Unitt 1984), suggest that Scott's Orioles occurred but were seldom noticed. On the coastal slope, cacti have been much reduced, along with the coastal sage scrub of which they are usually a part. Conservation of the remaining stands, so critical to the San Diego Cactus Wren, would favor wintering Scott's Orioles too.