

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*

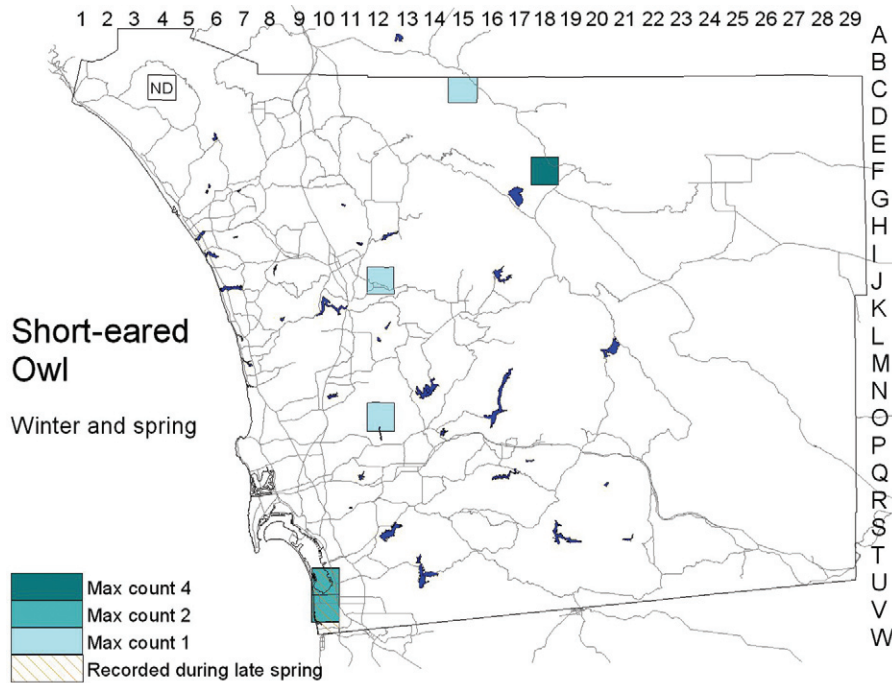
Most owls live in woodland and forest, but the Short-eared Owl lives in marshes and grassland. It is principally a winter visitor to San Diego County, regular in small numbers around south San Diego Bay and in the Tijuana River estuary but seldom seen elsewhere. The Short-eared Owl is rare and declining in California, recognized as a species of special concern by the California Department of Fish and Game. Thus the finding in 1998 and 2000 of at least three individuals from mid April to mid July, including an apparent pair, was most unexpected.

Winter: In San Diego County, the Short-eared Owl occurs regularly in small numbers only around south San Diego Bay and in the Tijuana River estuary. From 1997 to 2002, the highest counts here were of at least two between the Chula Vista Nature Center and the salt works (U10) 18 December 1999 (B. C. Moore et al.) and two in the



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Tijuana estuary (V10) the same day (R. B. Riggan). The Short-eared Owl has also been seen with some frequency at Fiesta Island, Mission Bay (Q8/R8), with up to six on



report of E. E. Sechrist collecting two sets of eggs at National City (T10) 10 April 1906. J. B. Dixon (in Willett 1933) observed the species in summer at San Diego Bay and the Santa Margarita River mouth (G4). Alice Fries noted one at the latter locality 23 May and 12 June 1972. By the time the atlas study began, the species was long inferred as absent from coastal southern California in summer (e.g., Garrett and Dunn 1981, Small 1994). Therefore its showing up at the Tijuana River estuary in 1998 was a great surprise. Brian Bonesteel trapped and photographed one in the Least Tern nesting colony there (W10) 28 May, then photographed two on the fence separating the refuge from the Imperial Beach naval auxiliary landing field (Ream

30 January 1976 (J. L. Dunn) and one found dead 18 December 1996 (SDNHM 49048).

At least three are known from the San Pasqual Valley, with one seen near the east end of Lake Hodges (K11) 16 November 1985 (K. L. Weaver), one found long dead there in spring 1997 (SDNHM 50409), and one seen near Ysabel Creek Road (J12) 1 December 1998 (W. E. Haas) and 2 January 1999 (C. G. Edwards). The few other records are scattered over the coastal wetlands like San Elijo Lagoon and grasslands in the coastal lowland like Lopez Canyon and Otay Ranch (the latter now developed). During the atlas period there were three winter records away from the San Pasqual Valley, San Diego Bay, and the Tijuana estuary, of one in Dameron Valley (C15) 3 February 2001 (K. L. Weaver), four near Swan Lake between Lake Henshaw and Warner Springs (F18) 10 December 2000 (J. R. Barth, M. G. Mathos), and one in Sycamore Canyon (O12) 27 February 1998 (G. L. Rogers).

In the Anza–Borrego Desert the only identifications of the Short-eared Owl probably correct are of one in Clark Valley (D25) 15 October 1977 and one in Collins Valley (D23) 21 December 1983 (A. G. Morley).

Migration: Dates for the Short-eared Owl away from coastal wetlands in San Diego County range from 30 September (1980, one at Point Loma, S7, AB 35:226, 1981) to 11 April (1975, one in the Santa Margarita River valley at Basilone Road, E6, A. Fries).

Breeding distribution: The only record of the Short-eared Owl's breeding in San Diego County is Willett's (1933)

Field; V10) 16 June. In 2000, R. T. Patton and S. M. Wolf noted one at the Chula Vista Wildlife Reserve in south San Diego Bay on 12 and 19 April. Thus it is possible that the occasional pair of Short-eared Owls still attempts to nest in San Diego County.

Nesting: Short-eared Owls nest on the ground among marsh vegetation or grasses. No details on the nests in San Diego County beyond that mentioned above are available.

Conservation: Stephens (1919a) called the Short-eared Owl "rather rare" in San Diego County, but Willett (1933) said it was "common" in coastal southern California in general. Grinnell and Miller (1944) called attention to a decrease, attributing it to shooting by duck hunters. In San Diego County, there seems to have been a decrease since the 1960s; the San Diego Christmas bird count averaged 4.7 per year from 1966 to 1972 but only 0.85 from 1989 to 2001. A factor contributing to the decline is undoubtedly the loss and degradation of coastal wetlands and native grasslands, both of which now cover only a small fraction of their original extent. Increased predation and human disturbance threaten all ground-nesting birds along the coast, including high-level predators like the Short-eared Owl.

Taxonomy: As a species breeding on four continents and numerous islands the Short-eared Owl not surprisingly consists of several subspecies. But only nominate *A. f. flammeus* (Pontoppidan, 1763) occurs on the mainland of North America.