

Song Sparrow *Melospiza melodia*

The Song Sparrow is the most abundant bird in San Diego County's riparian woodlands. Freshwater marshes, low rank vegetation in disturbed areas, shrubbery in parks, coastal chaparral, and any dense vegetation near water offer it habitat too. Though making little use of heavily built-up areas, the Song

Sparrow on balance benefits from human modification of the southern California environment, taking advantage of agriculture, irrigated landscaping, and urban runoff. A year-round resident, it is seen only very rarely in desert areas outside its breeding range.

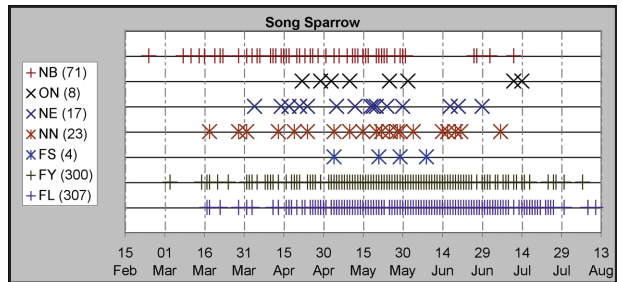
Breeding distribution: Though the Song Sparrow lives mainly around water, its habitat needs are generalized enough that on the scale of our atlas grid its distribution appears almost uniform over the coastal slope. The few gaps correspond to large stands of chaparral and/or coniferous forest. Concentrations correspond to squares with much riparian woodland (especially northwestern San Diego County), lagoons, and lakes. In prime habitat daily counts of Song Sparrows can be in triple digits, e.g., 226 in lower Los Peñasquitos Canyon (N8) 3 May 1997 (L. D. and R. Johnson et al.), 125 in Daley Ranch (H11) 31 May 1998 (C. G. Edwards).

On the desert slope the Song Sparrow occurs in all canyons where there is permanent water: Coyote Creek (C22/D23), Borrego Palm (F23), Hellhole (G23), Sentenac (J23), Vallecito Creek (M23–25), Canebrake (N27/O27), Bow Willow (P26), and Carrizo (Q27/R27). It also inhabits the oases of Agua Caliente Springs (M26, up to four on 4 June 1998, E. C. Hall) and Carrizo Marsh (O29, up to eight on 17 April 1998, M. C. Jorgensen). It has colonized plant nurseries on the floor of the northern Borrego Valley (maximum 16 at Ellis Farms, F25, 13 May 2001, P. D. Ache), outside its historic breeding range but in parallel with the spread of the coastal subspecies *heermanni* on the floor of the Coachella Valley in Riverside County (Patten 2001).

Nesting: Song Sparrows usually build their cup nest in or under dense low vegetation. The nest is occasionally higher, such as one 10 feet up in a saltcedar in Vallecito Valley (M24). It is often over or near water, as implied by atlas observers' reports of nests in cattails, hedge nettle, and debris left by a flood. Some nests are in drier places, and some are in entirely man-made habitats, such as one in rosemary in a garden and another in a potted shrub in a nursery.

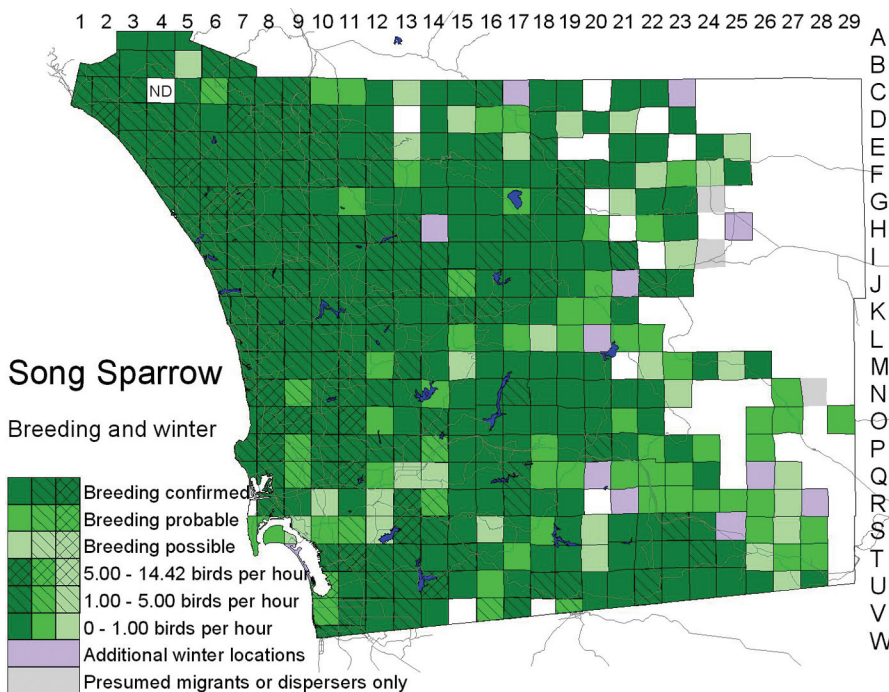


Photo by Anthony Mercieca



Song Sparrows are prolific, often raising three, rarely four broods per year (M. M. Nice in Austin 1968). In San Diego County they usually nest from March to July. A few birds begin even in mid February, as implied by two fledglings at the east end of Lake Hodges (K11) 17 March 1999 (E. C. Hall), adults carrying insects at Sentenac Ciénaga (J22) 3 March 1997 (L. Allen), and an egg set collected at Encinitas (K6) 16 February 1939 (WFVZ).

Migration: The local population of the Song Sparrow appears practically sedentary. In the Anza-Borrego Desert, migrants occur rarely away from sites where the species is resident: south Borrego Springs (G24), one on 7 March 1998 (P. D. Ache); Borrego sewage ponds (H25), one on 4 April 1997 (H. L. Young, M. B. Mosher); Yaqui Well (I24), one on 18 March 1997 (P. K. Nelson); Arroyo Seco del Diablo (N28), one on 14 March 1998 (R. and S. L. Breisch). Massey (1998) also reported single spring sightings from Clark Dry Lake (D26/E26) and Indian Valley (O27). These records more likely represent wanderers or pioneers of the local subspecies *heermanni* rather than migrants headed farther north: *heermanni* occasionally reaches the Imperial Valley (Patten et al. 2003).



Winter: In San Diego County, the only site outside the Song Sparrow's breeding range where the species appears even somewhat regular in winter is the Borrego sewage ponds, with three records 1997–2002, of up to two on 16 January 1999 (P. D. Jorgensen) and 16 December 2001 (L. D. and R. Johnson). The few other winter records from atlas squares where no Song Sparrows were noted during the breeding season are adjacent to squares where it breeds; they may represent sites where it is resident in small numbers.

Conservation: Although primarily a species of riparian woodland and scrub, many of whose birds have suffered declines, the Song Sparrow continues to thrive. Though a principal host for the Brown-headed Cowbird, the Song Sparrow remained common in San Diego County in spite of the cowbird's invading. Importation of water and irrigation allowed the sparrow to colonize areas formerly unsuitable, compensating for loss of riparian habitat. Urban runoff yields enough water to turn small canyons within the cities into Song Sparrow habitat. Although sparse in older residential areas, the Song Sparrow colonizes the ornamental shrubbery around new office parks and in landscaped housing developments. Low rank weeds often suffice: after a restoration attempt at the San Dieguito River estuary (M7), a sandy island intended as a Least Tern site was soon overgrown with weeds, and Song Sparrows moved in. The amount of habitat needed to support a pair may be quite small—Song Sparrows can usually be found in the patch of ornamental shrubbery, measuring about 50 by 30 feet, on the northeast side of the San Diego Natural History Museum.

Taxonomy: Though the Song Sparrow has differentiated into a remarkable number of subspecies—25 even after Patten's (2001) revision dispensed with some inadequately defined ones—only two of these are known from San Diego County. The resident subspecies, characterized by its heavy black streaking below and tricolor (black, brown, and olive gray) streaking above, is *M. m. heermanni* Baird, 1858, from which *cooperi* Ridgway, 1899 (type locality San Diego) is not well differentiated (Patten 2001). Although *heermanni* hybridizes with the small pale rusty *fallax* of the desert Southwest in the Coachella Valley of Riverside County (Patten 2001), the Song Sparrows at even the easternmost sites in San Diego County, Borrego Valley and Carrizo Marsh, appear typical of *heermanni*.

Some other subspecies breeding to the north of San Diego County are migratory, but their winter ranges do not extend quite this far south. The only specimen of one of these migrants is *M. m. merrilli* Brewster, 1896, collected by L. M. Huey at Yaqui Well (I24), where *heermanni* is absent, 13 October 1936 (SDNHM 17255). *M. m. merrilli* has moderate rufous streaking on its underparts and muted streaking on its upperparts—it would be readily noticed in the field as different from *heermanni*. The specimen from Yaqui Well is too pale and crisply streaked for subspecies *morphna* of the Pacific Northwest, as Huey (1954) reported it. *M. m. merrilli* originates in the intermountain area of eastern Washington, southeastern British Columbia, northern Idaho, and northwestern Montana. The next winter records north of San Diego County are from Los Angeles County (Grinnell and Miller 1944).