

CROWS AND JAYS — FAMILY CORVIDAE

Steller's Jay *Cyanocitta stelleri*

The bird most linked in San Diegans' minds with coniferous woodland in the county's mountains is Steller's Jay. Around campgrounds and picnic areas the jays are common and unavoidable; for generations the birds have learned to demand handouts from people. But in more remote areas the jays are less common and less obtrusive. One of the surprises generated by the atlas field work was how widespread Steller's Jay proved to be in oak woodland with no conifers, especially in southeastern San Diego County.

Breeding distribution: The higher mountains—Palomar, Hot Springs, Volcan, Cuyamaca, and Laguna—are the core of Steller's Jay's range in San Diego County. The species is most abundant on Palomar (up to 60 around Jeff Valley, E15, 28 May 1999, E. C. Hall, C. R. Mahrtd) but common in all the other ranges too. On Palomar's southwest slope, Steller's Jay is resident down to about 2300 feet elevation, even to about 1800 feet in deep canyons with big-cone Douglas firs (e.g., two in Agua Tibia Canyon, D12, 17 July 2001, K. L. Weaver). A local resident reported a Steller's Jay trapped in a greenhouse at 1600 feet elevation along Magee Road (C11) in late May 1998 (*vide* J. M. and B. Hargrove). The population on Palomar is linked broadly with that in central San Diego County through oak woodland in the Mesa Grande area (up to 15 in the Edwards Ranch northwest of Santa Ysabel, I18, D. W. Au). Steller's Jay appears absent from the stand of conifers on Bucksnot Mountain (C20), but we did find an isolated population at Adobe Springs in Chihuahua Valley (C18; six on 2 May 1999, A. Mauro).

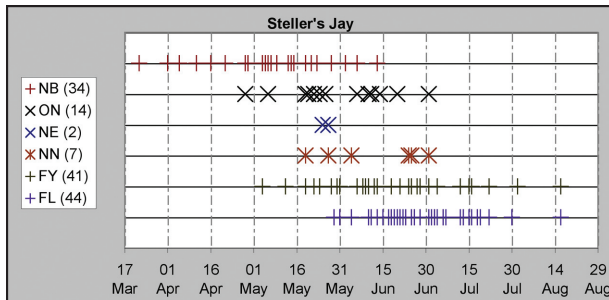
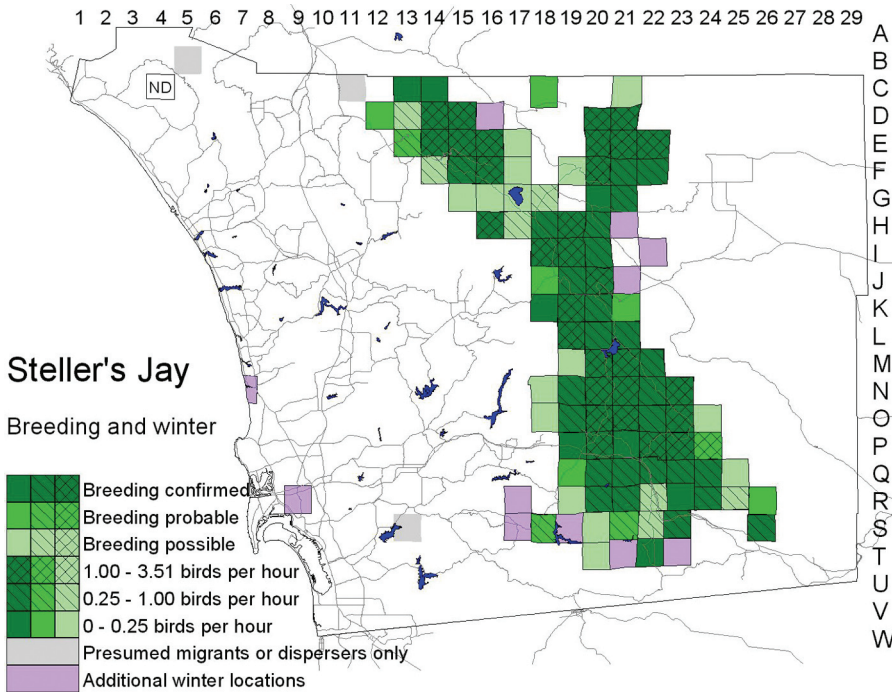
In the southern half of San Diego County, Steller's Jay



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

inhabits oak woodland up to 8 miles away from coniferous woodland. Points defining the southern limits of the species' breeding range are Wilson Creek just west of Barrett Lake (S18; up to 10 on 25 May 2001; R. and S. L. Breisch); Morena Village (T22; pair nest building on 1 April 2000; R. and S. L. Breisch), and McCain Valley (S26; up to 18, plus an occupied nest, on 20 May 2000, J. K. Wilson). Steller's Jays are apparently irregular in Hauser Canyon (T20), with a single observation of two on 15 May 1997 (J. M. Wells). The birds' extensive use of oak woodland habitat in southeastern San Diego County is a paradox because the area is the southern tip of the range of subspecies *C. s. frontalis*. Steller's Jays are absent from Baja California, their range terminating just 7 miles short of the international border.

Nesting: Steller's Jay nests are typically well concealed in trees with dense foliage. The birds take advantage, however, of man-made structures that offer sheltered sites. Observers noted two nests under eaves of houses, one atop a sheltered bulletin board at the Doane Valley



campground (E14), and one on a cow skull nailed to the side of a building.

Our observations in San Diego County imply that Steller's Jays lay eggs at least from mid April to mid June, probably to late June, with three records of birds carrying nest material as late as 13 June. The species' nesting season is thus the same as that reported by Bent (1946), who gave a range of 12 April–24 June for California egg dates.

Migration: In parts of its range, Steller's Jay engages in altitudinal movements or irregular irruptions, but these events rarely touch San Diego County. On the coastal slope more than 5 miles west of its breeding range, the species has been recorded only 10 times from 4 October (1978, one at Point Loma, S7, AB 33:216, 1979) to 27 April (1998, one along the Sweetwater River above Sweetwater Reservoir, S13, P. Famolaro), 24 May (2001, one at Sky Ranch, Santa Margarita Mountains, B5, E.

C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer), and 13 June (1984, one at 800 feet elevation along the San Diego River, M17, P. Unitt, AB 38:1062, 1984). The Santa Margarita Mountains offer much oak woodland, but the species is absent from the contiguous Santa Ana Mountains in Orange County, so evidently the bird at Sky Ranch was a vagrant. On the desert slope, Steller's Jays have been noted east of their breeding range six times between 17 August (1986, two in Borrego Palm Canyon, F23, and two at Tamarisk Grove, I24, R. Thériault) and 26 April (1996, one in Borrego Palm Canyon campground, F23, M. C. Jorgensen).

Winter: Steller's Jay is largely sedentary, so the winter and breeding distributions follow the same pattern. Most of the few

additional localities where we found the species in winter could be sites where it is resident in very small numbers. The most notable of these were about 2200 feet elevation on the south side of Hidden Glen (R17; one on 22 January 2001, J. R. Barth) and about 2300 feet elevation in Lyons Valley (S17; one on 24 January 1998, S. M. Wolf). Some but not all of the low-elevation occurrences of Steller's Jay are during invasion years for other montane birds. The two during the atlas period, of one in the Mission Hills neighborhood of San Diego (R9) 16 December 2000 (J. K. Wilson) and one in Torrey Pines State Reserve (N7) 22 December 2000 (S. Walens) coincided with irruptions of Mountain Bluebirds, Cassin's Finches, and a flock of Pinyon Jays. The one winter record during the atlas period on the desert slope, however, of one at Angelina Spring (I22) 2 December 1998 (P. K. Nelson), was in a year with no such invasions.

Conservation: Steller's Jays capitalize on the supplemental food and nesting sites that accompany the campgrounds and rural homes in their breeding range. But there seem to have been no changes in the species' numbers over time; Lake Henshaw Christmas bird count results since 1981 show no real trend.

Taxonomy: The Steller's Jays resident in southern California are *C. s. frontalis*, which lacks any white marks around the eye and is paler than other subspecies found farther north along the Pacific coast.