

Summer Tanager *Piranga rubra*

One of the more exciting events of the San Diego County Bird Atlas' five-year term was the first discovery of the Summer Tanager nesting in the county. Though the population in the species' core California range along the Colorado River collapsed, leading to its designation as a species of special concern by the California Department of Fish and Game, the Summer Tanager has pioneered west, colonizing new sites in the Mojave Desert and on the Kern River. The tanager's arrival as a nesting bird in San Diego County is part of this trend. The western subspecies occurs as a rare and localized summer visitor only, in mature riparian woodland, but the eastern subspecies of the Summer Tanager occurs as a rare migrant and winter visitor every year, usually in ornamental trees near the coast.

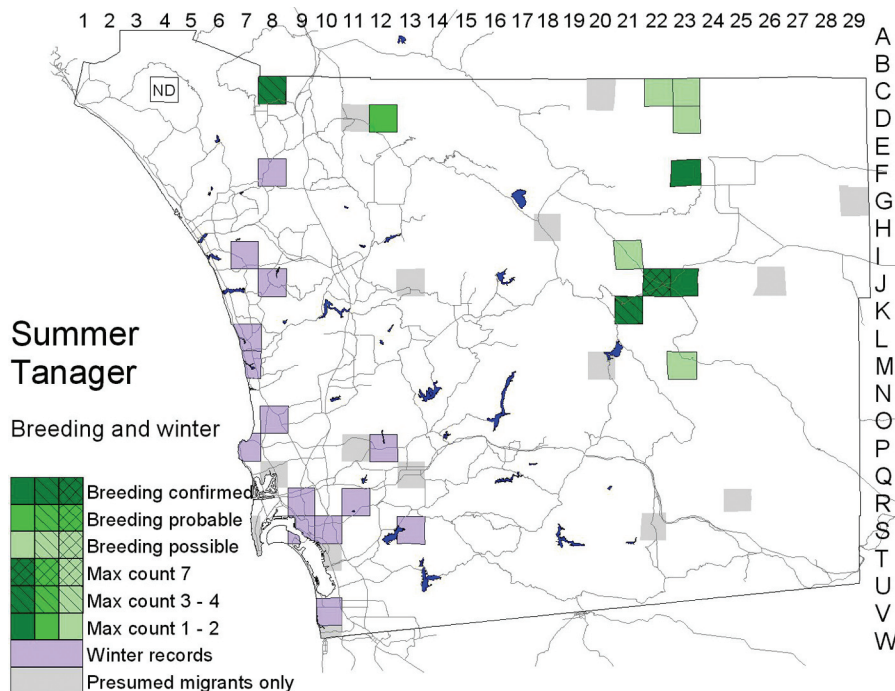
Breeding distribution: The Summer Tanager inhabits mature riparian woodland, especially where Fremont cot-



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

tonwoods form a fairly continuous canopy. The largest colony in San Diego County is along San Felipe Creek, from 1.5 miles west of Scissors Crossing to Sentenac Ciénaga (J22/J23). Here, the species was first noted 20 May 1998 (E. C. Hall) and increased to seven nesting pairs in 2001,

eight in 2002, then dropped to five in 2003 (P. D. Jorgensen, J. R. Barth). Thorough surveys in the last three years were made possible when the area was added to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Nearby were two pairs along Banner Creek near Banner (K21) in 2001 (feeding fledglings 16 July 2001, P. D. Jorgensen) and one singing male along San Felipe Creek near Paroli Spring (I21) 9 June–21 July 2000 (J. O. Zimmer, P. D. Jorgensen). Elsewhere in the Anza-Borrego Desert, the Summer Tanager occurs in Coyote Creek Canyon at both Middle Willows (C22; singing male 28 May 1998, P. D. Jorgensen) and Lower Willows (D23; only single birds 2000–2001, but at least one pair and up to four males 13 May–9 July



2002, J. R. Barth). In Borrego Palm Canyon, near the confluence of the middle and south forks (F23), there was one individual in the summers of 1997 and 2001, a singing male and a female carrying insects 30 June–3 July 2000 (L. J. Hargrove). Along Vallecito Creek near Campbell Grade (M23), one on 11 May 2001 was on a date when the species is still migrating, but in riparian woodland similar to that where it nests elsewhere on the desert slope (R. Thériault).

Summer Tanagers colonized the Santa Margarita River north of Fallbrook (C8) in 2000. The following year there were five pairs, with at least two confirmed breeding on the basis of males carrying insects 24 July 2001 (K. L. Weaver). The only other Summer Tanager nestings known from the coastal slope of southern California are from Soledad Canyon and near San Dimas, Los Angeles County, beginning in 1995 (Los Angeles County bird atlas data). Along the Santa Margarita River the birds are associated more with tall sycamores than with cottonwoods. Along the San Luis Rey River, one Summer Tanager was near Pala (D11) 2 July 1993 (J. C. Lovio, AB 47:1151, 1993), at least one remained in Wilderness Gardens (D11/D12) 13 May–4 June 2000 (K. L. Weaver et al.), and a pair was in nearby Marion Canyon (D12), elevation 1600 feet, 18 June–17 July 2001 (K. L. Weaver). Up to three Summer Tanagers have occurred irregularly in summer along the San Diego River at Old Mission Dam (P11) since 1968 (one 8–13 August 2000, M. B. Stowe). An apparent pair of Summer Tanagers, the male singing, on Cuyamaca Peak (M20) 10–18 June 2000 (G. L. Rogers, G. Hazard) was in pine/oak woodland seemingly inappropriate for nesting. An earlier parallel record was of one at Pine Hills (K19) 22–24 June 1987 (V. P. Johnson, AB 41:1489, 1987).

Other records from April to June more likely represent late winter visitors or spring vagrants of the eastern subspecies, but some could be pioneers of the western subspecies, especially one near the confluence of Cottonwood and La Posta creeks (S22) 9 May 1998 (R. and S. L. Breisch) and one at Seventeen Palms (G29) 2 May 1997 (G. Rebstock, K. Forney). The subspecies are readily distinguished only with the bird in hand.

Nesting: Although the Summer Tanager typically builds its nest far out on the longer branches of trees, over an opening (Robinson 1996), five nests found along San Felipe Creek 2000–2002 were near the trunks or major branches of often spindly trees, cottonwood and red willow, 30–50 feet above the ground (P. D. Jorgensen, J. R. Barth). These nests were built of a dark material and so sparsely lined that light passed through them (P. D. Jorgensen).

Reflecting its name, the Summer Tanager nests in midsummer. Data from San Felipe Creek, including those from 2002 not plotted here, imply the Summer Tanager lays from early June (fledgling 29 June 2002) to early July (nest building 3 July 2002, J. R. Barth). Along the Santa Margarita River, nesting appears even later, with three observations of adults carrying insects 24 July–5 August (K. L. Weaver). The lateness there may be due to the birds

taking longer to find each other in a sparse, newly colonizing population.

Migration: Data are still skimpy, but breeding Summer Tanagers evidently arrive in late April or at the beginning of May. The earliest dates are 26 April 2003 at Scissors Crossing (J. R. Barth) and 1 May 2001 at Lower Willows (D. C. Seals). In 2002, when arrival of Summer Tanagers along San Felipe Creek was watched for almost daily, the first appeared 1 May (R. Thériault). Five were still at Scissors Crossing 8 September 2000 (P. D. Jorgensen). Along the lower Colorado River, specimens have been collected as late as 24 September (SDNHM 9990, 33708, 33718).

The eastern subspecies of the Summer Tanager follows a completely different pattern. In spring, its schedule is like that of other eastern vagrants, shifted late in the season. Records extend from at least 11 May (1992, one male found dead at Coronado, S9, SDNHM 48027) to at least 18 June (1998, one near Chollas Reservoir, R11, P. Unitt). One at Solana Beach (L7) 13 July 1991 (R. T. Patton, AB 45:1162, 1991) was most likely a vagrant from the east as well. The Summer Tanager occurs annually in spring, with nine records 1997–2001.

In fall, the eastern subspecies begins showing up definitely by 19 September (1932, one at Point Loma, S7, SDNHM 16134) and presumably by 9 September (1977, four in the Tijuana River valley, L. C. Binford; 1994, one in Borrego Springs, G24, P. D. Jorgensen). It is more numerous in fall than in spring, though still to be considered rare. There is no clear break between fall and winter records, though one at Yaqui Well (I24) 22 November 1962 (AFN 17:71, 1963) was still migrating. Winter visitors may remain into early April (one at Bonsall, F8, 7 April 2000, P. A. Ginsburg; one at Point Loma 7 April 2000, V. P. Johnson; one at El Cajon, Q13, 8 April 1998, K. Neal).

Winter: The Summer Tanager winters annually in San Diego County's coastal lowland, in much the same habitat as the Western Tanager: exotic flowering and fruiting trees, mainly in urban parks. Numbers are somewhat smaller than those of the Western Tanager, but 22 wintering individuals were reported 1997–2002. Winter records extend inland as far as Bonsall (F8; one on 17 January 2000, P. A. Ginsburg), Santee (P12; up to two from 12 January to 3 February 2001, M. B. Mulrooney), and 0.9 mile east of Dictionary Hill (S13; one from 12 to 19 January 2002, R. Norgaard). The Summer Tanager was recorded on 30 of 39 San Diego Christmas bird counts 1963–2001, with a maximum of five in 1984. It is less frequent on the Oceanside and Rancho Santa Fe counts, with up to three on the latter in 1990.

Conservation: The Summer Tanager's history in California is remarkable. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the species was known as a breeding bird only along the Colorado River, where it was common. In the mid to late 20th century, following the building of the dams and the nearly total elimination of the native riparian forest, the population crashed, until in 1986 only three males were known persisting on the California side (Rosenberg et al.

1991). At the same time the population along the river was in free fall, however, the Summer Tanager began colonizing riparian oases farther west (Johnson 1994). Thus forces acting at cross purposes must be controlling the population.

Even if broad-scale factors are inducing the Summer Tanager to expand its range, there must be habitat to host the pioneers. Thus maintenance and enhancement of mature riparian woodland are essential. Clearing, burning, off-road vehicles, excessive groundwater pumping, and invasion of exotic plants are all continuing threats to Summer Tanager habitat elsewhere in California. Without careful management these factors could degrade the habitat in San Diego County as well. The inclusion of most of the sites in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and the California Department of Fish and Game's San Felipe

Valley Wildlife Area gives the Summer Tanager a head start in San Diego County.

Taxonomy: I confirmed the identity of the locally breeding population of the Summer Tanager as the western subspecies *P. r. cooperi* Ridgway, 1869, with the trapping, measuring, and electronic colorimetry of two males and one female at Scissors Crossing in 2002. All five specimens of migrants and winter visitors, however, are the eastern *P. r. rubra* (Linnaeus, 1758), which is smaller and darker in both sexes. As detailed by Rea (1972), throughout southern California nonbreeding Summer Tanagers are of the eastern subspecies prevails; only one exception is known, from Ventura County. The pattern has only been reinforced further as additional specimens have accumulated.