

Violet-green Swallow *Tachycineta thalassina*

The Violet-green is the characteristic, common swallow of San Diego County's mountains, easily seen cruising over meadows and nesting in cavities in nearby oaks or conifers. It has converged on the White-throated Swift's ecology by nesting also in rock crevices in cliffs. It is common as a spring migrant throughout the county, and as a fall migrant in the mountains. In winter the Violet-green Swallow is irregular, usually rare, and strangely localized in northern coastal San Diego County.

Breeding distribution: The Violet-green Swallow is common and widespread in woodland in the mountains. It has the honor of being the bird nesting at the highest altitude in San Diego County—on 8 June 2001 in a cavity in the fire-lookout tower atop the summit of Hot Springs Mountain, at 6533 feet the county's highest peak (E20; K. L. Weaver). Numbers in the mountains range up to 200 in a day, as near Stonewall Mine (M20) 26 May 1998, when the birds were discouraged from foraging on a cold foggy morning (B. C. Moore). In the foothills, outside the zone of coniferous and oak woodlands, the Violet-green Swallow is uncommon and local. Our atlas effort revealed several scattered outlying populations toward the coast: San Onofre Mt. area (D2, E3, E4), San Marcos and Merriam Mts. (G8, G9), hills south of San Marcos (J8, I9, J9), Mission Gorge (P11, Q11), Otay Mt. (U15, V14, V15), and Tecate Mt. (V17, V18). On Otay and Tecate mountains numbers as large as 30 in a day have been reported (V15, 25 May 1999, D. Seals; V17, 28



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

May 2001, A. P. and T. E. Keenan). At the more northern outlying sites the count per day is seldom more than two, maximum only six. In the Anza-Borrego Desert, the Violet-green Swallow summers along the ridge of the Santa Rosa Mts. (C27, D27, D28), with up to 20 around benchmark Rosa (D28) 2 May 2000 (L. J. Hargrove). Though at 3000–4000 feet the elevation zone is occupied by Violet-green Swallows elsewhere, in southeastern San Diego County east of Cottonwood Valley (R22) and Lake Morena (T21) there is only one record in the breeding season, of a single individual at Tule Lake (T27) 3 July 2000 (J. K. Wilson).

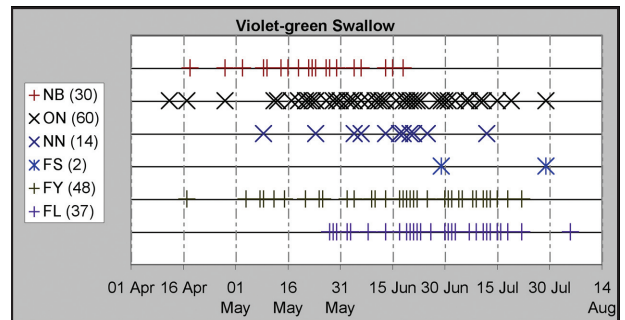
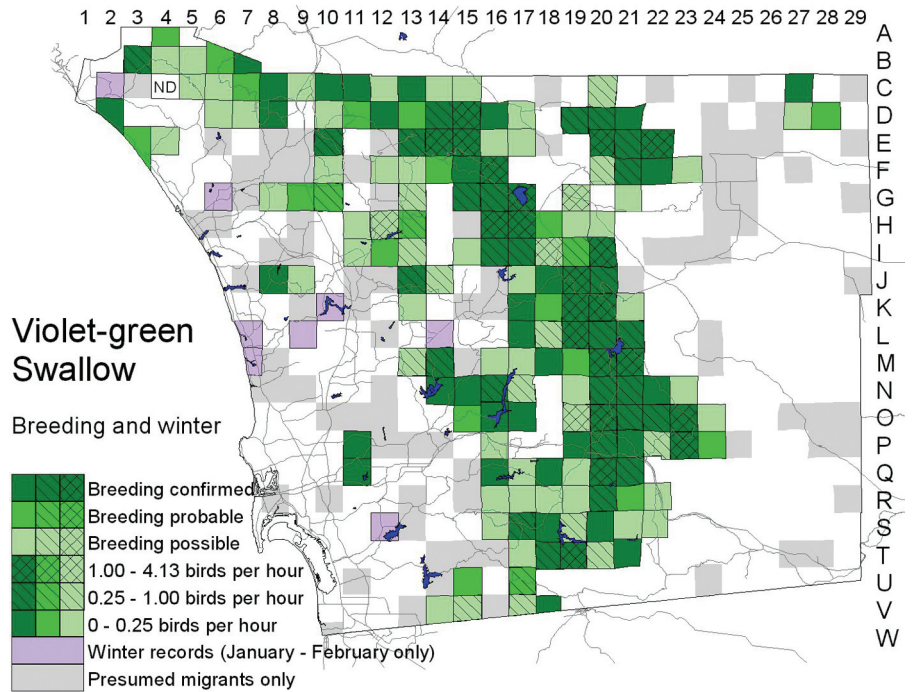
Nesting: Abandoned woodpecker holes and natural cavities in trees are the Violet-green Swallow's most common nest site, especially in semiopen woodland. Because of the difficulty of approaching them closely, nests in cliff crevices are probably far more common than the three our observers noted. Most of the nests at lower elevations are probably in cliffs, undoubtedly so in places like Otay and Tecate mountains that lack large trees and woodpeckers. Cliffs offer more sites in the Santa Rosa Mts. than do the small, sparse pinyons.

Atlas data suggest the Violet-green Swallow often lays its clutch earlier than the 28 May–22 June range of the seven egg sets collected 1915–31. A pair evidently feeding young 12 April 1997 suggests eggs laid as early as late March, though this was at the comparatively low elevation of Fernbrook (M14; J. Savary). Many reports from higher elevations imply that laying is regular by mid to late April. Adults removing a fecal sac from a nest hole 29 July 2000 (O23; J. R. Barth) and a fledgling 5 August 2000 (C8; K. L. Weaver) imply laying as late as about 1 July.

Migration: In spring, Violet-green Swallows arrive in early February, always by 5–10 February, occasionally by 1 February (1998, two at Lake Morena, T21, R. and S. L. Breisch). Two in south Ramona (L14) 23 January 2000 (G. Moreland), farther inland than other winter records, may have been exceptionally early migrants. Spring migration peaks in March and continues to mid May, rarely as late as 24 May (1999, four near Yaqui Well, I24, P. Nelson). King et al. (1987) reported two early June sightings at San Elijo Lagoon (L7).

In fall, migration begins by 19 July (1999, one at O'Neill Lake, E6, P. A. Ginsburg), peaks in August and September, and trails off through October to early November. Fall migration is mainly through the mountains and seldom conspicuous unless unseasonal stormy weather compels the birds to fly low.

Winter: At this season, the Violet-green Swallow is still regular only in the lower San Luis Rey River valley, around Whelan and Windmill Lakes (G6), as I reported in 1984. The maximum reported from 1997 through 2002, 20 on 20 January 2000 (J. Smith), is less than the high counts in some past years (maximum on Oceanside Christmas bird count 60 on 31 December 1977). A new wintering site, though, may be emerging at San Elijo Lagoon, with records in three of the five years of the atlas period and up to 20 birds 28 December 2000 (A. Mauro). King et al. (1987) found no wintering Violet-greens at



the lagoon from 1973 through 1983, but the species has been noted on 15 of 21 Rancho Santa Fe Christmas bird counts, 1980–2001. There were only single atlas records at other winter locations, but at Sweetwater Reservoir (S12) P. Famolaro noted 25 individuals 13 December 1999.

Conservation: The Violet-green is our only swallow not obviously affected by environmental change. Its core habitat of montane woodland is little disturbed. The birds' use of nest boxes and exotic trees is known but still rare. Evidently the Violet-green can use cavities too small to accommodate starlings. The breeding distribution we recorded from 1997 through 2001 is considerably more extensive than that previously described, but the difference may be due only to more thorough exploration of regions once poorly known.

Taxonomy: Phillips (1986) found too much overlap in both size and color to uphold a distinction between *T. t. thalassina* (Swainson, 1827), of the mountains of mainland Mexico, and *T. t. lepida* Mearns, 1894 (type locality Laguna Mountains), from farther north. Eliminating *lepida* leaves the smaller Baja California form *brachyptera* Brewster, 1902, as the only other subspecies of the Violet-green Swallow.