

Virginia Rail *Rallus limicola*

Being a secretive marsh bird, the Virginia Rail is difficult to observe and census accurately. It is noticed mainly by its peculiar series of grunts. Though generally uncommon, it is a widespread resident in freshwater and brackish marshes, even rather small ones, in all parts of San Diego County. The resident population is augmented in winter by migrants, which occasionally visit salt marshes as well.

Breeding distribution: Though the Virginia Rail’s distribution in an arid region like San Diego County is naturally very patchy, we found the species to be surprisingly widespread. It occurs in most if not all of the coastal wetlands of northern San Diego County, with up to eight at the mouth of Las Pulgas Creek (E3) 29 May 1999 (R. and S. L. Breisch) and six at the upper end of Agua Hedionda Lagoon (I6) 25 April 1999 (P. A. Ginsburg). It is perhaps more numerous at some of the lakes and ponds in the coastal lowland, with up to 10 at O’Neill Lake (E6) 10 July 2001 and nine in the San Luis Rey River valley just north of Bonsall (F8) 6 July 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg). An effort focused on this species—surveys using taped recordings—could yield even higher numbers in good habitat (18 in San Pasqual Valley, J12, 26 July 1980, K. L. Weaver).

A region where the Virginia Rail was poorly known before the atlas study but proved relatively common was the Campo Plateau. Among the more notable sites for the species here are Boundary and Carrizo creeks from Jacumba north to Dubber Spur (five in square U28 on 22 April 1999 and five in T28 on 30 April 1999, with only

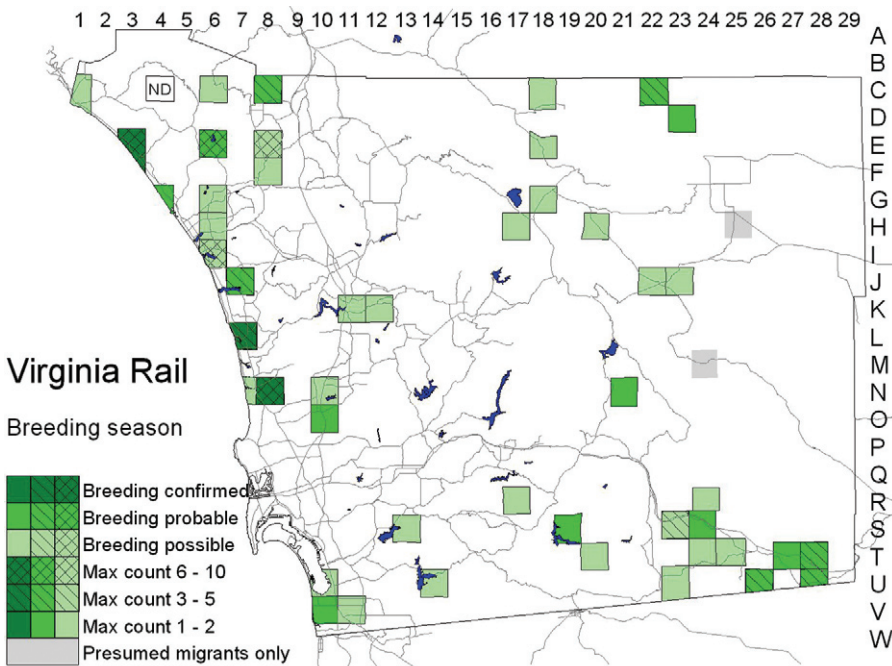
a fraction of the habitat sampled, F. L. Unmack), Lake Domingo (U26; four on 20 April 1999, possibly gathering nest material 17 April 1998, F. L. Unmack), Tule Lake (T27; two on 1 April 1999, J. K. Wilson), La Posta Creek (two in square R24 on 12 July 2000, J. Larson; three in S23 on 20 June 1999, L. J. Hargrove), and Campo Creek in the Campo Indian Reservation (T24; two on 3 May 1998 and 5 May 2001, P. Unitt).

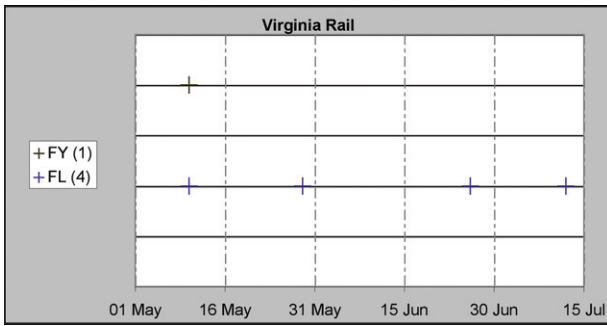
In the northern Anza–Borrego Desert the Virginia Rail is resident along Coyote Creek at Middle Willows (C22; up to four on 28 May 1999, P. D. Jorgensen) and Lower Willows (D23; up to six on 1 April 2001, R. and S. L. Breisch; chicks on 25 July 1995, P. D. Jorgensen in Massey 1998) and along San Felipe Creek from above Scissors Crossing (J22; up to two on 21 July 2002, J. R. Barth) and Sentenac Ciénaga (J23; at least eight on 3 May 1978, P. D.

Jorgensen, but no more than one during the breeding season 1997–2002). At Carrizo Marsh (O29) the Virginia Rail is irregular or a recent extirpation, found regularly until 1994 but not 1997–2001 (P. D. and M. C. Jorgensen). At other desert sites it is more likely a winter visitor only.

Nesting: The Virginia Rail proved to be one of the most difficult species for us to confirm breeding. All our confirmations were of chicks accompanying their parents, at the mouth of Las Pulgas Creek 29 May 1999 (R. and S. L. Breisch), at San Elijo Lagoon (L7) 10 May 1998 (G. Rebstock), and in Carmel Creek at El Camino Real (N8) 26 June and 12 July 2001 (S. Scatolini). The nests are well hidden in flooded marshes, touching the

Photo by Anthony Mercieca





water or elevated only slightly above it (Conway 1995).

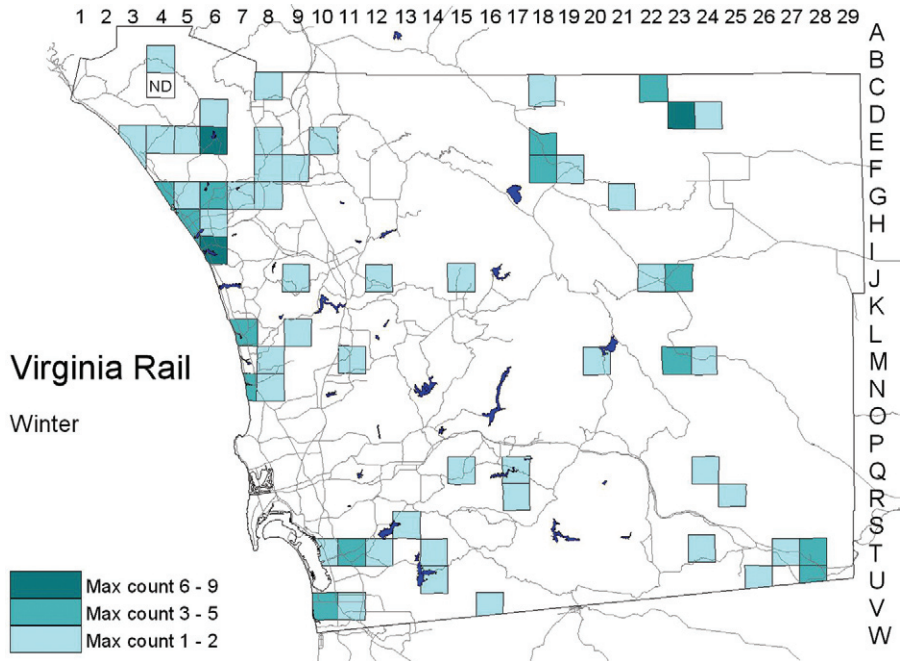
Egg sets collected in San Diego County number only five, 9 April–20 May. The chicks in late July at Lower Willows suggest laying as late as early to mid June.

Migration: The timing of Virginia Rail migrations is still poorly known because the birds are difficult to census accurately and few sites have been surveyed consistently through the year. Data from the Anza-Borrego Desert suggest that migrants arrive in numbers by 16 September (1978, 25 near Scissors Crossing, P. D. Jorgensen) and are still moving on 8 April (1998, four at the Borrego Springs sewage ponds, H25, H. L. Young, M. B. Mosher).

Winter: In winter the Virginia Rail is somewhat more widespread than in the breeding season and invades tidal salt marshes in small numbers (two at Kendall-Frost Marsh, Q8, 2 January 1987, P. Unitt; two in the Tijuana estuary, V10, 20 December 1997, W. Mittendorff). Numbers reported by atlas participants in winter were no greater than in summer, but monthly surveys of San Elijo Lagoon revealed a distinct peak from October to January, with a maximum count of 17 on 4 November 1973 (King et al. 1987). The Virginia Rail is recorded in winter exceptionally as high as 4600

feet at Cuyamaca Lake (M20; one on 4 December 1998, A. P. and T. E. Keenan). In addition to the sites in the Anza-Borrego Desert where it summers, the Virginia Rail winters occasionally at sewage ponds in the Borrego Valley (up to two on 26 October 1992, A. G. Morley) and along Vallecito Creek between Mason and Vallecito valleys (M23/M24; up to three on 22 January 1999, P. K. Nelson). From 1985 to 1992, Massey and Evans (1994) recorded the Virginia Rail at the latter site from September to May only.

Conservation: As a marsh species, the Virginia Rail is subject to the many habitat disruptions affecting wetland



birds. But because of the lack of surveys focused on it, data that could define a trend are insufficient. The elimination of natural marshes may be partly offset by artificial ponds and reservoirs. Carrizo Marsh has been badly degraded by the invasion of saltcedar, likely accounting for the rail's apparent disappearance there.

Taxonomy: Nominate *R. l. limicola* Vieillot, 1819, is the only subspecies of the Virginia Rail in North America; others occur in South America.