

## Western or Pacific-slope Flycatcher *Empidonax difficilis*

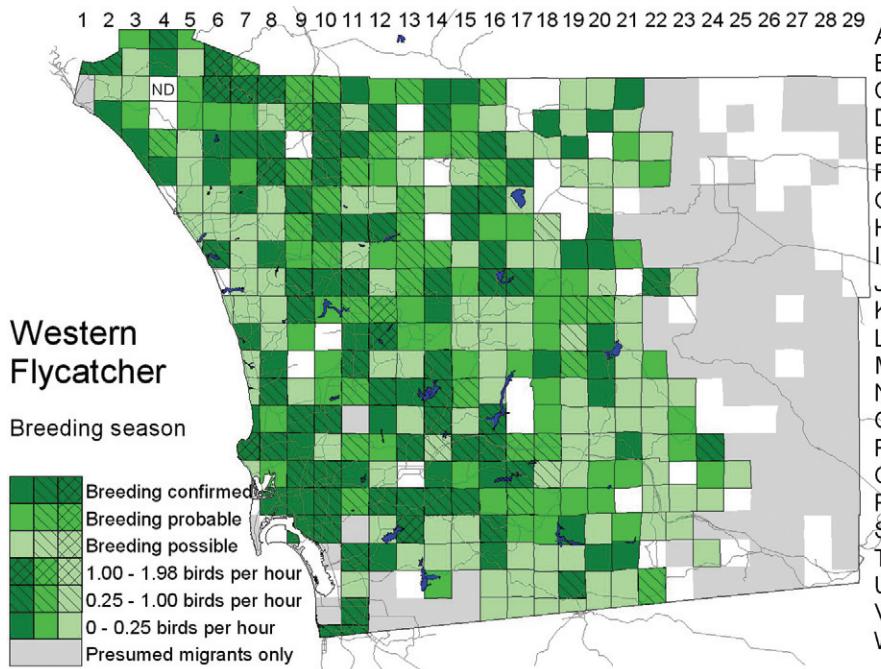
Few birds' invasions of San Diego County have been as aggressive yet as little noticed as that of the Western Flycatcher. Hardly known as a breeding species here in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Western Flycatcher is now a fairly common summer resident in native oak and riparian woodland from the coast to the mountains, as well as in groves of eucalyptus trees. Range expansion and ability to adapt to urbanization give it a double boost. In addition, the Western Flycatcher is common in migration throughout the county and rare in winter in the coastal lowland.

**Breeding distribution:** Breeding Western Flycatchers occur almost throughout the coastal slope of San Diego County in riparian and oak woodlands. Only a few areas (Warner Valley, Otay Mesa, Otay Mountain) are so lacking in these habitats that they yield holes in the distribution as seen at the scale of our atlas grid. The breeding distribution extends south practically to the Mexican border in the Tijuana River valley (W10, nest building on 23 May 2000, W. E. Haas; feeding fledglings on 2 July 2001,



Photo by Jack C. Daynes

M. B. Mulrooney; W11, occupied nest on 19 June 1999, P. Unitt). It extends down the desert slope along San Felipe Creek as far as Sentenac Ciénaga (J23; one on 8 July 2000, R. Thériault; juvenile on 6 July 2002, J. R. Barth) but does

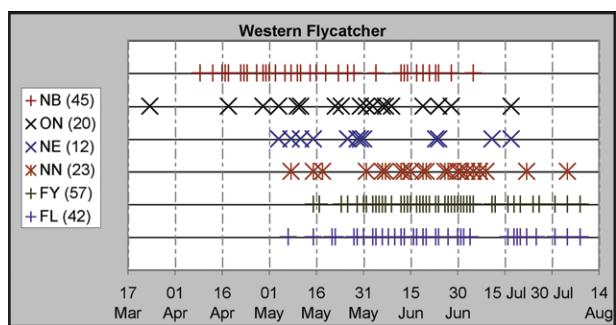
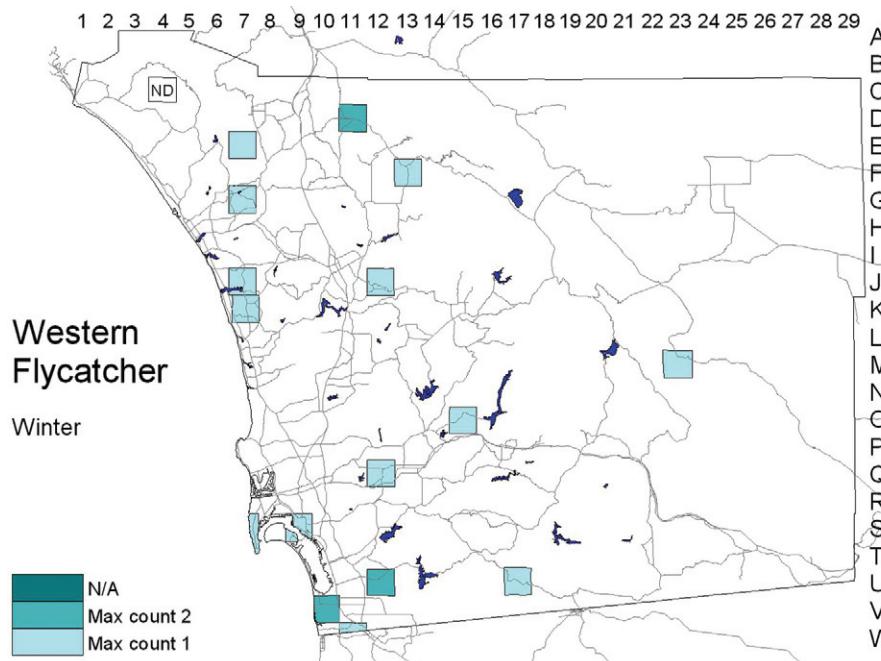


not quite reach the Tecate Divide east of Campo along the border. In addition, Western Flycatchers breed, still uncommonly and patchily, in parks, eucalyptus groves, and residential areas.

The greatest concentrations, as one might expect in a species expanding its range south, are still in northwestern San Diego County, especially along the Santa Margarita River near Fallbrook (C7, 25 males on 13 June 1998; C8, 27 males on 24 May 2001, K. L. Weaver). Other notable counts were of 25 along the west fork of the San Luis Rey River below Barker Valley (E16) 23 June 2000 (J. M. Wells, J. Turnbull, P. Unitt), 20 in the Agua Tibia Wilderness (C13) 18 May 2001 (K. J. Winter), and 18–20 in Blue Sky Canyon Ecological Reserve (L12) 6 June 1997

and 16 March 1998 (M. and B. McIntosh).

**Nesting:** However closely the Western resembles other small flycatchers, its choice of nest site is distinctive. The nest is a cup, but it is placed atop a solid support, with a solid surface behind it, and preferably above it, too. Broken-off snags and knotholes in trees are the Western Flycatcher's typical nest sites in San Diego County. The widespread planting of eucalyptus trees, though, gave the birds a new opportunity. Slabs of bark hanging half attached to the eucalyptus offer ideal supports and shelters for Western Flycatcher nests and allow the birds to occupy eucalyptus groves lacking any other vegetation. Man-made sites our observers described were atop a



pipe bracketed to the underside of a bridge, a ledge over a patio, and on the support structures below wooden decks.

Another interesting site was in an old Cliff Swallow nest under a bridge.

Because past data on the Western Flycatcher's nesting in San Diego County are minimal, our atlas results establish the first baseline for understanding the species' nesting schedule here. Two reports of fledglings on 7 May imply that at low elevations the birds lay as early as the first week of April, earlier than farther north (cf. Lowther 2000). An occupied nest in Stelzer County Park (O14) on 24 March 1998 (M. Farley, M. B. Mulrooney) may still have been under construction. A nest with nestlings in Palomar Mountain State Park (D14) on 4 August (2000, P. D. Jorgensen) implies that in the

mountains they lay at least as late as the first week of July. Early spring arrival gives the Western Flycatcher, unlike its close relatives, ample time to raise two broods in San Diego County.

**Migration:** Western Flycatchers typically begin arriving in San Diego County in the third week of March and quickly reach full abundance. One along the Sweetwater River at Highway 94 (R13) 3 March 1999 (J. R. Barth) was exceptionally early, beating the previous early record of 9 March 1983 (AB 37:911, 1983) by six days. The highest counts of migrants are from along the east base of the mountains: Agua Caliente County Park (M26), 70 on 11 May 1998; Scissors Crossing (J22), 60 on 14 May 1998 (both E. C. Hall). The species' spring migration period is notably long, regularly extending through the first week of June. The latest atlas record from a nonbreeding locality (6 June 2001, one in Carrizo Valley, O28, P. D. Jorgensen) is typical; stragglers can be expected later, even to 23 June (Unitt 1984).

Fall migrants begin returning in mid August, peak in September, and trail off through October and November. The latest specimen of an adult is dated 16 September; all seen later in the fall are juveniles.

**Winter:** At this season the Western Flycatcher is rare but occurs annually. Eight, nearly half of the 19 reported 1997–2002, were in a single winter, the wet El Niño year of 1997–1998. Almost all winter records are from low elevations on the coastal slope, from riparian woodland or ornamental vegetation in parks. As many of the winter records are from inland valleys as from the coastal strip, east (during El Niño) to near Dulzura (U17), with one on 24 January 1998 (W. Pray, O. Carter, C. R. Mahrdt). One at Butterfield Ranch (M23) 22 January 1999 (P. K. Nelson) made the first winter record for the Anza-Borrego Desert. The following year saw the first two winter records of the Western Flycatcher for the Imperial Valley (Patten et al. 2003).

**Conservation:** At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Western Flycatcher probably bred in San Diego County, as in northern Baja California still, at the highest elevations only. Though Willett (1912) called the species common in southern California generally, the only report in the early literature of breeding Western Flycatchers likely identified correctly in San Diego County is that by Anthony (1895), who called them "rather common" between 4000 and 6000 feet elevation on Cuyamaca Peak in late June 1895. Frank Stephens collected four specimens (MVZ) at Julian and Volcan Mt. from 31 July to 6 August 1908. F. E. Blaisdell (in Belding 1890) called the

Western Flycatcher "a summer resident" at Poway but misidentified enough other birds to cast doubt on this one. In the early 1900s the southern limit of the species' lowland breeding distribution was apparently north of San Diego County.

Egg collections, dating primarily from 1890 to 1940, contain only a single set from San Diego County, collected by Griffing Bancroft at an unspecified location in 1926 (WFVZ 75013). Thus it appears that the invasion of breeding Western Flycatchers gained momentum only after 1940 and was largely overlooked because the species has always been common in migration. By the late 1970s the breeding population was still uncommon and scattered (Unitt 1984). Our atlas data confirm that the spread has continued and suggest that low-elevation nesting in northwestern Baja California is now likely.

What factors prompted the Western Flycatcher's invasion? The planting of eucalyptus trees, the erecting of structures that offer nest sites, and the maturation of riparian woodland in floodplains where scouring by floods is now rare must all have contributed. Yet much of the spread has happened in canyons little touched by these forces. The species is only lightly parasitized by cowbirds, perhaps because its nests are usually hidden from above. No clear increase of the breeding population has been reported in California north of San Diego County, but at its northern end the Western Flycatcher's range has also expanded, in this case to the east (Lowther 2000).

**Taxonomy:** The comparatively bright yellow subspecies *E. d. difficilis* (Baird, 1858) ranges along the Pacific coast from southeastern Alaska south at least to San Diego County. The slightly larger and drabber *E. d. insulicola* Oberholser, 1897, is a summer visitor only to the Channel Islands but has not been identified conclusively in migration on the California mainland. The drab yellow-deficient subspecies *E. d. cineritius* Brewster, 1888, breeds in Baja California and ranged at least formerly north to the Sierra Juárez (Laguna Hanson, 24 July 1924, SDNHM 31899). Anthony (1895) reported his late June specimens from Cuyamaca Peak (M20) as *cineritius*. But six more recent (1984–1993) San Diego County breeding specimens are all typical of nominate *difficilis*. The southward expansion of *difficilis* has probably already swamped any former population of *cineritius*.

The split of the Western Flycatcher into two species seems premature in the lack of adequate study in most of the area of possible sympatry in southeastern British Columbia, northeastern Washington, eastern Oregon, and northwestern Montana.