

Western Gull *Larus occidentalis*

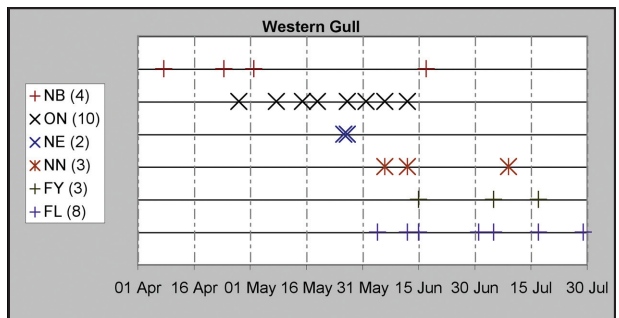
Of the gulls so ubiquitous along San Diego County's coast, it is the rowdy Western Gull that often dominates in both numbers and size. The Western is the only gull that nests in the county; the number of breeding pairs is modest but growing. A large colony is within sight of San Diego, however, on Los Coronados Islands off Tijuana. Typically coastal, the Western Gull seldom penetrates more than 15 miles inland in southern San Diego County, more than 5 miles in the north county.

Breeding distribution: The first site where the Western Gull was reported nesting in San Diego County was the cliffs at La Jolla, in 1935 (Miller 1936, Unitt 1984). Some birds continue to nest on these cliffs (at least two pairs in 1999), but many more have begun using the tops of nearby buildings (at least seven on 12 June 1999, L. and M. Polinsky). Other described sites are on artificial structures scattered around Mission and north San Diego bays, including the tram station at Sea World (R8), towers in the channel leading from San Diego Bay to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot (R8), and the roof of the Kona Kai Hotel, Shelter Island (S8). At North Island Naval Air Station (S8), the birds continue to nest on the cement pilings in San Diego Bay they have used since the 1970s; on 27 May 2000 one pair was nesting along one of the runways. It is also likely that a few Western Gulls nest on San Onofre Bluff, near which pairs were seen copulating 30 May 1998 (E3; R. and S. L. Breisch) and 15 May 2001 (D2; P. D. Jorgensen).

Away from nesting sites the Western Gull is still common in the middle of the breeding season, with up to 100 at Encinitas (K6) 27 April and 22 May 1997 (J. M. Dart) and 85 at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7) 7 June 1999 (D. K. Adams). Inland numbers in the breeding season range up



Photo by Jack C. Daynes

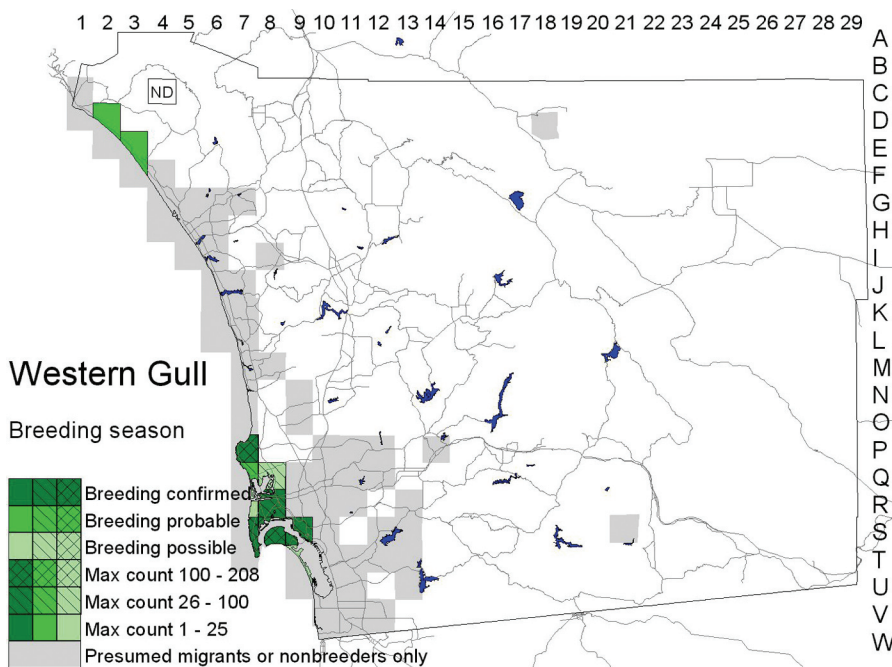


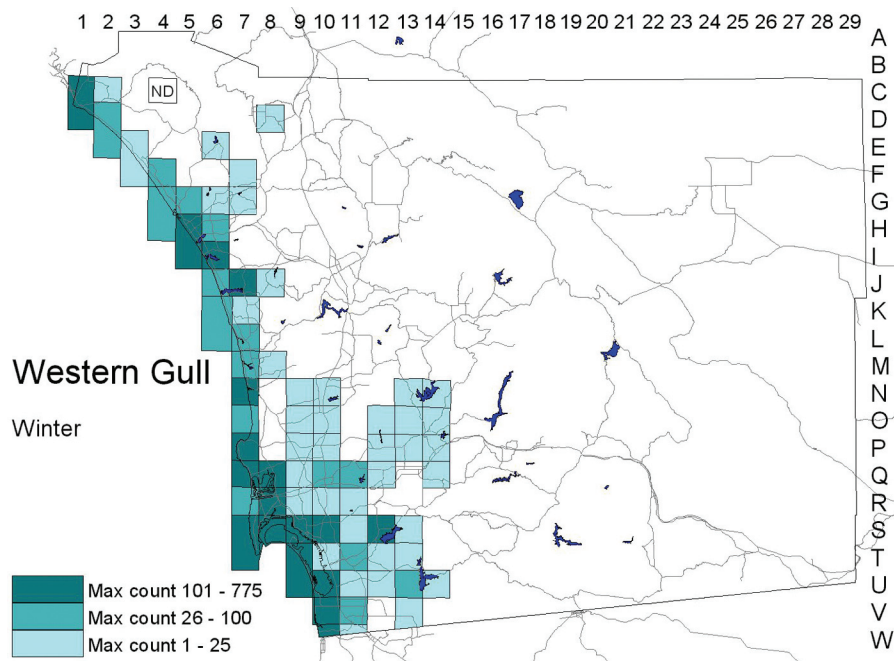
to 50 at Chollas Reservoir (R11) 15 April 1998 (P. Unitt) and 50 at Sweetwater Reservoir (S12) 8-9 June 1998 (P. Famolaro).

Nesting: Cliff ledges and predator-free islands were the Western Gull's primitive nesting sites. Increasingly, the gulls are now augmenting these with man-made structures, on which they build a rough nest of debris. Before the atlas study, few data were available on the species' nesting season in San Diego County. Our observations

suggest the Western Gull lays mainly in April in May, with young fledging mainly in June and July.

Migration: At San Elijo Lagoon, King et al. (1987) found the Western Gull to be most numerous from June to August, least numerous in April and May. At the south San Diego Bay salt works, however, Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) found it most numerous in September and October, least numerous in June. Variation in the number of Western Gulls in San Diego County is more related to the birds' concentration in breeding colonies than to long-distance migration. Regular commuting between Los Coronados Islands and the mainland is attested by





the chicken bones littering the gull colonies on the islands.

During the atlas period, we twice noted Western Gulls much farther inland than they had been recorded in San Diego County previously. One in second-year plumage was at Lake Morena (S21) 7 June 1997 (S. E. Smith); one was flying over Pervitt Canyon (D18) 3 August 2001 (M. B. Stowe). With the Western Gull becoming increasingly frequent at the Salton Sea (Patten et al. 2003), more sightings well inland in San Diego County are to be expected.

Winter: Even if the Western Gull is most numerous in summer or fall, it is still abundant in winter. From 1997 to 2002 our winter counts ranged up to 482 at Oceanside (H5) 28 December 1999 (S. Walens), 775 at Torrey Pines State Reserve (N7) 26 December 1999 (B. C. Moore), and 1212 on the ocean from the mouth of San Diego Bay to Imperial Beach 18 December 1999 (D. W. Povey). One curious feature of the Western Gull's dis-

tribution in San Diego County is that the birds disperse inland farther and in greater numbers through metropolitan San Diego than in the north county. Now, with extensive urbanization and many ponds and reservoirs in the north county, the difference between these two areas lacks a clear explanation. Lakes Hodges and Lower Otay are the same distance inland, yet the Western Gull is absent from Hodges (K10) but regular at Lower Otay (U13), where counts ranged up to 35 (6 January 2001, P. Unitt). It is especially common at Sweetwater Reservoir, with up to 200 on 15 December 2001 (P. Famolaro). Winter records extend up to 19 miles inland at San Vicente Reservoir (N14; one on 21 January 2001, N. Osborn).

Conservation: The Western Gull's colonization of San Diego County may be part of a trend of population increase in southern California as a whole. The banning of DDT and reduced contamination of the ocean off southern California favors the gull, while reduced upwelling and lowered productivity of the same waters disfavor it (Pierotti and Annett 1995).

Taxonomy: The subspecies of Western Gull resident in southern California is *L. o. wymani* Dickey and van Rossem, 1925. The paler-backed nominate subspecies, *L. o. occidentalis* Audubon, 1839, breeds in northern California, Oregon, and Washington and reaches San Diego County as a rare winter visitor (Devillers et al. 1971). Two juveniles banded in June on the Farallon Islands off San Francisco were recovered at San Diego the following October.