

Western Meadowlark *Sturnella neglecta*

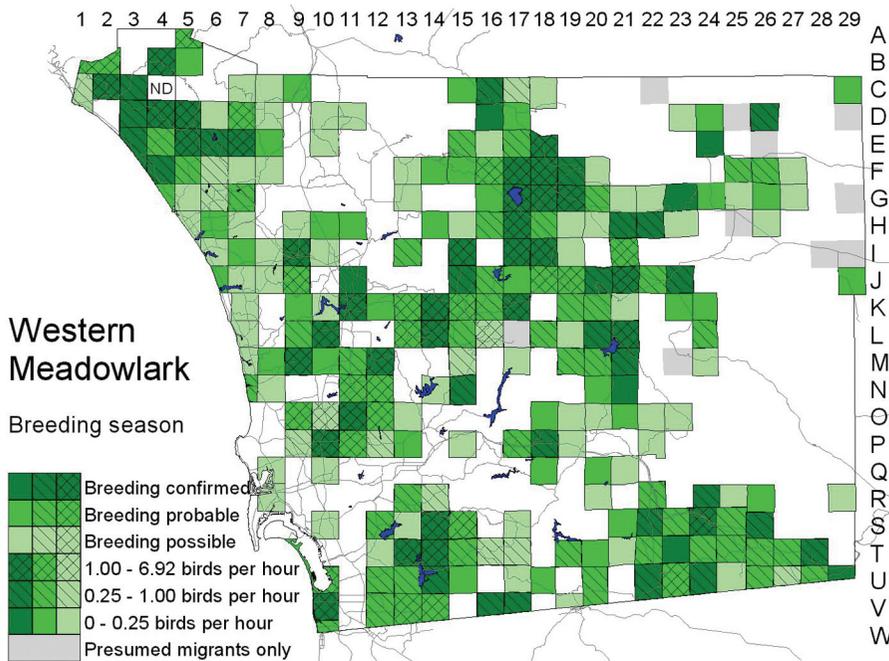
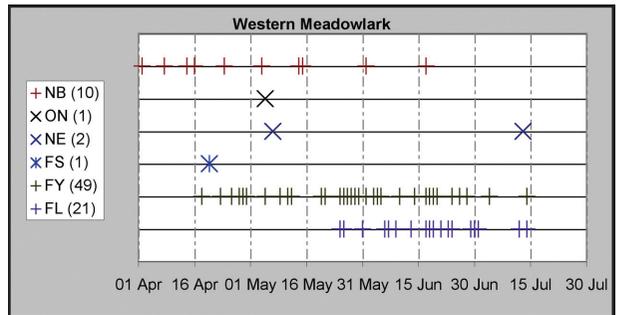
Grassland is the Western Meadowlark’s most typical habitat, but coastal marshes, open sage scrub, disturbed weedy areas, and even desert sinks also host the species. The Western Meadowlark is fairly widespread and common as a breeding species but is even more widespread and common as a winter visitor, when it gathers into flocks. The meadowlark survives cattle grazing and replacement of native grasses with exotics, but it does not adapt to urbanization and is susceptible to the ill effects of habitat fragmentation. Though heard all over the coastal mesas a century ago, in most of the city of San Diego the meadowlark’s song has now fallen silent.

Breeding distribution: Western Meadowlarks concentrate in San Diego County’s remaining large tracts of grassland. The largest numbers of breeding birds were reported from Warner Valley (up to 75 near Puerta La Cruz, E18, 12 May 2001, P. K. Nelson), Ballena Valley (K17; 60 on 12 June 2000, D. C. Seals), and Santa Maria Valley (up to 106 northeast of Ramona, K15, 26 April 1999, M. and B. McIntosh). Other areas important to the species are Camp Pendleton, Santa Ysabel Valley, Air Station Miramar, Proctor Valley, Rancho Jamul, Otay Mesa, and Campo Valley. Western Meadowlarks are widely but patchily distributed elsewhere: many atlas squares that are largely developed or covered largely by chaparral lack them. Along the coast they inhabit coastal wetlands (up to 20 at San Elijo Lagoon, L7, 14 May 1997, A. Mauro; 20 in the Tijuana River estuary, V10, 16 May 1998, B. C. Moore). A few persist around Mission Bay on weedy bayfill (e.g., two on the south shore, R8, 31 May 1998, C. B. Hewitt). In the Anza–Borrego Desert the Western Meadowlark is fairly common at Sentenac Ciénega (J23; up to 16 on 14 June 1998, feeding young in an extensive



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

area of yerba mansa, R. Thériault) but uncommon to rare on valley floors elsewhere. Some birds advertise territories but apparently find the habitat insufficient and move on in the middle of the breeding season. Nevertheless, a few remain and nest at least irregularly, both in the agricultural area of the Borrego Valley (E24; three, including fledgling, 31 May 2001, J. Fitch) and in sinks (Clark Dry Lake, D26; three, including feeding young, in a weed patch amid mesquite and tamarisk 30 April 2001, J. R.



Barth). These records are the first of Western Meadowlarks breeding in the Anza–Borrego Desert (cf. Massey 1998), though the species breeds fairly commonly in the agricultural lands of the Coachella and Imperial valleys (Patten et al. 2003).

Nesting: Western Meadowlarks nest on the ground in dense grass or other low vegetation. The birds often build a dome or roof over the nest, screening it from above and making it difficult to locate. Atlas observers reported only three. Though egg collections demonstrate that Western Meadowlarks lay in San Diego County as early as 11 March, atlas observations reveal that early April to late June is

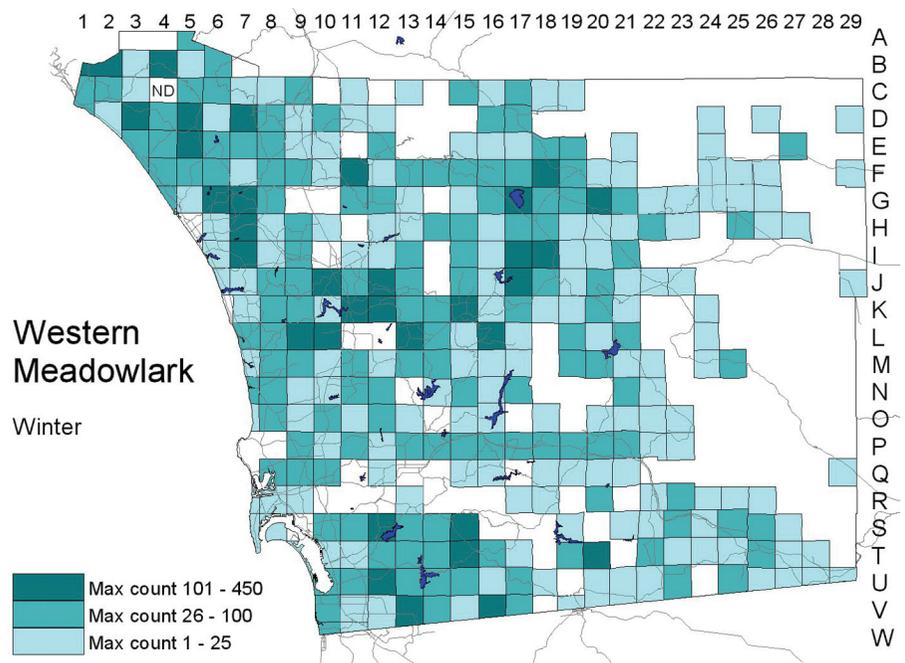
the principal season for meadowlark nesting in San Diego County. Reports of nest building near Warner's Ranch (G19) 17 June 2000 (J. D. Barr) and a nest with eggs near Dyar Spring, Cuyamaca Rancho State Park (N21) 13 July 2000 (S. Martin) are later than previous egg dates (to 15 June, Sharp 1907) but from elevations higher than most collected sets. We noted no winter nesting, as reported by Sechrist (1915b) and Abbott (1927c) during relatively wet winters.

Migration: During migration and winter Western Meadowlarks spread into habitats like open desert and sparsely vegetated disturbed areas unsuitable for their breeding.

In spring, migrants or winter visitors occur in such areas to mid April (11 April 1998, one near Five Palms Spring, G29, G. Rebstock, K. Forney; 20 April 1997, four near Greenwood Cemetery, S10, P. Unitt). Later scattered records from marginal desert habitat may be of birds scouting for possible breeding territories but unable to attract a mate (e.g., one near Middle Willows, C22, 14 May 1997, P. D. Jorgensen).

Winter: At this season the Western Meadowlark is considerably more abundant than during the breeding season. Maximum daily counts range up to 250 at Lake Henshaw (G17) 27 December 1999 (D. Aklufi), 368 between Poggi Canyon and Otay Valley (U12) 20 December 1997 (W. E. Haas), and 450 in Rancho Jamul (S15) 14 January 2001 (P. Unitt). The winter distribution is similar to the breeding distribution, though, with rather little spread into areas where breeding birds are absent. Among these latter areas are open spaces within the city of San Diego (up to 50 around the radio towers at Emerald Hills Park, S11, 12 December 1999, P. Unitt). The Western Meadowlark occurs irregularly even at high elevations through the winter (up to 40 at 4600 feet in the upper basin of Lake Cuyamaca, L21, 5 January 1999, J. K. Wilson; 32 at 4700 feet near Dyar Spring, N21, 20 January 2002, R. C. Sanger; 10 at 5400 feet in Laguna Meadow, O23, 6 December 1999, D. S. Cooper). In the Anza-Borrego Desert wintering Western Meadowlarks occur mainly on golf courses and on sandy valley floors (up to 30 near Little Clark Dry Lake, E27, 7 December 2000, R. Thériault; 30 at Vallecito, M25, 25 February 1999, M. C. Jorgensen).

Conservation: The Western Meadowlark has survived heavy grazing of its grassland and replacement of native



plants by foreign weeds, though these factors likely depressed the population. The meadowlark forages as readily in disturbed areas as in pristine habitat. But as a ground-nesting and ground-foraging species it has no ability to adapt to urbanization. As a result, there are now large gaps in what was once undoubtedly a nearly continuous distribution though the coastal lowland. Bolger et al. (1997) reported the Western Meadowlark to be susceptible to the effects of fragmentation, and this is implicit in the atlas results as well. Nesting birds are highly sensitive to human disturbance (Lanyon 1994). Disturbed grassland constitutes much of the meadowlark's remaining habitat in San Diego County but has been given low priority in habitat-conservation plans. Large areas of former meadowlark habitat, as around the eastern fringe of Chula Vista (T13/U12/U13), were developed and eliminated during the five-year atlas period. On the positive side are acquisition as wildlife habitat of San Felipe Valley and Rancho Jamul by the California Department of Fish and Game and part of the Ramona grasslands by the Nature Conservancy.

Taxonomy: The two described subspecies of the Western Meadowlark, *S. n. confluenta* Rathbun, 1917, and *S. n. neglecta* Audubon, 1844, are said to intergrade in San Diego County (AOU 1957). *S. n. confluenta* is darker, with heavier black barring on the upperparts and larger spots on the sides and flanks; it breeds in the Pacific Northwest and possibly south through coastal California. Nominate *neglecta* occurs farther south and east. The difference between the subspecies is obscured in worn plumage, and Lanyon (1994) considered them poorly differentiated.