

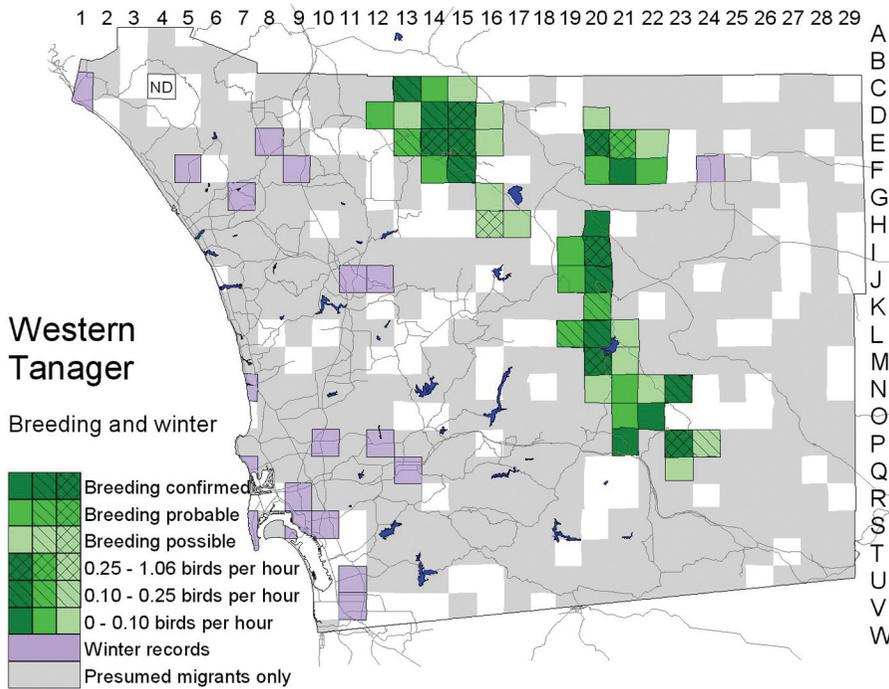
Western Tanager *Piranga ludoviciana*

The Western Tanager's splash of color marks the peak of spring migration through San Diego County. The birds also nest in the pine–oak forests of the county's mountains, where they are generally uncommon. In fall migration the Western Tanager is less conspicuous than in spring, but adults pass through in late July and August, immatures largely in September and early October. In winter the species is rare but regular, occurring almost exclusively in urban parks. Indeed, the Western Tanager was the first species known to shift its range to take advantage of this novel habitat.

Breeding distribution: The Western Tanager's breeding distribution in San Diego County corresponds to



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

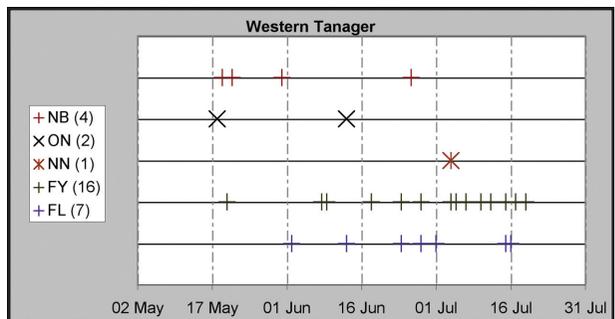


Nesting: Western Tanagers typically nest in the middle to upper levels of trees, often placing the nests atop the outer branches of conifers (Hudon 1999). With the species uncommon and its nest built in the canopy, atlas observers noted few nests. The two described were in a big-cone Douglas fir and a willow, 18 to 25 feet above the ground. Most breeding confirmations were of adults carrying insects, on dates ranging from 20 May to 19 July. These and other data suggest that in San Diego County Western Tanagers lay from early May to early July, a wider spread than the 6–27 June of five egg sets collected 1915–20.

Migration: As a migrant the Western Tanager occurs county-wide. From 1997 to 2001 the

the higher mountains supporting stands of conifers and black oaks. In this habitat the birds are typically uncommon; high counts are of 28 (10 singing males) on Middle Peak (M20) 11 June 2000 (R. E. Webster), 12 (10 singing males) near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain (E20) 18 June 2000 (K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt), and 11 (8 singing males) near Palomar Observatory (D15) 1 July 1999 (K. L. Weaver). In southern San Diego County the downslope limit for breeding Western Tanagers is around 3600 feet elevation at Pine Valley (P21; two feeding young 7 July 1998, J. K. Wilson). In the northern half of the county breeding tanagers extend down to 3200 feet at the northeast base of Volcan Mountain (H20; fledglings in summer 1999, A. P. and T. E. Keenan). Apparently a few birds summer around Mesa Grande (3200–3300 feet; H16/H17), where there are many black oaks but few conifers (e.g., one tanager along Mesa Grande Road, H16, 17 June 1998, C. G. Edwards). Along the San Luis Rey River below Lake Henshaw many mountain birds extend to unusually low elevations, but the only midsummer record of a Western Tanager there is of a single male near the San Luis Rey Picnic Ground (2600 feet; G16) 3 July 1999 (W. E. Haas). In the deep canyons cutting the southwest face of Palomar Mountain, however, Western Tanagers summer down to 2000 feet, among big-cone Douglas firs (four singing males along Pauma Creek, E13, 7 June 2001, P. Unitt; two singing males along Agua Tibia Creek, D12, 18 June 2001, K. L. Weaver).

Scattered Western Tanagers, evidently nonbreeding, show up rarely at odd localities through the summer (one at Fallbrook, D8, 21 June 2000, M. Freda; one near Puerta La Cruz, E18, 23 June 2000, A. P. and T. E. Keenan; one near Warner’s Ranch, G19, 24 June 2000, E. C. Hall; one at Fernbrook, M14, 24 June 2000, B. Hendricks; two at Torrey Pines State Reserve, N7, 1 July 2001, J. Lesley).



spring’s first date for arriving Western Tanagers ranged from 3 to 15 April. The earliest record, of two in Boden Canyon (I14) 3 April 1999 (R. L. Barber), is exceptionally early for California. But the recurrence of early April arrivals since 1998 may foreshadow a shift in the species’ migration schedule (compare also Patten et al. 2003); mid April arrival had long been the rule (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Still, spring migrants do not become common until late April, and their numbers vary from year to year. The birds occasionally concentrate in large numbers, with up to 100 at the University of California, San Diego (O8), 5 May 1999 (L. Myklebust) and 200 at Tecate (V19) 1 May 1999 (M. and B. McIntosh). Past years occasionally saw even larger numbers, up to 500 at Pauma Valley (E12) 16 May 1942 (E. Beemer) and 1000 at Bonita (T11) 1 May 1964 (AFN 18:488, 1964). Migrants are still frequent in small numbers in the first week of June, and stragglers occur through the second week. Latest, if not summering, were one near Rincon (F13) 12 June 1999 (E. Wallace) and one in Carlsbad (I7) 14 June 1998 (E. Garnica).

Adults begin heading south in mid July, possibly even early July (one at Scissors Crossing, J22, 3–6 July 2001, P. D. Jorgensen; two near Rincon, F13, 8 July 2000, M. B.

Mosher), and have all departed by the end of August. The immatures, by contrast, begin appearing at low elevations only in late August, then continue in dwindling numbers through October. In fall, adults avoid the coast; only immatures are normally seen there.

Winter: At this season the Western Tanager is confined to the coastal lowland, to parks and residential areas well wooded with exotic trees. It is most numerous in Balboa Park (R9; three west of Highway 163 on 16 December 2000, J. K. Wilson; three on the grounds of the San Diego Zoo 15 December 2001, V. P. Johnson). Wintering birds can often be heard calling from the tops of tall eucalyptus and fig trees near the San Diego Natural History Museum. The highest winter number recorded is 21 on the San Diego Christmas bird count, 19 December 1981. Elsewhere records are scattered from San Onofre (C1; one on 11 January 1999, M. Lesinsky) to the Tijuana River valley (V11; one on 16 December 2000, G.

McCaskie). The records farthest inland are from 2.5 miles east of Bonsall (F9; two on 12 December 1999, J. Evans), Kit Carson Park, Escondido (J11; two on 2 February 1999, M. B. Stowe; one on 30 December 2000 and 27–29 December 2001, K. L. Weaver), and El Cajon (Q13; one on 15 January 2001, J. R. Barth). One in Borrego Springs (F24) 1 December 1998 (M. L. Gabel) was likely a late fall migrant, though there are three winter records for the Salton Sink (Patten et al. 2003).

Conservation: No changes to San Diego County's breeding population of the Western Tanager are known; the species has always been uncommon as a breeding bird. The species' wintering came only with the planting of exotic trees that flower and fruit through that season. The first winter reports, from National City, were in the 1920s (Johnson 1922, 1928), and only since 1956 have wintering Western Tanagers been noted annually.