

Western Bluebird *Sialia mexicana*

The Western Bluebird is a common resident of San Diego County's foothills and mountains, especially where meadows lie among groves of oak or pine. In winter the birds gather into flocks and move in search of berries, especially mistletoe. Despite being a cavity nester that must compete with many other species for scarce holes in trees, the Western Bluebird shows signs of spreading out of its primitive range, colonizing urban areas with mature trees and wide lawns.

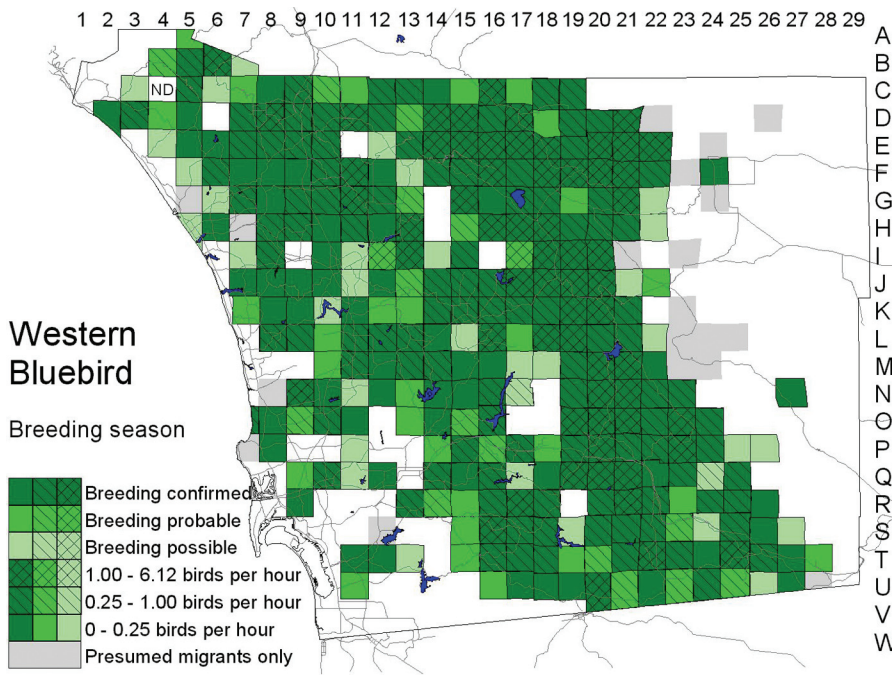
Breeding distribution: Montane coniferous and oak woodlands constitute the core of the Western Bluebird's range in San Diego County. In these habitats, daily counts late in the breeding season, when recently fledged young are common, range up to 60 in the Cuyamaca Mountains (N20) 16 July 2000 (B. Siegel), 90 on Hot Springs Mountain (E21) 14 July 2000 (K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt), and 100 in the Laguna Mountains (O23) 24 July 1998 (E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer). Toward the coast, the species becomes less abundant and more localized, but it is still common in many places, especially in northern San Diego County, with up to 20 in Valley Center (G11) 4 June 1997 (L. Seneca) and 20 in Horno Canyon, Camp Pendleton (D3) 25 June 1999 (D. C. Seals). The outline of the Western Bluebird's distribution is basically similar to that of other oak woodland birds like the Oak Titmouse and Acorn Woodpecker, but the atlas effort revealed a surprising number of Western Bluebird nestings in south-coastal San Diego County outside this historic range. These records ranged as near the coast as an apartment complex on the west side of the University of California campus (O7; nest in a Nuttall's Woodpecker



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

hole in a wooden lamp post 31 May 1999, young in a nest box 6 June 2001, D. G. Seay), the San Diego River next to the Fashion Valley shopping center (R9; fledging young in both 1997 and 1998 from woodpecker holes in cottonwoods, J. K. Wilson), and Glen Abbey Cemetery, Bonita (T11; feeding young 18 June 2001, T. W. Dorman).

The eastern edge of the Western Bluebird's range in San Diego County follows the eastern edge of oak woodland closely, with just a little extension into other trees infested with mistletoe, as in mesquites near Arsenic Spring (T28; two on 11 May 2001, F. L. Unmack). The species may summer irregularly in riparian woodland at Scissors Crossing (J22), where E. C. Hall noted two on 20 May 1998 and one on 21 June 1999 but J. R. Barth found none in 2002. Two nestings on the floor of the Anza-Borrego Desert were completely unexpected: one nest with two nestlings was in a dead planted tree at Canebrake (N27) 17 May 1998 (R. Thériault), and an adult female was tending three fledglings on the grounds of Borrego Springs

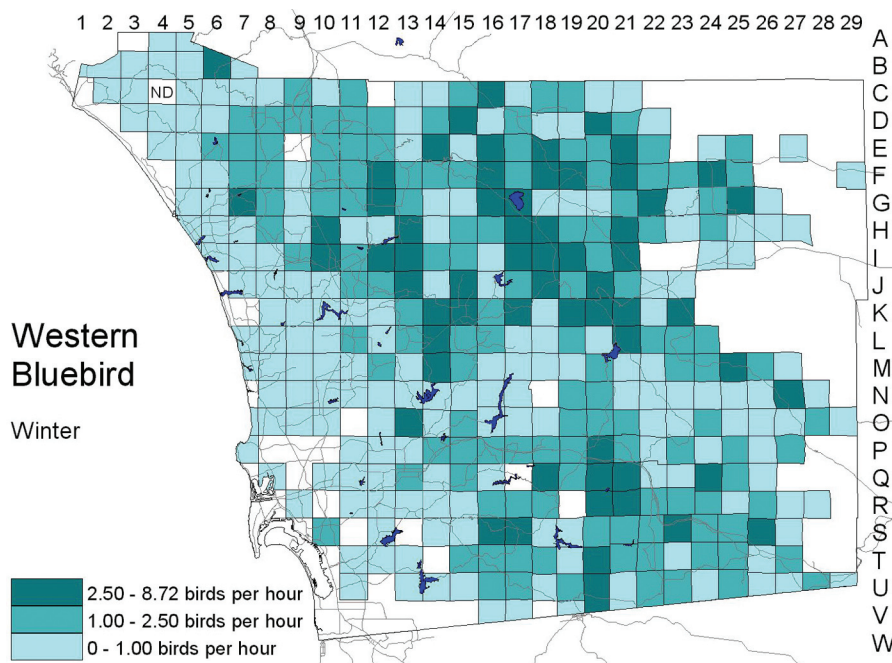
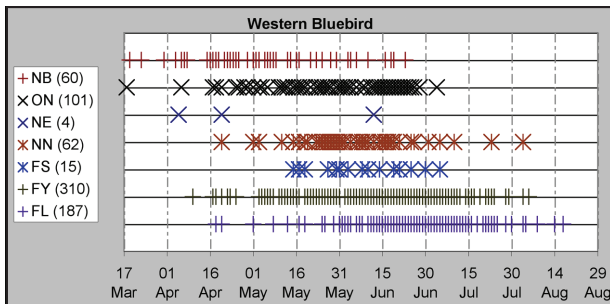


High School (F24) 20 July 2000 (P. D. Jorgensen). Two in upper Indian Valley (P26) 9 May 1998 (P. R. Pryde) thus could have been nesting too. I know of no other instances of the Western Bluebird nesting in low desert anywhere in its range.

Nesting: The Western Bluebird is a secondary cavity nester, traditionally using holes in trees, usually excavated by woodpeckers. From 1997 to 2001 we noted nests in a wide variety of native trees as well as in eucalyptus trees and fan palms. The Western Bluebird is a leading patron of nest boxes. We also noted two nests in houses: under an eave or under roof tiles. One nest along Highway 80 between Boulevard and Bankhead Springs (T27) 3 May 1998 was in a splice sleeve

on a large suspended telephone cable (F. L. Unmack). In its choice of nest site the Western Bluebird exemplifies the opportunism common to most secondary cavity nesters.

Our many observations of Western Bluebird nesting indicate that the species lays mainly from early April through the end of June, closely matching the range 4 April–29 June that Bent (1949) reported from California on the basis of 104 collected egg sets. Several observations, though, suggested that some birds started in late March; for example, a nest at Wilderness Gardens (D11) already had seven eggs on 5 April 1997 (V. Dineen), and fledglings at Bell Gardens, Valley Center (F12), 18 April 2001 (E. C. Hall, C. R. Mahrtdt) must have hatched from eggs laid around 23 March.



Migration: The Western Bluebird occurs outside its breeding range in San Diego County mainly from October, exceptionally 23 September (1956, “flocks” at Blair Dry Lake, L24, ABDSP file), to early April. After 15 April migrants are normally rare, yet by far the largest concentration observed was on the latest recorded date, 24 April 1999. On that day, in San Felipe Valley (I21), a huge multispecies fallout of migrants included 370 Western Bluebirds (W. E. Haas).

Winter: Western Bluebirds remain throughout their breeding range in San Diego County year round, even at high elevations (up to 18 near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain, E20,

13 February 1999, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtd). But they also spread in fall and winter into the Anza–Borrego Desert. In this region, they seek developed and agricultural areas or fruiting fan palms and mistletoe, avoiding other habitats. The birds are usually in small flocks, occasionally in flocks of dozens. By far the highest daily count for a single atlas square in the Anza–Borrego Desert was of 604 in Borrego Springs (F24) 20 December 1998 (R. Thériault et al.).

The Western Bluebird spreads in winter in the coastal lowland as well, more numerous in the north county, less so to the south. It does not normally reach Point Loma or the Tijuana River valley; Greenwood and Mount Hope cemeteries in San Diego (S10; up to 22 on 18 December 1999 and 16 December 2000, C. Sankpill), Lower Otay Lake (U13; up to eight on 21 January 2001, T. Stands, S. Yamagata), and Marron Valley (V16; five on 1 December 2001, J. K. Wilson) marked the southwestern limits of its winter dispersal during the atlas period. The margin of the winter range in the coastal lowland parallels the margin of the breeding range, suggesting that these winter visitors are only short-distance dispersers.

Conservation: Over much of its range the Western Bluebird is in decline, apparently as a result of loss of nest cavities to logging and fire suppression, and from competition for cavities with European Starlings and House Sparrows (Guinan et al. 2000). In San Diego County, however, despite many competitors for nest sites, the Western Bluebird appears to be holding its own and actually extending its breeding range. In spite of a few nesting records from Rose Canyon and Balboa Park from 1915 to 1926 (Abbott 1927d), the species' breeding range stayed static for decades. So the nestings we observed in the city of San Diego from 1997 to 2001 were unexpected and appeared to represent new colonizations. The spread

continued after the atlas period into 2002, with nesting that year in Presidio Park (R8) and Balboa Park near the Hall of Champions (S9; P.Unitt), adding two more squares beyond those in which the Western Bluebird had nested previously.

Why should the Western Bluebird in San Diego County be bucking the general trend? The planting of trees in what was once treeless scrub created new prospective habitat, and the spread of Nuttall's Woodpecker into urban areas as a breeding species has brought a primary cavity excavator into an area that once had none. The bluebird may be adapting to novel nest sites such as the crevices behind the leaf bases of certain species of palms, the most likely site for the birds that fledged young in Balboa Park. Installation of hundreds of nest boxes in Orange County in the late 1990s increased the population just to the north of San Diego County greatly (R. Purvis unpubl. data). As people notice bluebirds appearing, they may set up nest boxes appropriate for them, accelerating the increase. The small numbers of Western Bluebirds nesting in the heavily developed areas of San Diego County so far only hint at this species' becoming an urban adaptor. Yet another possibility is a general southward range expansion, paralleling that of the Orange-crowned Warbler and Western Flycatcher. Stephens (1919a) called the Western Bluebird a "common winter resident" but said that only "a few breed in the mountains."

Taxonomy: Western Bluebirds so far collected in San Diego County are the Pacific coast subspecies *S. m. occidentalis* Townsend, 1837. Even winter specimens from the Anza–Borrego Desert have the reduced chestnut on the back suggesting *occidentalis* rather than *S. m. bairdi* Ridgway, 1894, which breeds in the intermountain region and reaches southeastern California as a winter visitor.