

Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri*

The Western Sandpiper is by far the most abundant shorebird along San Diego County's coast. The number wintering in the county is roughly 10,000 to 15,000, and even larger numbers pass through in migration. Tidal mudflats are the sandpiper's preferred habitat, used by flocks of thousands. The species is also common in brackish lagoons, uncommon on beaches and rocky shores, and variably common on lakeshores. Though there are several sites of greater importance to the Western Sandpiper than San Diego County's coastal wetlands, San Diego and Mission bays rank among the top dozen sites for the species in California.

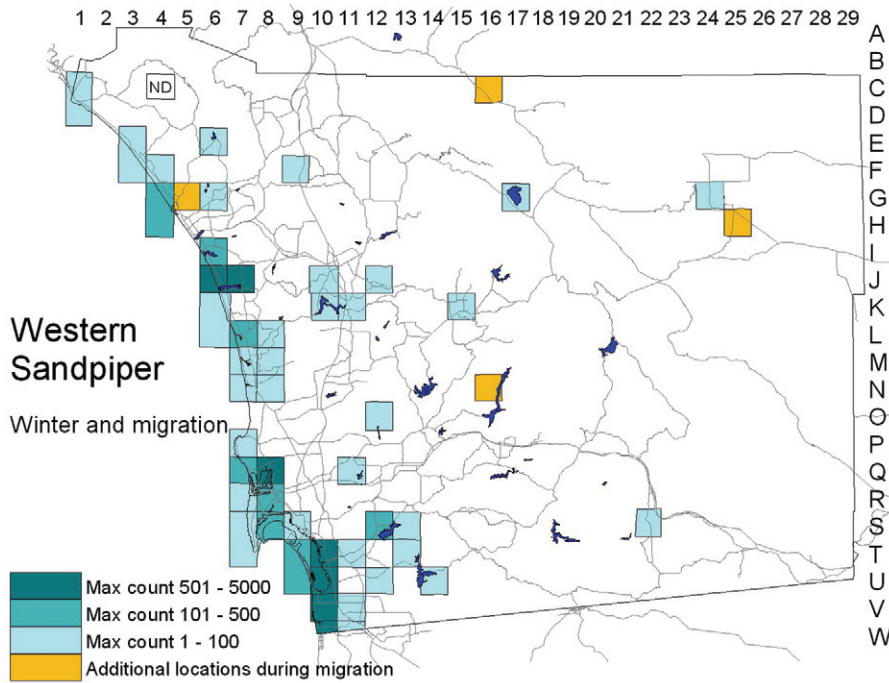
Winter: The Western Sandpiper's primary wintering sites around San Diego are northeastern Mission Bay (Q8; 5000 on 21 December 1998, J. C. Worley), south San Diego Bay (U10/V10; 7885 on 1 December 1993, Stadtlander and Konecny 1994), and the Tijuana River estuary (V10/W10; 1200 on 16 December 2000, S. Walens). In the north county the principal sites are the Santa Margarita River estuary (G4; 300 on 25 February 2000, P. A. Ginsburg), Agua Hedionda Lagoon (I6; 300 on 22 January 2000, P. A. Ginsburg), Batiquitos Lagoon (530 in the west half, J6, 15 January 1999, M. Baumgartel; 1000 in the east basin, J7, 5 January and 9 February 1998, B. C. Moore), and San Elijo Lagoon (L7; 456 on 22 December 2000, G. C. Hazard). The Western Sandpiper occurs at all coastal wetlands except Buena Vista Lagoon (H5/H6), where there are no longer suitable mudflats. It even occurs regularly in small numbers on rocky shorelines, with up to 12 at Point Loma (S7) 19 December 1998 (M. W. Klein) and six at La Jolla (P7) 28 December 1998 (L. and M. Polinsky).

Inland, wintering Western Sandpipers are much out-



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

numbered by Least Sandpipers. Large numbers of the Western are known only at Lake Hodges (K10/K11; up to 50 on 9 December 1997, E. C. Hall) and Sweetwater Reservoir (S12/S13; up to 150 on 16 December 2000, P. Famolaro). Smaller numbers are regular in the lower San Luis Rey River valley, with up to 22 at Whelan Lake (G6) on 17 December 1997 (D. Rorick). Elsewhere inland, from 1997 to 2002, we found no more than 10 wintering Western Sandpipers. The only sites above 1500 feet elevation where we encountered wintering Western Sandpipers were the upper end of Lake Morena (S22; two on 5 December 1999, R. and S. L. Breisch) and Lake Henshaw (G17), where the species is regular in small numbers, up to six on 18 December 2000 (J. Coker). Reports of larger numbers on Lake Henshaw Christmas bird counts in 1982 and 1999 are probably based on misidentified Least Sandpipers. In the Anza-Borrego Desert two or three were found at the Borrego sewage ponds (H25) on Christmas bird counts in 1987 and 1989; one was at Borrego Springs (G24) 27 February 2001 (P. D. Ache).



Migration: Western Sandpipers begin arriving in late June, becoming common by the beginning of July. A count of 474 on south San Diego Bay, mainly between the salt works and Chula Vista Wildlife Reserve (U10), 24 June 1988 is unusually high for so early in migration (Macdonald et al. 1990). Early arrivals are adults; juveniles begin arriving at the end of July. Both King et al. (1987) at San Elijo Lagoon and Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) in the salt works found the Western Sandpiper's fall migration peaking in October.

The species' spring migration through San Diego County takes place mainly in March and April. On their weekly surveys of the salt works 1993–94, Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) recorded their maximum of 8010 on 3 March 1993. A peak in early or mid April is probably more typical. By the second week of May, most migrants have continued north. Our latest date for the Western

Sandpiper during the atlas period was 9 May; Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) did not record the species at all in May or June. Nevertheless, birds in breeding plumage, presumably still heading north, have been seen as late as 5 June (Unitt 1984).

Inland, the Western Sandpiper is more widespread and numerous in both spring and fall migration than in winter (up to 80 at Lake Hodges 27 April 1997, E. C. Hall; 800 there 24 August 1985, K. L. Weaver). In the Anza–Borrego Desert the Western Sandpiper occurs as a rare spring migrant, mainly at artificial ponds, from 21 March (1999, four at the Borrego sewage ponds) to 8 May (1994, one at the same site, P. D. Jorgensen). Desert records are of 10 or fewer, except for 70 along Coyote Creek

(D23/D24) 17 April 1991 (A. G. Morley).

Summering Western Sandpipers in nonbreeding plumage are generally rare and confined to tidal mudflats. Numbers as high as 46 on south San Diego Bay 17 June 1987 (R. E. Webster, AB 41:1487, 1987) and 50 in the Tijuana River estuary 6 June 1998 (B. C. Moore) are exceptional. At San Elijo Lagoon, King et al. (1987) noted only two Western Sandpipers in June in 10 years of surveys 1973–83; one was there 13 June 1998 (B. C. Moore).

Conservation: Though abundant, the Western Sandpiper is vulnerable because of its concentrating in migration at a few staging sites, such as San Francisco Bay and the Copper River delta, Alaska (Wilson 1994). The relative importance of San Diego County to the species may have been greater before so much of the mudflats of San Diego and Mission bays were filled for development.