Western Scrub-Jay *Aphelocoma californica*

A year-round resident, the Western Scrub-Jay is well known to San Diegans, conspicuous in most urban areas and dominating bird feeders. Nevertheless, it remains most abundant in native chaparral and oak woodland, where it feeds heavily on acorns. Scrub oaks as well as tree oaks support the jay. In fall and early winter, when the oaks are bearing, the jays can be seen shuttling between oak groves and chaparral, carrying acorns to be cached and eaten later.

Breeding distribution: The Western Scrub-Jay is common over most of San Diego County's coastal slope, with regions of greatest abundance in the northwest from the north side of the Santa Margarita Mountains east to Rainbow, in the north-central area from the north slope of Palomar Mountain east to Chihuahua Valley and Warner Springs, and in the southeast on the Campo Plateau. Surveys near Pine Valley revealed it as one of the most common birds of mature chaparral, exceeded significantly only by the Spotted Towhee and Wrentit and on a par with the Mountain Quail and Bewick's Wren (Cleveland National Forest data). Daily counts in the breeding season run as high as 50, as around Sunshine Summit (D17) 1 May 1999 (A. Mauro) and in Tecolote Canyon (Q9) 10 May 2001 (T. Plunkett). Field work for the atlas disclosed two areas on the coastal slope where scrub-jays are rare to absent: the lowest 5 or 6 miles of the Santa Margarita and San Luis Rey River valleys and from the Tijuana River valley east to Otay Mesa and Lower Otay Lake (U13/V13), a region of riparian woodland, sage scrub, and grassland but little chaparral.

In the Anza–Borrego Desert, the eastern margin of the scrub-jay's range largely follows the edge of scrub that retains components of chaparral; very likely the availability of acorns of the desert scrub oak is the species' limiting factor here. The jay occurs in small numbers at the higher elevations of the Santa Rosa and Vallecito mountains, where the desert scrub oak is an important component of the vegetation. But it also ranges in small numbers down Coyote Creek to the riparian oasis of Lower Willows (D23; up to two on 10 May 1997 and 25 April 1998, B. L. Peterson), where oaks are absent.

Nesting: Western Scrub-Jays build a bowl of coarse twigs, usually concealing it in dense-foliaged trees or shrubs. We found one nest, however, on the support for a satel-
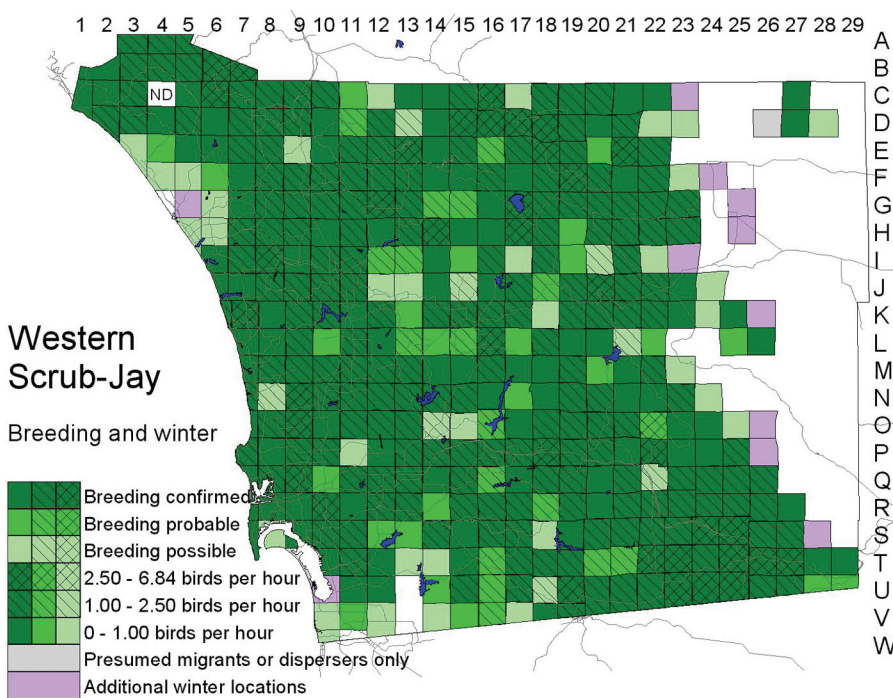

Photo by Anthony Mercieca
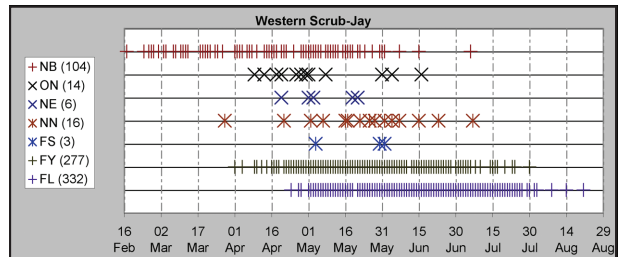
lite dish in a rural yard. Our observations from 1997 through 2001 imply egg laying from mid March to about 1 June—the same interval attested by 51 egg sets collected from 1894 to 1956 (WFVZ).

Winter: In California the Western Scrub-Jay is essentially sedentary, mated pairs maintaining their territories year round unless the supply of acorns fails. In San Diego County the jay's pattern of abundance in winter is very similar to that in the breeding season, with hardly any dispersal into the areas on the coastal slope where it is absent in the breeding season. Nevertheless, it is sometimes seen in winter in numbers considerably greater than in the breeding season, possibly because of nonterritorial birds concentrating where the feeding is good. Such concentrations were noted especially on the Campo Plateau, with up to 150 north of Lake Morena (S21) 16 February 1998 (S. E. Smith), 125 west of Campo (U22) 31 January 2000 (E. C. Hall, C. R. Mahrdt), and 235 around Campo (U23) 14 January 2001 (D. S. and A. W. Hester, M. and B. McIntosh).

Only rarely do scrub-jays venture even a short distance outside their breeding range along the edge of the Anza–Borrego Desert. There are three records for the floor of the Borrego Valley: one in Borrego Springs

Western
Scrub-Jay

Breeding and winter

Breeding confirmed
Breeding probable
Breeding possible
2.50 - 6.84 birds per hour
1.00 - 2.50 birds per hour
0 - 1.00 birds per hour
Presumed migrants or dispersers only
Additional winter locations

(F24) 20 December 1998 (R. Thériault), one in the mesquite bosque of the Borrego Sink (G25) 17 December 2000 (B. Siegel), and one at Casa del Zorro (H25) 19 December 1999 (L. D. and R. Johnson). Also on the desert floor were two on the north side of Clark Dry Lake (D26) 11 March 2000 (P. K. Nelson).

Conservation: The Western Scrub-Jay is a familiar component of San Diego County's urban avifauna. In residential areas, bird feeders probably help compensate for the lack of oak trees as a food source. Urbanization has enabled the jays to spread into former sage scrub that was once unsuitable. In the San Diego Christmas bird count circle, most of which was marginal scrub-jay habitat before urbanization, count results show a definite upward trend in the species' numbers. The number of scrub-jays per party-hour on the count 1997–2002 was larger by a factor of 1.93 than the 20-year average 1962–81. An increase and spread of the scrub-jay is relevant to conservation of other birds because the jay is a major predator of eggs and nestlings; Peterson (2002, Peterson et al. 2003) found the scrub-jay to be the principal predator on Bell's Vireo nests along the San Luis Rey River. Nevertheless, the scrub-jay remains considerably more abundant in its native habitats. Bolger et al. (1997) found it to be among the birds insensitive to habitat fragmentation, neither attracted nor repelled by the urban edge.

Taxonomy: The local subspecies of the Western Scrub-Jay, *A. c. obscura*, is a classic exemplar of a bird whose range and characters define the San Diegan District of the California Floristic Province. *Aphelocoma c. obscura* is the dark extreme of the species—as long as the Santa Cruz Island Scrub-Jay (*A. insularis*) is excluded.