

White-breasted Nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis*

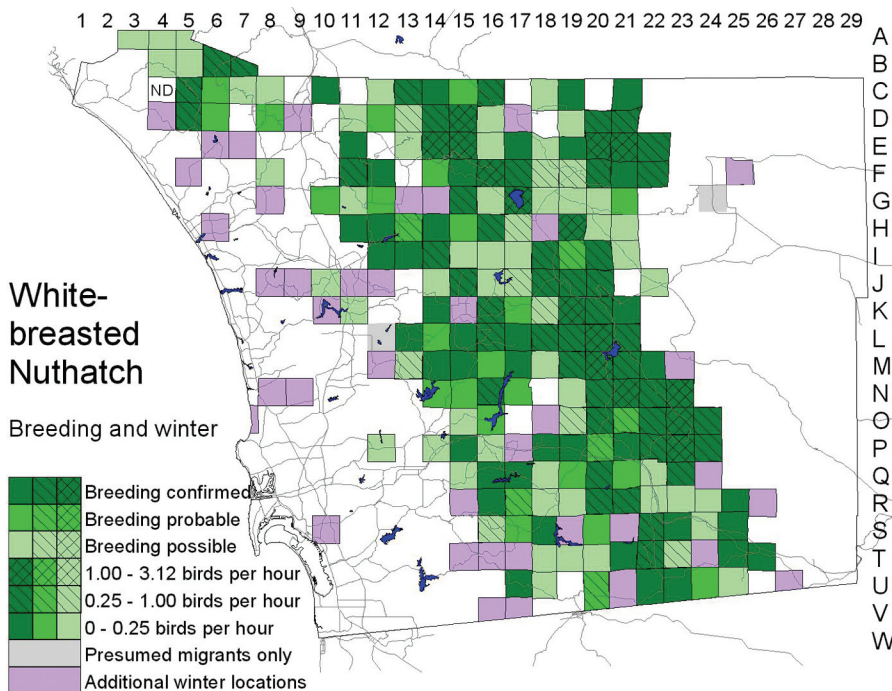
The White-breasted Nuthatch is the most widespread of San Diego County's three nuthatches. It is a common year-round resident in mountain forests and a familiar patron of bird feeders near this habitat. It is uncommon in oak woodland in the foothills. At low elevations it is a rare and irregular wanderer, apparently most frequent when stressed in its normal range by drought.

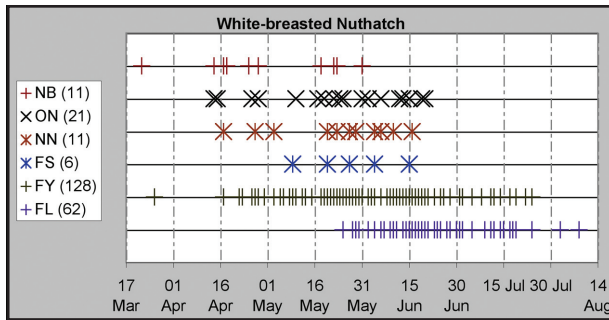
Breeding distribution: The White-breasted Nuthatch is one of the common birds of the conifer-dominated woodlands of San Diego County's mountains. Daily counts range as high as 52 on Hot Springs Mountain (E21) 24 July 1999 (K. L. Weaver), 40 on North Peak, Cuyamaca Mountains (L20), 14 July 2000 (E. C. Hall), and 40 at Mount Laguna (O23) 9 June 2001 (C. G. Edwards). The species is locally common as well in oak woodland at



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

lower elevations (up to 15 in Camp Pendleton 1.5 miles south of Margarita Peak, C5, 25 May 1997, J. M. Wells, and in Boden Canyon, I14, 27 June 1997, R. L. Barber). The White-breasted Nuthatch's distribution in San Diego resembles that of other oak woodland birds like the Acorn Woodpecker and Oak Titmouse. The nuthatch, however, does not approach the coast as closely as those species; the western margin of its range is shifted a few miles to the east. If the nuthatch requires larger patches of woodland than the other species, then that requirement could account for the difference in distribution. In northwestern San Diego County, in Camp Pendleton, it ranges to about 8 miles from the coast, at about 600 feet elevation in Las Pulgas Canyon (D5; up to six on 28 May 2001, P. Unitt). Near the Mexican border, the site nearest the coast is Dulzura, 19 miles





inland and about 1200 feet elevation (U17; up to four, including a male feeding a fledging, 19 June 1998, D. W. Povey). Single birds were at low elevations in isolated oak groves in Gopher Canyon (F8) 27 June 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg) and near the east end of Lake Hodges (K11) 9 June 1997 (E. C. Hall). One was in riparian woodland lacking oaks along the San Diego River in Santee (P12) 26 June 2001 (M. B. Mulrooney), but this may already have been a postbreeding disperser.

Along the eastern side of its range, however, the White-breasted Nuthatch follows the limits of the oaks almost exactly. It descends to about 4400 feet elevation in the middle fork of Borrego Palm Canyon (F22; up to 10 on 18 July 2001, J. R. Barth) and ranges east to Boulevard (T26) near the Mexican border (nest with nestlings on 20 May 1999, J. K. Wilson). The White-breasted Nuthatch may be a rare resident along San Felipe Creek or only a postbreeding visitor: one was near Paroli Spring (I21) 16 June 2000 (J. O. Zimmer), another near Scissors Crossing (J22) 13 July 2001 (P. Unitt). In 2002, when J. R. Barth monitored the Scissors Crossing area intensively, the first individual showed up 16 June and numbers reached their maximum of 10 on 14 July. High elevation is no limit to the White-breasted Nuthatch in San Diego County, as it breeds near the summit of Hot Springs Mountain (E20; up to 14 on 19 May 2001, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt).

Nesting: The White-breasted Nuthatch is a secondary cavity nester, using natural holes in trees or those excavated by woodpeckers. Earlier literature summarized by Pravosudov and Grubb (1993) reported no nests lower than 13 feet, but all the nests whose heights atlas observers described were lower: about 8 feet (in a coast live oak east of Rainbow, C10, P. Unitt), 6 feet (in an ornamental broad-leaved tree at Cameron Corners, U23, M. McIntosh), 4 feet (in a coast live oak in along San Vicente Creek, L15, A. Mauro), and just 1 foot off the ground (southeast of Lake Cuyamaca, N21, P. D. Jorgensen). Our observations suggest that in San Diego County White-breasted Nuthatches lay at least from early April through mid May, well within the range of 21 March–9 June for 56 California egg dates given by Bent (1948).

Migration: The White-breasted Nuthatch does not engage in regular migration, but small numbers disperse occasionally outside the breeding range. This dispersal begins possibly as early as mid June, as suggested by the records from San Felipe Valley, certainly by mid July.

Most dispersers are seen on the coastal slope, but one was at Borrego Springs (G24) 31 July 1999 (M. C. Jorgensen), another at Tamarisk Grove (I24) 3 August–2 September 1990 (B. Knaak). White-breasted Nuthatches have been noted at least as late as 22 March at locations where they do not breed (1997, one at Blue Sky Ecological Reserve, L12, M. and B. McIntosh). The end of such dispersal is uncertain because scattered individuals occur through the breeding season at such locations on the margin of the breeding range.

Winter: In winter most White-breasted Nuthatches remain in their breeding range. The species is still most abundant at higher elevations; our maximum daily count was 50 around Mount Laguna (O23) 21 January 2002 (E. C. Hall, J. O. Zimmer). Winter visitors outside the breeding range decrease rapidly with distance from the edge of that range, suggesting they result largely from short-distance local dispersal, not long-distance migration. The only desert records are of one at Ellis Farms, Borrego Springs (F25), 17 December 2000 (L. J. Hargrove, P. Unitt) and two at Butterfield Ranch, Mason Valley (M23), 13 January 2000 (H. and K. Williams). The highest count outside the breeding range during the atlas period was of five at Lake Hodges (K10) 22 December 2000 (R. L. Barber et al.), but the few winter wanderers 1997–2002 were eclipsed the following fall and winter by the largest incursion ever recorded in San Diego County. For example, from 1953 to 2001 the White-breasted Nuthatch was noted on only 13 of 49 San Diego Christmas bird counts, maximum seven on 31 December 1961, whereas the count on 14 December 2002 yielded 20.

Conservation: No trend in White-breasted Nuthatch numbers in San Diego County is clear. The species depends on mature trees for foraging and nest sites, so it depends on the maintenance and regeneration of oak and coniferous woodland. The nuthatch may benefit from the spread of Nuttall's Woodpecker, a primary cavity excavator whose old holes the nuthatch uses. The two largest invasions outside the breeding range, in 1961 and 2002, followed the two driest years in San Diego County history, so some birds may have been driven out of their normal range by drought-induced lack of food.

Taxonomy: *Sitta c. aculeata* Cassin, 1857, is the subspecies of White-breasted Nuthatch resident in San Diego County and the only one collected here. It inhabits the Pacific coast region from Washington to northern Baja California and is characterized by a comparatively short bill and brown-tinged female. The subspecies breeding in the Great Basin/Rocky Mountain region, *S. c. nelsoni* Mearns, 1902, and *S. c. tenuissima* Grinnell, 1918, differ in call as well as bill length and plumage. A bird giving calls characteristic of these subspecies has been heard once at Point Loma (4 October–November 2000, R. E. Webster), as well as once in the Imperial Valley (Patten et al. 2003). Other White-breasted Nuthatches recorded in the latter area called like *aculeata*, as did the one in Borrego Springs 17 December 2000.