

White-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia leucophrys*

In winter, the White-crowned Sparrow is one of San Diego County's most abundant birds. Some grass, weeds, or open ground for foraging, and nearby shrubbery or trees for refuge from predators, are all it needs for habitat at this season. Thus coastal sage scrub, broken chaparral, woodland edges, desert-edge scrub, desert washes and sinks, urban parks, and disturbed weedy areas all are home to the White-crowned Sparrow during its seven-month stay in San Diego County. White-crowned Sparrows often gather in large flocks and patronize bird feeders, making them seem even more numerous.

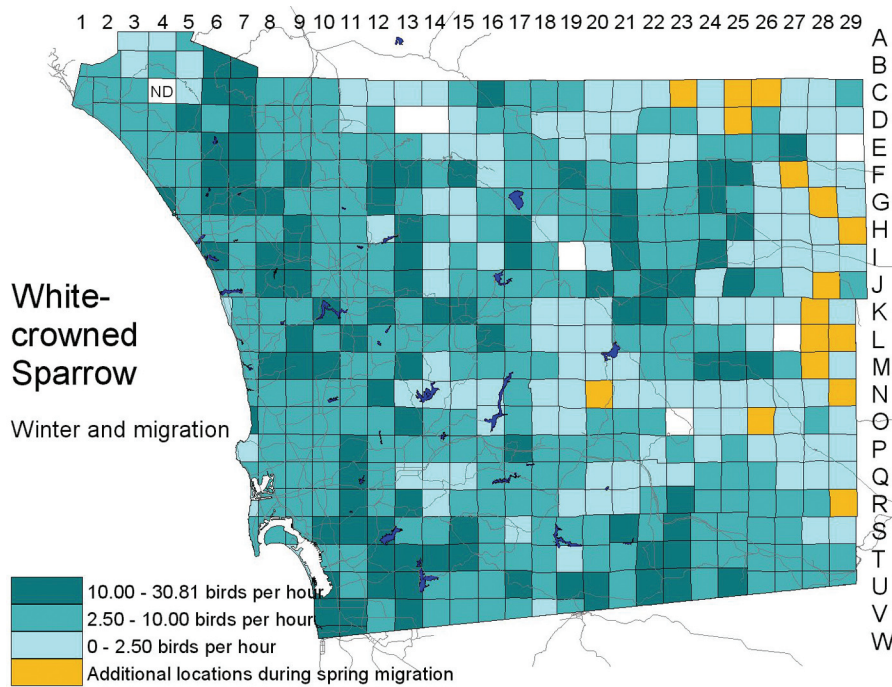
Winter: As an abundant winter visitor, the White-crowned Sparrow seems to be everywhere. On the coastal slope it is indeed almost ubiquitous, being scarce or lacking only at the highest elevations. The largest numbers are near the coast and in the inland valleys, with reports as high as 940 in the Tijuana River valley 18 December 1999 (W. E. Haas) and 700 at Sweetwater Reservoir (S12) 20 December 1997 (P. Famolaro). Large numbers sometimes occur even as high as 5000 feet (572 near Julian, J20, 27 December 1999, E. Post; 253 near San Ignacio, Los Coyotes Indian Reservation, E21, 11 December 1999, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrdt). In the Anza-Borrego Desert the White-crowned Sparrow is abundant around oases and irrigated developed areas, with counts as high as 1053 in north Borrego Springs (F24) 20 December 1998 (R. Thériault et al.). In dry natural desert habitats, though, its numbers vary with rainfall. White-crowned Sparrow numbers in the desert outside Borrego Springs were greatest during the atlas' first year, the wet winter of



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

1997–98. Daily counts in creosote bush scrub ran as high as 300 on Mescal Bajada (J25) 11 January 1998 (M. and B. McIntosh) and near Indian Hill (R28) 8 February 1998 (J. O. Zimmer). The following three years White-crowned Sparrows remained fairly steady at a level less than half that in the wet year. In the atlas' final winter, the record dry winter of 2001–02, their numbers dropped even further. During the drought, the sparrows became so sparse over so much desert that they were missed in 16 atlas squares not covered in 1997–98.

Migration: In fall, the White-crowned Sparrow arrives punctually in the third week of September and is common by the end of that month. The earliest date is 7 September with one near Lake Murray (Q11; N. Osborn) and two near Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7; D. K. Adams) in 2003. In spring, the sparrow's numbers decrease through April and early May. By the end of April the



species is uncommon, though large numbers remained in the Anza–Borrego Desert into late April after the wet winter of 1997–98: 150 on Mescal Bajada 26 April 1998 (M. and B. McIntosh), 30 at Vallecito (M25) 27 April 1998 (M. C. Jorgensen). By mid May the White-crowned Sparrow is rare, and the only records after 20 May during the atlas period were of single birds at Lower Willows (D23) 21 May 2001 (M. L. Gabel), in La Jolla (P7) 22 May 1999 (L. and M. Polinsky), along the Pepperwood Trail (P25) 22 May 2000 (L. J. Hargrove), and one at the De Luz Campground (B6) 29 May 2000 (K. L. Weaver). Ill health accounts for some of these stragglers; for example, the bird on the Pepperwood Trail had a tumor over one eye. The only later record published is of one in East San Diego (S10) 2–11 June 1975 (AB 29:912, 1036, 1975).

Breeding distribution: There is only one record of the White-crowned Sparrow breeding in San Diego County, of a pair with three juveniles near the Palomar Observatory (D15) 18 July 1983 (R. Higson, AB 37:1028, 1983). This is far outside the species' normal breeding range, which extends south only to Mt. San Gorgonio, and the small colony even there is an outlier from the main range of subspecies *oriantha* in the high Sierra Nevada. The record at Palomar, though, came after the wet El Niño winter of 1982–83, the event most likely to induce such a bizarre occurrence.

Conservation: The White-crowned Sparrow is less common in heavily urbanized areas than where much open ground remains, whether the latter is natural or disturbed. But no trend in its winter numbers is obvious. The breeding range of our principal subspecies, *gambelii*, is far to the

north in little-disturbed subarctic regions, so the White-crowned Sparrow seems secure as a dominant bird of San Diego County's winter landscape.

Taxonomy: Of the White-crowned Sparrow's five subspecies, three are known from San Diego County. *Z. l. gambelii* (Nuttall, 1840), with its pink bill, gray and rufous back stripes, and white eyebrow extending through the lores to the base of the bill, is the abundant winter visitor, representing 84 of 87 SDNHM specimens.

Zonotrichia l. pugetensis Grinnell, 1928, with its yellowish bill, brown-and-black back stripes, and white lores, breeds in the Pacific Northwest. It reaches the southern tip of its winter range in San Diego

County. Specimens have been reported from San Luis Rey (G6), San Marcos (I9), La Jolla (P7), and Nestor (V10/11), on dates ranging from 19 October to 10 April (Grinnell 1928b, Grinnell and Miller 1944, Rea 1967, Unitt 1984). Rea (1967) also reported that "during the period 1958–63 several other White-crowns of this race were banded by us at the Old Mission [San Luis Rey], leading me to believe that the race has largely been overlooked." But the scarcity of *pugetensis* in the SDNHM collection (only one of 87 county specimens), the lack of further sight reports, and the lack of records farther south attest to the rarity of the subspecies here.

Zonotrichia l. oriantha Oberholser, 1932, with its pinkish bill, gray-and-rufous back stripes, and black lores, occurs in San Diego County mainly as a rare spring migrant. Most birds must overfly the county, since the subspecies is a common breeding bird in the Sierra Nevada and a common winter visitor in southern Baja California. It is more common even in the Imperial Valley than in San Diego County. Dates extend from 8 April (1904, Witch Creek, J18, Bishop 1905) to 5 May (1885, San Diego, Belding 1890); the bird noted 2–11 June 1975 was also black-lore. Apparently there is still only one good record of a fall migrant, of one at Point Loma (S7) 20 September 1973 (J. L. Dunn). Just as San Diego County is the southern tip of the winter range of *pugetensis*, it is the northern tip of the winter range of *oriantha*. Bishop (1905) reported an immature collected at Volcan Mountain (I20) 3 December 1904, and there are a few other winter specimens from elsewhere in southern California (Grinnell and Miller 1944).