

White-headed Woodpecker *Picoides albolarvatus*

In San Diego County, which represents the southern tip of its range, the White-headed Woodpecker is uncommon to rare, breeding only in coniferous forest near the mountain tops. Even here it occupies only a fraction of the habitat, occurring mainly where the sugar pine is an important constituent of the forest. Only twice have vagrants been recorded in San Diego County away from the mountains.

Breeding distribution: The White-headed Woodpecker is most numerous on Hot Springs Mountain; in places there it can be the most conspicuous woodpecker (up to eight, representing probably five pairs, east of the summit, E21, 19 June 1999, K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtd). On the south side of the mountain it is found only above 5800 feet elevation, but on the north side it extends down to the mountain's base, occurring at 4600 feet in Lost Valley (D20/D21; up to three on 28 April 2000, W. E. Haas). On Palomar Mountain, the White-headed Woodpecker occurs mainly around the observatory (D15; up to three, including a pair, on 18 April 1998, K. L. Weaver). In Palomar Mountain State Park (D14) only a single individual was noted during the breeding season from 1997

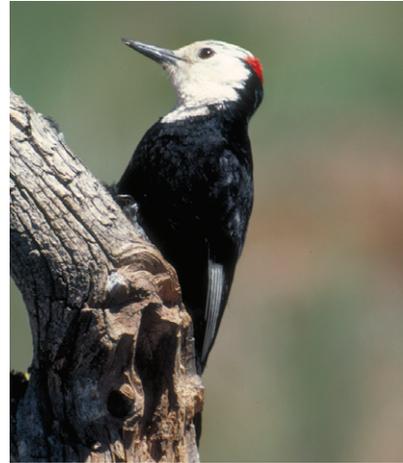
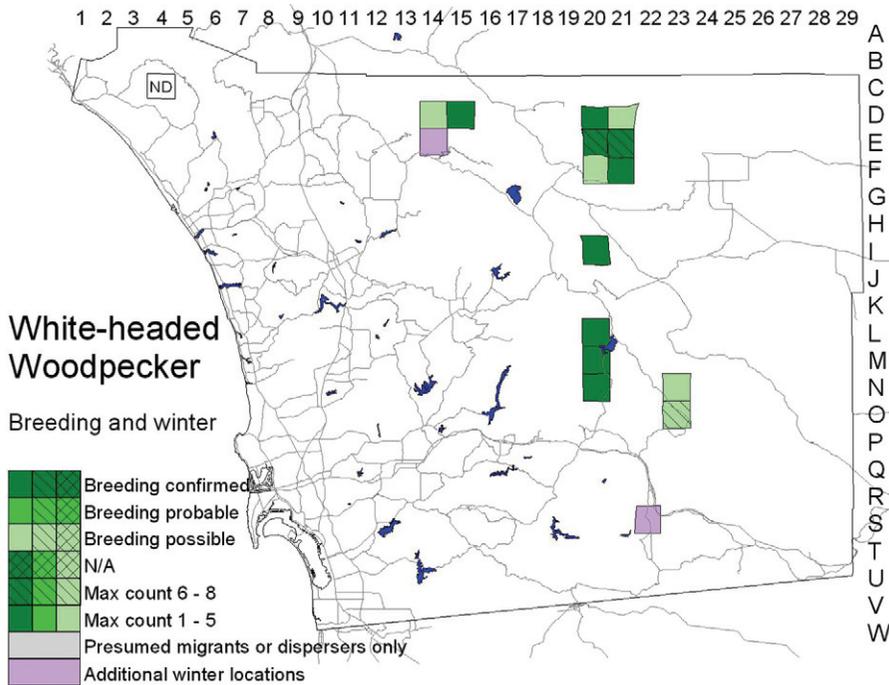


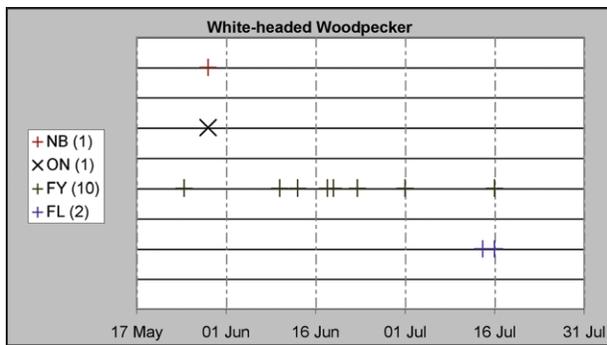
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

to 2001, on 2 June 1998 (P. D. Jorgensen). On Volcan Mountain (I20), the species is rare, occurring above 5300 feet elevation (five, including a family group, 16 July 2001, J. R. Barth). In the Cuyamaca Mountains, the White-headed Woodpecker is uncommon above 5300 feet elevation on North Peak (L20), Middle Peak (M20; maximum daily count three on 2 July 2000, R. E. Webster), and Cuyamaca Peak (M20/N20). In the Laguna Mountains,



Winter: The White-headed Woodpecker is essentially sedentary, seen in winter in the same places in much the same numbers as during the breeding season. During the atlas period our highest winter count was of five on Hot Springs Mountain (E21) 11 December 1999 (K. L. Weaver, C. R. Mahrtdt). The addition of atlas square E14 as a winter location resulted from one bird seen at Observatory Campground, just 1.2 miles southwest of the Palomar Observatory, 24 February 1999 (G. L. Rogers). The only winter record from the Laguna Mountains during the atlas period was of one at the north end of Big Laguna Lake (O23) 6 December 1999 (D. S. Cooper).

Of California's high-mountain birds, the White-headed Woodpecker is one of the least



inclined to vagrancy. San Diego County's only winter records more than about 2 miles from breeding localities are of one at Ramona (K15) 20 November 1955 (AFN 10:58, 1956) and one male in planted pines at the Cottonwood Fire Station, at 3080 feet elevation northeast of Lake Morena (S22), 27 February 2000 (R. Breisch). The last made the species' southernmost record ever. The winter of 1955-56 was an invasion year for several species of mountain birds, but that of 1999-2000 was not.

the White-headed Woodpecker is rare and confined to the vicinity of Al Bahr Shrine Camp (O23); the highest number reported there, seven on 9 and 10 June 2001, was spread over two days so may have entailed some double counting (C. G. Edwards). One on 4 June 2001 along the trail to Garnet Peak about 1.4 miles north-northwest of Al Bahr Shrine Camp (N23; K. J. Winter) was the most distant from that site.

Nesting: Like other woodpeckers, the White-headed excavates its own nest hole, usually in a dead snag. A pair on Hot Springs Mountain (F21) was excavating a nest cavity 29 May 1999 (J. M. and B. Hargrove). Atlas observers noted the birds carrying food items from 25 May to 16 July. These dates suggest egg laying at least from mid May to early June, well within the range of 24 April-16 June for 53 California egg sets given by Bent (1939).

Conservation: San Diego County's small population of the White-headed Woodpecker may be decreasing slowly. My count of 13 on Hot Springs Mountain 23-24 June 1980 (Unitt 1981) was not equaled from 1997 to 2002. During the atlas period the species was reported less frequently and from fewer locations on Palomar Mountain than before 1980. We did not find it at William Heise County Park (K20), where it occurred in the 1970s (Unitt 1984). The woodpecker's habitat in San Diego County covers under 4 square miles on Hot Springs Mountain, less in the other ranges. Thus it is vulnerable to factors like extended droughts, forest fires, and irruptions of bark beetles killing pine trees. Logging, silviculture, and fire suppression are thought responsible for the White-headed Woodpecker's decline in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho (Garrett et al. 1996).

Taxonomy: White-headed Woodpeckers in San Diego County belong to the large-billed subspecies *P. a. gravirostris* Grinnell, 1902.