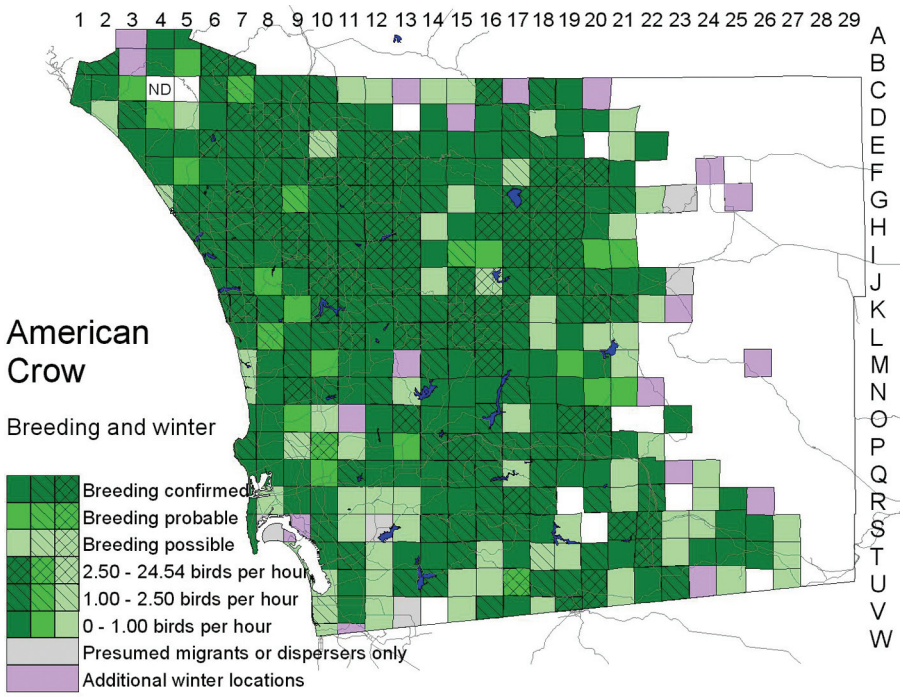
American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*

No change among San Diego birds has been more striking than the proliferation of the American Crow. Until the mid 1980s the species ranged no farther south along the coast than Carlsbad, no nearer the coast in metropolitan San Diego than El Cajon. Then it surged south and west, spreading over the coastal lowland. By the new millennium it was abundant in many areas where it was absent only 15 years earlier. Primitively the crow occurred in oak and riparian woodland near grassland; now orchards, eucalyptus groves, and cities support large numbers.

Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Breeding distribution: The American Crow now occurs almost throughout the coastal slope of San Diego County, most abundantly in the inland valleys of the county's northern half. Concentrations during the breeding season are as large as 200 at Lake Hodges (K10) 9 March 1999 (R. L. Barber), and 220 northeast of Ramona (K15) 26 April 1999 (M. and. B. McIntosh). The crow is abundant locally south to the Mexican border (up to 138 at Potrero, U20, 26 June 1999, R. and S. L. Breisch). The eastern margin of the range follows that of oak woodland closely, except that the species occurs uncommonly in San Felipe Valley down to Scissors Crossing (J22; up to nine on 3 June 2002, J. R. Barth; fledgling on 13 July 2001, P. Unitt). The crow is uncommon and local in montane coniferous forest and absent from sage scrub and chaparral. Its breeding

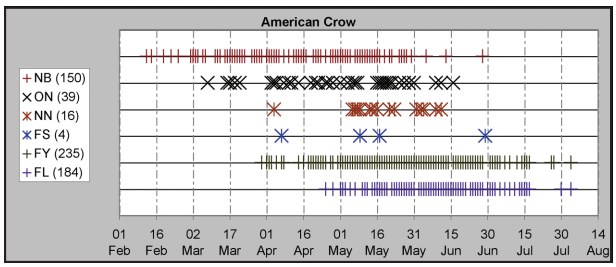


range has now extended south along the coast to Point Loma (S7; birds seen carrying nest material repeatedly in 1997, J. C. Worley) and Otay Valley (V11; fledgling on 26 June 1999, P. Unitt), probably to the Tijuana River valley (V10/W10; up to 30 on 18 June 1997, C. G. Edwards).

Nesting: American Crows nest in the crowns of trees with dense foliage. In San Diego County, coast live oaks are the traditional nest site; now the birds also make much use of palms, pines, Italian cypress, and especially eucalyptus. In groves of such trees, crows nest colonially, as they do elsewhere in California (Verbeek and Caffrey 2002).

Thirty-five egg sets collected in San Diego County from 1888 to 1962 range in date from 24 March to 18 May, and 112 from throughout California range from 21 March to 12 June. But, on the basis of an incubation period of 18 days, our observations from 1997 to 2001 suggest egg laying from the second week of March to mid May, with records of nest building as early as 12 February, nestlings being fed as early as 30 March, and fledglings as early as 25 April. In Los Angeles, Verbeek and Caffrey (2002) reported egg laying beginning 17 March.

Winter: In San Diego County the American Crow is nonmigratory, and its distribution in winter is similar to that in spring and summer. But in winter the birds gather into even larger flocks and roosts. Probably the largest of these in San Diego County is at the east end of Lake Hodges (K11), where counts range up to 1800 on 1 December 1998 (E. C. Hall). Wintering crows are already abundant in areas the species has only recently colonized, especially Bonita and eastern National City (T11), with up to 800 on 16 December 2000 (G. C. Hazard) and possibly 4000 on 15 December 2001 (D. W. Aguillard).



The American Crow is a rare winter visitor to the Anza–Borrego Desert east of its breeding range with at least 15 records, eight during the atlas period. Some of these are of small flocks, of up to six in Earthquake Valley (K23) 17 February 2001 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan) and five in Borrego Springs (F24) 17 December 2000 (J. York).

Conservation: The crow's primitive distribution paralleled that of other oak woodland birds whose range retracts inland from north to south, though it was always common in riparian woodland without oaks in northwestern San Diego County. In many of the areas where it occurred historically the population increased: from 1975 to 1979 the Oceanside Christmas bird count averaged 253 crows; from 1997 to 2001 it averaged 1031. From 1985 to 1989 the Escondido count averaged 571; from 1997 to 2001 it averaged 2161. On the San Diego count before 1984 the crow was irregular, occurring only at the eastern margin of the circle; it was regular in small to moderate numbers from 1985 through 1995 and then increased rapidly. Yet there has been no significant change in the Lake Henshaw circle where, in contrast to the other circles, there has been little development.

The crow adapted quickly to urbanization in its original range. The mysteries in San Diego County are why the crow took so long to take advantage of new suitable habitat, why the expansion took place at the moment in history when it did, and why the increase was so explosive when it arrived.

Many San Diegans express concern for the survival of other birds in the face of proliferation of a predator on eggs and nestlings. But the effects of the crow's population explosion remain unknown. On the other hand, the American Crow is particularly susceptible to West Nile virus, which appeared in New York City in 1999 and is spreading rapidly across North America; crows have already been decimated in parts of the eastern United States.

Taxonomy: The crow inhabiting southern California is *C. b. hesperis* Ridgway, 1887, the smallest subspecies of the American Crow—if the Northwestern Crow (*C. caurinus*) is in fact a distinct species.