

# Introduction to Birding in San Diego County

## Why San Diego County?

San Diego County has many wonderful and varied habitats. From the sparkling cold Pacific Ocean to the Laguna Mountains to the shimmering hot Anza Borrego Desert, this county offers birders an unparalleled experience. Millions of birds follow the Pacific Flyway as they migrate north and south along the western coast. The county bird list reflects this variety, too, with a remarkable tally of over 500 species, the highest in the United States.

There's something for everyone here, whether you like plying the high seas for pelagics, kicking up the sand as you search for shorebirds, listening to the sounds of the marsh denizens, trekking after elusive quail in the forests, strolls in urban parks, or enjoying a spectacular bloom of desert flowers as you search for sparrows and thrashers.

If you like "Big Days" this is the county for you. Over 150 species is a reasonable goal in any season, and if you have a good push of migrants and are willing to put some miles on your vehicle, you'll be shooting for 200.

The weather is also remarkable here, with an average temperature of 72 degrees Fahrenheit and just 6" of annual rainfall. Winter brings the most moisture and there may be fog along the coast, but more often than not it clears up before the morning is over.

## Seasonal Birding Calendar

- **January** – Look for raptors and first breeders
  - Falcons and accipiters hunt in urban and agricultural areas
  - Anna's, Allen's, and Costa's Hummingbirds perform display flights and Western Screech-Owls and Great Horned Owls call to each other in preparation for breeding
- **February** – Thrashers are singing and breeding
  - This is the best month to find Le Conte's and Crissal Thrashers in Anza Borrego State Park
  - The first Cliff Swallows return and Violet-green Swallows start passing through
- **March** – A fine combination of wintering and migrating birds
  - Waterfowl and raptors head north out of the area

- Spring migrants like Black-chinned Hummingbird, Warbling Vireo, Lucy's Warbler, and Hooded and Bullock's Orioles begin to arrive from the south
- **April** – Peak of migrant and breeding activity
  - Migration usually peaks during the last week of April. Good places to check for flycatchers, vireos, and warblers are Point Loma and the numerous city and county parks
  - Check desert areas like Tamarisk Grove Campground for singing and calling Verdin, Black-tailed Gnatcatchers, Cactus Wren, Phainopepla, Scott's Oriole, and Lawrence's Goldfinch
- **May** – Migration still going strong
  - Continue to check urban parks, green neighborhoods, and riparian zones for warblers and flycatchers
- **June** – Look for eastern vagrants among the breeding birds
  - Early in the month keep an eye out for eastern vagrants (Baltimore Oriole, Northern Parula, and American Redstart are just a few to watch out for) which show up along riparian corridors and in urban green zones
- **July** and early **August** – Shorebirds and hummingbirds come south
  - Look through the large shorebird flocks at the San Diego River estuary next to Robb Field
  - Check flowers and feeders around San Diego and in the mountains for Anna's, Rufous, Allen's, and Black-chinned Hummingbirds
  - First passerine migrants also start heading south
- **Late August** and **September** – Fall migration
  - Look for passerines in riparian areas along the Tijuana River and San Diego parks
  - Shorebirds are still streaming through in good numbers; check for rarities like Curlew Sandpiper and Ruff
  - The first migrant/wintering ducks and geese return to the area
- **October** – Look for vagrants and returning winter residents
  - Keep checking the shorebirds. This is a good time to spot a vagrant Ruff and look for the rare (but regular) Pacific Golden-Plover
  - Red-breasted Sapsucker, Fox Sparrow, rare Clay-colored Sparrow, and other wintering birds return
  - Search for eastern vagrant warblers like American Redstart, Black-throated Green Warbler, and Northern Parula in riparian and urban green zones

- During some years Red-throated Pipit can be found at the Tijuana River Valley sod farm or other grassy areas like Fiesta Island
- Look for western and (rare but regular) eastern orioles: Hooded, Bullock's, Baltimore, and Orchard
- **November**
  - Most wintering loons, grebes, Brant, and other waterfowl have returned
  - Wintering raptors are back; look for Ferruginous Hawk and Prairie Falcon in the Ramona Grasslands Preserve west of Ramona
  - Wintering sparrows are back; look for Golden-crowned Sparrows at Point Loma and elsewhere in coastal brush
- **December** – another opportunity to search for rare northern visitors
  - Check for rare gulls along the coast
  - Look for unusual or rare waterfowl like Long-tailed Duck, Harlequin Duck, Black and White-winged Scoters, and Barrow's Goldeneye
  - Check Fiesta Island and other large grassy patches for wintering longspurs

## Target Birding in San Diego County

Visitors to a new area often wish to know where and when they can find a particular species. For example, where can I find that Tricolored Blackbird or the California Gnatcatcher, and when is the best time to look for them?

The chart below recommends likely locations and seasons to find some of the more sought-after California target species. These are by no means the only spots you can find the indicated species, just some of the better-known areas. These birds are in American Ornithological Union (A.O.U.) 7th Edition order, 56th supplement, from July 2015.

Status codes are often a mystery, and depend on all sorts of variables, such as weather, birder's experience level, time of day, and the number of pets or people in the area. Nonetheless, they do give you some idea on how likely you are to see a particular bird if everything goes well. The codes I use are:

**C** – Common, usually found 3 out of every 4 visits

**U** – Uncommon, usually located only 1 out of every 4 visits

**R** – Rare, usually not seen, and may be absent some years

V – Vagrant, does not regularly occur here; often a lost “visitor” from Mexico or the eastern United States—but still, keep an eye out for it!

<b>SPECIES</b>	<b>GOOD LOCATION(S)</b>	<b>SEASON</b>	<b>STATUS</b>
Wood Duck	Lindo Lake County Park	all year	C
All scoter species	Imperial Beach Pier	winter	R-C
Mountain Quail	- Laguna Recreation Area - Kitchen Creek Road	spring	U
California Quail	Jacumba	summer	C
Red-throated Loon	Quivira Basin	winter	U
Black-vented Shearwater	La Jolla Cove	winter	C
Brandt's Cormorant	- La Jolla Cove - Sunset Cliffs	all year	C
Pelagic Cormorant	Point Loma	winter	U
Little Blue Heron	San Diego River Estuary	all year	C
Reddish Egret	Imperial Beach Salt Works	all year	U
Yellow-crowned Night Heron	Imperial Beach Sports Complex	spring	C
Red-shouldered Hawk	- Foothills - Laguna Mountains	all year	C
Ferruginous Hawk	Ramona Grasslands Preserve	winter	U
Ridgway's Rail	- Tijuana Slough NWR - San Elijo Lagoon	spring	C
Black Oystercatcher	Cabrillo National Monument	winter	R
Pacific Golden-Plover	Tijuana Slough NWR		R
Snowy Plover	- Tijuana Slough NWR (breeding) - San Diego River Estuary	summer winter	U
Wandering Tattler	- La Jolla Cove - Sunset Cliffs	winter	C
Black Turnstone	- Cabrillo Nat. Monument - La Jolla Cove	winter	C
Red Knot	San Diego River Estuary	winter	U
Surfbird	- La Jolla Cove - Sunset Cliffs	winter	C
Heermann's Gull	- La Jolla Cove - Sunset Cliffs	all year	C
Western Gull	- La Jolla Cove - Sunset Cliffs	all year	C
Glaucous-winged Gull	- San Diego River Estuary - Chula Vista Bayfront Park	winter	C

<b>SPECIES</b>	<b>GOOD LOCATION(S)</b>	<b>SEASON</b>	<b>STATUS</b>
Least Tern	San Diego Bay	summer	C
Royal Tern	San Diego River Estuary	winter	U
Elegant Tern	San Diego River Estuary	summer	C
Black Skimmer	San Diego River Estuary	summer	C
Burrowing Owl	San Diego River Estuary	all year	U
Spotted Owl	William Heise County Park	spring	U
Northern Saw-whet Owl	Laguna Mountains	spring	R
Vaux's Swift	San Elijo Lagoon	spring	U
Anna's Hummingbird	San Elijo Lagoon	all year	C
Costa's Hummingbird	Anza Borrego State Park	early spring	U
Rufous Hummingbird	San Elijo Lagoon	late summer	U
Allen's Hummingbird	San Elijo Lagoon	all year	U
Acorn Woodpecker	Laguna Recreation Area	all year	C
Red-breasted Sapsucker	- Lindo Lake County Park - Cuyamaca Rancho State Park	winter	U
Ladder-backed Woodpecker	Anza Borrego State Park	spring	U
Nuttall's Woodpecker	- Cuyamaca Rancho State Park - San Elijo Lagoon	all year	C
White-headed Woodpecker	- Cuyamaca Rancho State Park - Palomar Mountain	all year	R
Peregrine Falcon	San Elijo Lagoon	winter	U
Olive-sided Flycatcher	Laguna Mountains	spring	U
Cassin's Kingbird	- Tecolote Canyon Natural Park - Robb Field	winter	U
Bell's Vireo	Tijuana Valley	spring	C
Gray Vireo	Buckman Springs	spring	U
Cassin's Vireo	Palomar Mountain State Park	spring	U
Violet-green Swallow	Laguna Mountains	summer	C
Oak Titmouse	Laguna Mountains	all year	C
Pygmy Nuthatch	Laguna Mountains	all year	C
Canyon Wren	Buckman Springs	spring (singing)	U
Cactus Wren	Anza Borrego State Park	all year	C
California Gnatcatcher	San Elijo Lagoon	spring	C

SPECIES	GOOD LOCATION(S)	SEASON	STATUS
Wrentit	Cabrillo National Monument	all year	C
Western Bluebird	Laguna Recreation Area	winter	U
California Thrasher	Jacumba	all year	C
Le Conte's Thrasher	Anza Borrego	spring	R
Phainopepla	Jacumba	spring	C
Longspurs	Mission Bay Park, Fiesta Island	winter	V
Grace's Warbler	Point Loma	winter	V
Northern Waterthrush	Dairy Mart Ponds	winter	V
Painted Redstart	Point Loma	winter	V
Rufous-crowned Sparrow	- Mission Trails Regional Park - Kitchen Creek Road	spring	U
California Towhee	Point Loma	all year	C
Black-chinned Sparrow	Kitchen Creek Campground	spring	C
Black-throated Sparrow	Anza Borrego State Park	spring	C
Nelson's Sparrow	Tijuana Estuary	winter	V
Golden-crowned Sparrow	Point Loma	winter	C
Blue Grosbeak	Dairy Mart Ponds	summer	C
Tricolored Blackbird	Jacumba Pond	spring	C
Scott's Oriole	- Anza Borrego State Park - Jacumba	spring	U
Lawrence's Goldfinch	Kitchen Creek Road	summer	U
Scaly-breasted Munia	Tecolote Natural Canyon Park	summer	C

## Birding in the Desert

Be prepared. Parts of Anza Borrego State Park are remote desert areas without drinking water—take along plenty of water (2 gallons of water per person per day is recommended by many experts). Let someone know your schedule, and realize that there is no cell phone coverage in some of these remote areas. Take a good map with you—the line drawings in this book do not show all roads and may not be exactly to scale. Take the appropriate type of vehicle, and be aware that road conditions can change overnight during heavy rains. If you break down, the best advice is to wait by your vehicle for help.

Summer birding in the desert is best avoided, when daily temperatures often soar above 100° and the birds seem to have disappeared in the shimmering heat waves. Winter is often beautiful, but always be

prepared for cold weather—even snow in the higher portions of San Diego County. Spring is usually beautiful, but even then it can be hot, rainy, or cold. February and March are great for spring wildflowers after a wet winter. April is usually the best time for birding in the desert, with residents breeding and migrants moving through the washes.

Watch out for bushes, trees, and cacti with thorns. Carrying a multi-tool with pliers is wise; it's a good way to remove cactus spines from boots, pant legs, and tender skin.

## Birding on Private Land

Many of the sites listed in this book adjoin private property. Please do not enter these areas without first asking permission from the property owner.

## Birding References

One of the best reference books for San Diego County breeding birds is the *San Diego County Bird Atlas*, by Philip Unitt, 2004, San Diego Natural History Museum.

The San Diego Field Ornithologists meet monthly and promote birding in San Diego County: <http://www.sandiegofieldornithologists.org/>.

The site to check for recent sightings is:

<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/SanDiegoRegionBirding/info>.

You can also find the same information at: <http://birding.aba.org/>, which serves as a clearing house for world-wide rare and unusual bird reports.

Mary Beth Stowe has put together an expansive website with driving routes and hiking trails through her favorite birding locations in San Diego County. The descriptions are accompanied by bird frequency charts compiled from 2003-2008 and a wealth of scenic photos. It's a great resource located at

<http://www.miriameaglemon.com/Birding%20Pages/San%20Diego%20Birding%20Pages/By%20Site/San%20Diego%20Site%20Index.html>

Short descriptions and a map showing the locations of nine South San Diego County parks is available at

[http://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/parks/BrochuresMiscellaneous/South\\_County\\_Parks\\_English\\_Brochure.pdf](http://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/parks/BrochuresMiscellaneous/South_County_Parks_English_Brochure.pdf)

Our website at <http://www.southwestbirders.com/> has trip reports for many of these birding locales and will have updates to the sites listed in this book. If you have suggestions or comments about this guide, please send them to Henry Detwiler at: [henrydetwiler@earthlink.net](mailto:henrydetwiler@earthlink.net)

## Chapter Layout

The chapters are organized by areas radiating out from the city of San Diego, which is the first chapter. The coastal zone is next, and covers important areas like the Tijuana River Valley, La Jolla, and San Elijo Lagoon. Palomar Mountain is next. Following that are sites in southern San Diego County, chiefly the Laguna Mountains. Anza Borrego State Park and the desert communities are the final section.

Each chapter is organized in the same way, with descriptions of the most common habitats, target birds you might wish to search for, a general description of the area, one or more maps of the area with numbers and letters that pinpoint birding locations, descriptions of the birding locations themselves, driving directions, and specific site notes for the area.

Under the **Target Birds** heading will be birds that you are likely to find at this location, depending on the season you visit. *Resident* means the bird is likely to be found at the location year-round, and probably breeds there. *Migration* means the bird is found there during either the northern migration in March, April, or May, or during the southern migration in August, September, or October. *Winter* means the bird winters in the area during the months of November-February.

Under the **Driving Directions** I've tried to be as specific as possible, and get you to the birding location in the most direct fashion. However, take a map and/or GPS and understand that some of the back roads are prone to washouts in storms.

Under the **Site Notes** I've identified specific locations where gas, food, and other services may be available. Please don't take these as endorsements of fine food or excellent service—they are merely mentioned here as a convenience. The information is current as of 2015.

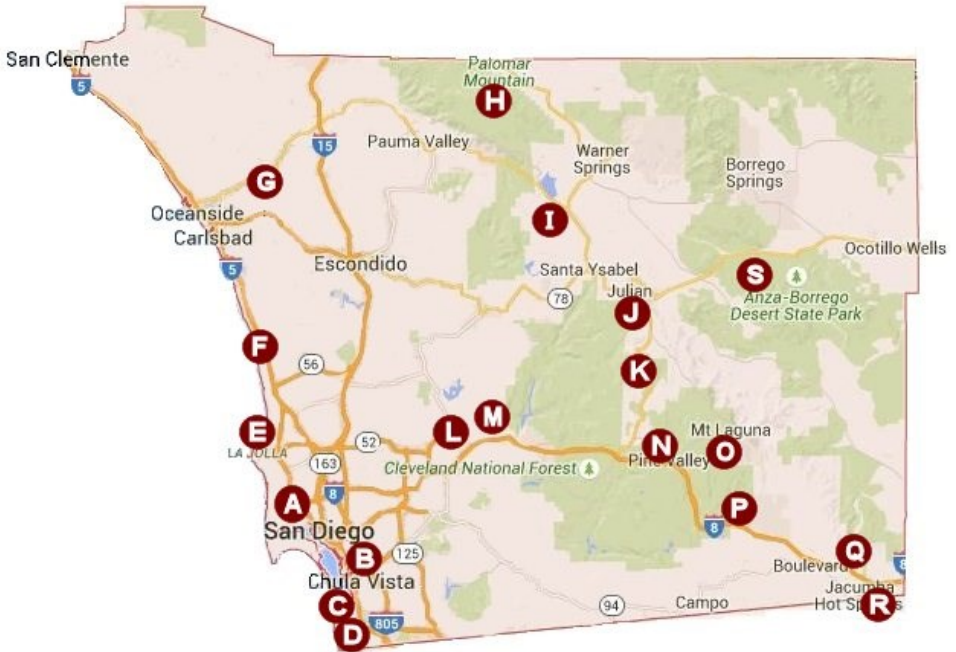
This book focuses on 19 general birding areas, which are only a portion of the good spots in San Diego County. Some of the other very nice birding locations are summarized in the final chapter on miscellaneous birding sites. In future versions of this guide I plan to expand on several of these sites with maps and make them full chapters.

Special thanks to Bob Miller for his contributions in the chapter on the Anza Borrego Desert.



# San Diego County Map and Birding Locations

This basic map of San Diego County shows the relative locations of the birding sites described in this book. The letters match the chapter and site names, and are listed in the Table of Contents. More detailed maps and driving directions to each of these sites are contained within the chapters themselves.



## A. San Diego

- Point Loma
- Cabrillo National Monument
- San Diego Bay
- San Diego Estuary
- Mission Beach – Quivira Basin
- Sunset Cliffs
- Balboa Park
- Tecolote Canyon

## B. Chula Vista Bayfront Park (J Street Mudflats)

## C. Imperial Beach

- Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve
- Tijuana River Mouth
- Imperial Beach Pier
- Imperial Beach Sports Park
- South Bay Salt Works

## D. Tijuana River Valley

- Bird and Butterfly Garden

- Dairy Mart Ponds
- Sod Farm
- E. La Jolla**
- F. San Elijo Lagoon**
  - N. Rios Avenue Trails
  - Visitor Center and Trails
- G. Guajome Regional Park**
- H. Palomar Mountain State Park**
- I. Lake Henshaw and Mesa Grande Road**
- J. Julian Area**
  - Banner Grade
  - William Heise County Park
  - The Bird Watcher
- K. Cuyamaca Rancho State Park**
  - Green Valley
  - Paso Picacho Campground
  - Visitor Center and Museum
  - Stonewall Mine
  - Lake Cuyamaca
- L. Mission Trails Regional Park**
- M. Lindo Lake County Park**
- N. Pine Valley**
- O. Laguna Recreation Area**
  - Sunrise Highway
  - Wooded Hill Trail
  - Agua Dulce Spring
  - Burnt Rancheria Campground
  - Visitor Center
  - Desert View Picnic Area
  - Laguna Campground
- P. Buckman Springs Area**
  - Sheephead Mountain Road
  - Boulder Oaks Campground
  - Lake Morena County Park
- Q. Kitchen Creek Road**
  - Cameron Truck Trail
  - Yellow Rose Spring
  - Cibbets Flats Campground
- R. Jacumba Hot Springs**
- S. Anza Borrego Desert State Park**
  - Barrel Springs
  - Old Mine Road
  - Culp Valley
  - Borrego Valley
  - Tamarisk Grove Campground
  - Vallecito Stage Station County Park
  - Agua Caliente County Park