

LADDER-BACKED WOODPECKERS NEST IN CISMONTANE SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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The Ladder-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides scalaris*) is an uncommon resident of arid regions from California east to Texas and south to Nicaragua (Short 1971, AOU 1998). Although in Baja California the Ladder-backed Woodpecker occurs along the northwest coast at least as far as north as La Bufadora, 15–20 km southwest of Ensenada (Erickson and Howell 2001), its California distribution is transmontane (i.e., inland of the Transverse and Peninsular ranges), extending north to the desert slopes of the southern Sierra Nevada (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Cismontane (coastal slope) breeding has recently been documented in Miller Valley in southeastern San Diego County and from Dameron Valley of north-central San Diego County to Aguanga in adjacent Riverside County; these small valleys support many elements of desert biota (Unitt 2004). Occupied habitats in California typically include desert slopes vegetated with Joshua Tree (*Yucca brevifolia*) or Desert Agave (*Agave deserti*), desert washes and arroyos, riparian oases, and occasionally pinyon–juniper woodland. Ladder-backed Woodpeckers nest in both the live and dead wood of a variety of trees, includ-



Figure 1. Alluvial-fan sage scrub (late pioneer to intermediate stage) used by Ladder-backed Woodpeckers in the Santa Ana Wash.

Photo by Karen Carter

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ing cottonwoods (*Populus* spp.) and willows (*Salix* spp.), in the trunks of the Joshua Tree, or in the dead flowering stalks of other species of yucca or agave (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Lowther 2001, Unitt 2004, McKernan unpubl. data).

We present details of successful nesting of the Ladder-backed Woodpecker at a cismontane site along the Santa Ana River near Redlands, San Bernardino County, California. We also briefly discuss other sightings of this species in this drainage as well as in nearby Cajon Creek.

On 18 May 2000, Willick found an active nest of a Ladder-backed Woodpecker in the stalk of a Chaparral Yucca (*Hesperoyucca whipplei*) at which a female was observed making several visits to feed very advanced nestlings. The nest was on the north side of the main active channel of the Santa Ana River wash, approximately 1 km northeast of the Redlands Municipal Airport runway. The height of the nest cavity was not measured, but Willick noted that the cavity was above eye level and therefore ≥ 2 m above ground. More specific details regarding the nest site were not recorded. Although no male was seen in the area when the nest was found, Willick had observed a male approximately 0.5 km north of the nest on 19 April. This observation represents the first report of nesting by this species in the cismontane portion of San Bernardino County. On 29 May 2000, McKernan observed two fledgling Ladder-backed Woodpeckers and an adult female near the site.

Beginning in the fall of 1999, prior to the discovery of the nest, House had sporadically observed single Ladder-backed Woodpeckers in the Santa Ana wash. On 22 April 2000 we collected an adult male approximately 2 km northeast of the Redlands Municipal Airport (San Bernardino County Museum 56105). The specimen's enlarged testes suggested nesting. House observed adult male and female Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, as well as juveniles, on several occasions during summer 2000 in the riparian corridor and adjacent alluvial-fan sage scrub near Greenspot Road, approximately 1.5 km east of where the specimen was collected. The presence of an adult male in August 2000 suggests that more than one pair was in the area, since the bird collected in April was also an adult male. Although Nuttall's Woodpeckers (*P. nuttallii*) were also present and presumably breeding along the Santa Ana River at Greenspot Road, the plumage of the specimen showed no evidence of hybridization.

During the same period, House also noted Ladder-backed Woodpeckers at two locations along Cajon Creek (a tributary of the Santa Ana River), near Devore. The Cajon Creek sites also support alluvial-fan sage scrub. The first sighting was of two birds approximately 1 km north of Glen Helen Regional Park in Devore, on 28 and 29 October 1999. Approximately 4 km upstream of the 1999 sighting and approximately 2 km northwest of the intersection of interstate highways 15 and 215, two birds were present from 29 February to 2 March 2000. Since the Cajon Creek locations are over 30 km northwest of the Santa Ana River site, we assume that these sightings involved different individuals. It is unknown if the birds nested at either Cajon Creek location. A sighting of a possible Ladder-backed Woodpecker at Glen Helen Regional Park in January 1997 by Dave Goodward (C. McGaugh, pers. comm.) suggests the species was present in the area even earlier. Ladder-backed Woodpeckers were still present in both Cajon Creek, and along the Santa Ana River throughout 2001. The sighting of a male in Devore in February 2003 (C. McGaugh, pers. comm.) and a male near the confluence of the Santa Ana River and Mill Creek on 10 October 2007 (J. Dunn pers. comm.) suggests a continued presence in both areas.

The Ladder-backed Woodpeckers in cismontane San Bernardino County were found in alluvial-fan sage scrub, a plant community unique to southern California and now limited to isolated remnants as a result of urbanization and flood-control projects. Alluvial-fan sage scrub supports a distinctive combination of plants of both chaparral and coastal sage scrub (Smith 1980) and of both coastal and desert affinities. The dominant shrubs at the Santa Ana River locale included Brittlebush (*Encelia farinosa*), Eastern Mojave Buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum* var. *foliolosum*),

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California Broomsage (*Lepidospartum squamatum*), Chaparral Yucca, Coastal Pricklypear (*Opuntia littoralis*), and California Cholla (*Cylindropuntia californica*). A narrow corridor of riparian woodland dominated by Goodding's Willow (*Salix gooddingii*), Coyotebrush (*Baccharis pilularis*), and Fremont Cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*) is present along an unnamed drainage near the confluence of the river and Mill Creek.

Older cismontane records of the Ladder-backed Woodpecker are from Riverside County, near Riverside, where one was collected in April 1895 (Heller 1901), and near Valle Vista in the San Jacinto Valley (six or seven birds, 29 August–5 September 1908) (Grinnell and Swarth 1913). More recent sightings have been west of San Geronio Pass in San Timoteo Canyon, Riverside County (22 August 1979; Garrett and Dunn 1981), Santa Clara River in Acton, Los Angeles County (24 February 1998; M. C. Long, pers. comm.) and in the Tijuana River valley, San Diego County (9 October 1974; Garrett and Dunn 1981). The Valle Vista records apparently represented a resident population (Unitt pers. comm.), but the other records likely represent wanderers. Searches of the last remnant of alluvial-fan scrub along the San Jacinto River on the northeast margin of Valle Vista on 13 February 2008 by Lori Hargrove and Philip Unitt, on 9 August 2008 by Kenneth L. Weaver, and 8–10 September 2008 by Unitt (pers. comm.) did not reveal any Ladder-backed Woodpeckers, so that population is likely extirpated.

In California, the Ladder-backed Woodpecker and Nuttall's Woodpecker are almost completely allopatric (Short 1971). In some areas of southern California they breed within a few kilometers of each other, and they are sympatric in the Walker Pass area of Kern County, in Morongo Valley, San Bernardino County (Short 1971), locally on the desert slope of San Diego County (Unitt 2004), and in the Antelope Valley (westernmost Mojave Desert), where the latter species has expanded its range into ranchyards (Los Angeles County Breeding Bird Atlas data, Los Angeles Audubon Society). Although the differing habitat preferences result in spatial isolation in some areas where the species' ranges overlap, hybridization occurs regularly in Walker Pass and Morongo Valley (Short 1971).

On the basis of exhaustive ornithological investigations of this locality and other reaches of the Santa Ana River before 1997, we consider the occurrence of the Ladder-backed Woodpecker in the Santa Ana River Wash a recent colonization. The San Bernardino County Museum had surveyed the birds of this area annually from 1982 and 1994 without finding the Ladder-backed Woodpecker. Furthermore, the location is within the circle of the Redlands Christmas Bird Count, which has been conducted since 1962 (E. A. Cardiff pers. comm.). Although the degree of spatial and temporal overlap in habitat use by the Ladder-backed and Nuttall's Woodpeckers in these areas is unknown, both species were observed using the same riparian areas at least some of the time. The presence of Ladder-backed Woodpeckers along the Santa Ana River and Cajon Creek over a period of several years, along with successful nesting, suggests the possibility of a new (at least temporary) area of sympatry with Nuttall's and presumably Downy (*P. pubescens*) Woodpeckers. Observers visiting these areas should be aware of the potential presence of all three species, as well as possible hybrids. Future documentation of Ladder-backed Woodpeckers or possible hybrids in these areas will be invaluable in determining the degree of sympatry and hybridization that may be occurring in southern California.

We thank Jon Dunn, Kimball Garrett, Matt Heindel, Chet McLaugh, Kathy Molina, and Michael Patten for their very helpful and kind comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript. We also thank Garrett and Mickey Long for the use of unpublished data.

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Accepted 19 April 2009