

### **Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens***

San Diego County marks the northern limit of the Reddish Egret's usual range along the Pacific coast. Though the species does not (yet) nest here, two or three occur in the county's coastal wetlands each year as nonbreeding visitors. Though rare, the Reddish Egret calls attention to itself by its animated behavior, dashing about erratically in shallow water with wings spread, ready to nab any small fish its gyrations may startle.

**Winter:** The Reddish Egret has been seen in most of San Diego County's coastal wetlands but is considerably

more frequent in the San Diego area than in the north county lagoons. Over the final quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century an average of between two and three reached San Diego County each year. The exact number is often impossible to determine, as the birds move up and down the coast. The Reddish Egret is usually seen singly (though often near other foraging herons); during the atlas period two were noted at the south end of San Diego Bay (V10) 14 May 2000 (Y. Ikegaya; NAB 54:326, 2000) and in the San Diego River flood-control channel (R7/R8) 26 December 2001–7 February 2002 (M. Billings, NAB 56:223, 2002).

Sites along the coast of northern San Diego County where the Reddish Egret has been found are Los

Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7; two from 6 to 12 September 1968, AFN 23:107, 1969; one from 9 to 23 January 2000, D. K. Adams), the San Dieguito River estuary (M7; 8–24 October 1990, G. Deeks, Heindel and Garrett 1995; 16–19 October 1991, J. O’Brien, Patten et al. 1995b; 25 September 1999–30 January 2000, B. Foster, R. T. Patton, NAB 54:104, 220, 2000), San Elijo Lagoon (29 September 1968 and 13 December 1969, King et al. 1987; 19 May 1991, R. T. Patton, Heindel and Garrett 1995; 11–24 September 2000, D. Trissel, McKee and Erickson 2002), Batiquitos Lagoon (11–18 September 1962, King et al. 1987; 6 September–12 December 2001, G. C. Hazard, M. Baumgartel, NAB 56:223, 2002), and the Santa Margarita River estuary (17 April–3 May 1981, L. Salata, Langham 1991; 25 August 2001, B. Foster).

**Migration:** The Reddish Egret has been seen in San Diego County in every month of the year, but its frequency peaks in October and November with the dispersal of immatures. Yet the largest number recorded, seven at the south end of San Diego Bay, was seen on 6 May 1990 (G. McCaskie; Patten and Erickson 1994). The Reddish Egret is least frequent in June and July, with only about five records for each of those months.

Though the Reddish Egret has wandered on several occasions from the Gulf of California to the Salton Sea (Patten et al. 2003), in coastal southern California it sticks to the coastal wetlands almost exclusively. Except for four birds that moved a short distance inland in the Tijuana River valley, the only well-supported inland record for San Diego County is of an immature found in a weakened condition at a backyard goldfish pond along Tobiasson Road in Poway (M11) 6 September 2002 (SDNHM 50658).

**Conservation:** The numbers of the Reddish Egret reaching San Diego County appear to be on a gradual increase.



Photo by Kenneth Z. Kurland

From the time of the first report in 1931 (Huey 1931b) through the early 1970s the species was casual, but since 1980 not a year has passed without at least one. The increase is paralleled by a northward extension of the species’ breeding range in Baja California. In 1999 two pairs colonized Islas Todos Santos off Ensenada (Palacios and Mellink 2000). Some day the Reddish Egret may join some of the mixed-species heronries around San Diego.

**Taxonomy:** Reddish Egrets in California have been ascribed to the west Mexican subspecies *E. r. dickeyi* (van Rossem, 1926), adults of which are said to have a head and neck darker than in the nominate eastern subspecies. Both specimens from San Diego County (the one from Poway and one from the Tijuana River estuary 23 October 1963, SDNHM 30757, McCaskie 1964) are immatures, however, so cannot be identified.

