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EXPANSION OF THE BREEDING RANGE OF THE ACORN WOODPECKER EAST OF THE SIERRA NEVADA, CALIFORNIA

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Resident and breeding Acorn Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes formicivorus*) were first found on the east side of the Sierra Nevada in Lassen County, California, in 1959 (McKeever and Adams 1960). Currently, that area is the only published site of breeding and residence of this species in the eastern Sierra. In Inyo County, California, approximately 416 km south of Lassen County, the Acorn Woodpecker has been considered a regular vagrant and possible resident (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Small 1994), but long-term residence and breeding have never been confirmed. Here we provide evidence of Acorn Woodpecker residence in native oak (*Quercus*) habitats near Independence, Inyo County, as well as the first county breeding records for the species.

Inyo County is separated by the Sierra Nevada from most of California's native oak populations and the Acorn Woodpecker populations closely associated with those oaks. However, stands of three native oak species, the Black Oak (*Q. kelloggii*), the Interior Live Oak (*Q. wislizenii*), and the Canyon Live Oak (*Q. chrysolepis*), thrive along streams and at springs on the east face of the Sierra Nevada from north of Independence at Division Creek to Inyo County's southern border.

Grinnell and Miller (1944) reported what was then "the only trans-Sierra record" of one female Acorn Woodpecker "from Carroll Creek at 5500 feet, near Lone

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Pine, Inyo County, September 8 [1911]." Garrett and Dunn (1981) described the Acorn Woodpecker as "apparently regular in small numbers in winter at the Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery near Independence INY, and . . . possibly resident here." Small (1994) agreed that Acorn Woodpeckers "may be resident in a small isolated grove of live oaks at the Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery near Independence." Koenig et al. (1995) considered the Acorn Woodpecker to be absent "from all eastern deserts" of California, but also a "good colonizer, regularly found outside its normal range," including "near Independence, Inyo Co., CA." The most recent American Ornithologists' Union Checklist (1998) acknowledges the Lassen County population of Acorn Woodpeckers but does not mention the Inyo County population.

There are 34 records (in addition to those we report here) throughout Inyo County from 8 September 1911 through 29 April 2004 (T. and J. Heindel pers. comm.). Sixteen of these records are from oak woodlands on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada, mostly near Independence. Fifteen records are of single birds at or near desert oases east of Big Pine and in the area of Death Valley during the months of May/June and September/October. Two records are from the city park in Bishop. One unusual sighting is from the summit of Mt. Barnard (4264 m), 11 September 2003.

From January 2002 through August 2003 we searched for Acorn Woodpeckers near Independence, within the limited distribution of the Black Oak and Interior Live Oak, at elevations of approximately 1220 to 1950 m. We returned regularly to the locations where we found Acorn Woodpeckers, seeking proof of breeding and continuous residence.

At Seven Pines (9 km west of Independence) a family group of five or six adult Acorn Woodpeckers remained in a mixed stand of Black Oak and Jeffrey Pine (*Pinus jeffreyi*) throughout our observation period. There we observed adult males and females feeding nestlings at a nest cavity in a Black Oak on 28 May 2002 and one or two fledged juveniles on 8 June 2002. This group nested a second time in 2002, and we saw adults feeding nestlings at the same cavity on 15 July, with at least one nestling fledging on 3 August. These woodpeckers stored Black Oak acorns in mature Jeffrey Pines, near their nest tree. During the winter of 2002–03, we often saw these birds flycatching from perches high in the Jeffrey Pines. The Seven Pines group nested again in 2003: we observed a nestling at a cavity in a different Black Oak on 21 June and a fledged juvenile on 9 August.

At Tub Springs (2 km north of Seven Pines), we found three adult Acorn Woodpeckers on 20 July 2002 and observed one or more adults feeding an unknown number of vocal nestlings on 3 August 2002. The nest cavity was in a Black Oak trunk.

In summer 2002 we surveyed a stand of Interior Live Oak mixed with other native and exotic trees on private property 2 km east of the Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery. Acorn Woodpeckers were present from our first day of observation on 21 July until the end of our study period over one year later. We observed as many as seven adult Acorn Woodpeckers and ultimately found two nests separated by about 150 m. At one nest, a cavity in a Siberian Elm (*Ulmus pumila*), we saw a nestling on 29 June 2003 and a fledged juvenile on 6 July 2003. At the other, excavated in a native Red Willow (*Salix laevigata*), we saw adults feeding a nestling on 6 July 2003. Woodpeckers at both these nests stored acorns in nearby Black Locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) trees.

Acorn Woodpeckers were usually present in the Interior Live Oaks and exotic trees at the Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery. We found eleven adults there on 14 April 2002. Although we witnessed breeding behavior there, including copulation and cavity excavation, we never found nestlings or fledglings and thus were unable to confirm successful breeding. At the hatchery, as at the site 2 km to the east, the woodpeckers stored acorns in Black Locust trees.

In the summer of 2003, we also observed two or more adult Acorn Woodpeckers in appropriate breeding habitat at McGann Springs (7.5 km north of Seven Pines), Charley Canyon (5.5 km north of Seven Pines), Sardine Springs (3 km north of Seven

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Pines), a private residence 1 km east of the Mt. Whitney Hatchery, and the Bright Ranch (2 km west of the hatchery). The woodpeckers had stored acorns in Black Oak trees at McGann Springs, Sardine Springs, and Bright Ranch.

During our study, Acorn Woodpeckers were well distributed in the range of native Black Oak and Interior Live Oak trees near Independence, Inyo County. They were present throughout the year, bred successfully, and stored acorns for winter consumption.

Elsewhere in the eastern Sierra, Acorn Woodpeckers occupy an extensive isolated stand of Black Oak in the area of Janesville and Susanville, Lassen County (McKeever and Adams 1960). Although there are no current population estimates or surveys of Acorn Woodpeckers for this area, a small part of the oak stand is included in the Honey Lake Christmas Bird Count circle. Acorn Woodpeckers are recorded annually on that count, with a high of 34 birds observed. On the basis of these data, the population in the entire stand could be well into the hundreds (T. Manolis pers. comm.).

Ornithologists in Kern County report no known breeding populations of the Acorn Woodpecker on the east side of the Sierra in Kern and southwestern Inyo counties (S. Steele, M. Heindel, K. Levinson, pers. comm.). Susan Steele (pers. comm.), however, found Acorn Woodpeckers in Indian Wells Canyon, Kern County, in January, March, May, and June 2002, and in August 2003. On 3 March 2002, four birds were working on storage holes in a dead pine tree. The granary contained about 100 acorns. Indian Wells Canyon, on the east slope of the Sierra Nevada near Inyokern, Kern County, hosts a stand of the Canyon Live Oak.

Confirmation of breeding Acorn Woodpeckers in Inyo County, combined with known and potential breeding in Lassen and Kern counties, indicates that this oak-woodland species has colonized isolated oak woodlands along the eastern base of the Sierra Nevada, well outside the species' core range.

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