

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

SORA

Porzana carolina

Family: RALLIDAE
B146

Order: GRUIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

In summer, fairly common and widespread in fresh emergent wetlands of northern California. It breeds throughout the San Francisco Bay area, north into Sonoma and Napa cos., throughout the Central Valley, and east of the Cascade-Sierra Nevada crest south at least to Mono Lake (Grinnell and Miller 1944). It probably breeds regularly in southern California mountains, but the only recent breeding record is from Fain Springs in the San Bernardino Mts. Historical nesting localities include Big Bear Lake in the San Bernardino Mts. and the Owens Valley, Inyo Co. There are a few summer records from the Salton Sea district and along the coastal lowlands, but recent nesting there has not been confirmed (Garrett and Dunn 1981). In winter, northern and high-elevation populations migrate southward. Widespread along the southern California coast in winter, as well as at the Salton Sea and the Colorado River, and visitors occasionally reach the Channel Islands (Garrett and Dunn 1981). There are historical, northern coast wintering records (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Although absent from the immediate coast in summer (McCaskie et al. 1979), visits saline emergent wetlands in the nonbreeding season. Most common rail in California and North America, but numbers have been reduced by loss of wetlands.

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Primarily forages on the ground in dense, emergent vegetation, but less commonly walks on mudflats in marsh openings, wades into water, or swims. In Iowa, Horak (1970) reported a diet of 73% seeds (by weight), largely of *Polygonum*, sedges, foxtail grasses, and duckweed. During spring and summer, also eats many small mollusks and aquatic insects (Terres 1980).

Cover: Emergent vegetation such as grasses, sedges, cattails, or rushes needed for cover.

Reproduction: Nests in cattails, grasses, sedges, and rushes in emergent wetlands (small or large), where water is shallow and food is abundant (Johnsgard 1975). Nest usually constructed a few inches above the water and secured to surrounding grasses or reeds. Frequently there is a runway of grasses along the last meter to the nest (Eckert and Karalus 1981). Some nests are built on raised tussocks by the water's edge (Harrison 1978). Nest usually sheltered from above by overhanging vegetation.

Water: No additional data found.

Pattern: Preferred habitats include fresh emergent wetlands, wet meadows, and vegetated margins of sloughs (Grinnell and Miller 1944). In fall, winter, and early spring, this rail also occurs in saline emergent wetlands.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Active yearlong. Secretive habits; is heard much more often than seen. It calls most often at night, but also in daylight. Activity pattern and life history poorly known. Primarily migrates at night (Cogswell 1977).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Some individuals migrate up to 4800 km (3000 mi), each way, between breeding and wintering grounds -- one of the longest migrations in the family (Bent 1926). Mostly resident yearlong in central California, but migrates from east of Cascade-Sierra Nevada crest in winter. A winter visitor to southern California, but migrates in summer, except for a few that may breed in southern mountains.

Home Range: Hay (1977) reported 2 territories in a 9.3 ha (23 ac) plot along the Santa Ana River in Riverside Co., which was half marsh and half riparian. Sometimes found close together in non-breeding seasons; e.g., 43 were counted 50-75 m (164-246 ft) apart along a ditch in Colusa Co., March 11, 1955 (Cogswell and Pray 1955).

Territory: Kaufman (1971) described territorial behavior, but gave no sizes. Glahn's (1974) rough sketch map of 6 territories suggested areas of 0.16-0.24 ha (0.4-0.6 ac), with 12 m (39 ft) separating the closest nests. Pospichal and Marshall (1954) found 46 nests averaging 9.4 m (31 ft) apart.

Reproduction: Begins nesting in late April and finishes by mid-August. Monogamous, as other rails (Johnsgard 1975). Single-brooded; clutch size 8-12 eggs (Harrison 1978). Both parents incubate eggs for 14 days, or more (Bent 1926), and help tend young. Young leave nest 1-2 days after hatching, but may return at night. Young fly at about 36 days (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Occurs in many localities with Virginia rail. Berger (1951) recorded the 2 species nesting in proximity on a 0.2 ha (0.5 ac) site in Michigan. Competitive interactions between the 2 species not described; but the more vegetarian diet of the sora (except in breeding period) probably reduces competition. Shallow emergent wetlands are critical. Heavy grazing and wetland reclamation are detrimental.

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