

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

SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER

Limnodromus griseus

Family: SCOLOPACIDAE
B196

Order: CHARADRIIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: C. Swarth
Reviewed by: L. Mewaldt
Edited by: R. Duke

DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Common to abundant during spring (late March to mid-May) and fall (mid-July to October) migration along the entire coast of California, where it typically occurs on intertidal mudflats of estuarine habitats (Cogswell 1977, Garrett and Dunn 1981). In winter, rare to uncommon along the north coast, and along much of central and southern coastal California. May be abundant on San Francisco, Morro, Newport, and San Diego bays (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Generally rare to uncommon in the Central Valley, mountain, Great Basin, and southeastern desert regions during migration (McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981). At the Salton Sea, however, common during fall and spring migration (Garrett and Dunn 1981). It is a rare migrant on the Channel Islands. The largest numbers in central coastal California occur from late March to early April (Page et al. 1979). A few stragglers remain in California through summer (Cogswell 1977). In winter, occurs almost exclusively in estuarine habitats; at other seasons may frequent the borders of shallow ponds and lakes or irrigated fields. Generally much more common in saltwater habitats than is the long-billed dowitcher (Pitelka 1950). Breeds in subarctic regions of southern Alaska and central Canada (Johnsgard 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Forages on soft mud substrates by probing deeply and rapidly with perpendicular strokes of the bill. In shallow water the entire head may be immersed. Although probing motions are quick, moves along at a slow, measured pace. Typical prey in estuarine mudflat habitats include small mollusks, crustaceans, marine worms, and some vegetative material. A variety of insects also is taken (Bent 1927, Palmer 1967). On a southern California estuarine mudflat, ate mostly various polychaete worms, small gastropods, fly larvae, and mud-burrowing goby fish (Reeder 1951).

Cover: Requires undisturbed areas above high tide for roosting during the high tide period.

Reproduction: Breeds in boggy muskeg of Alaska and central Canada. The nest is a shallow depression lined with dry grasses, leaves, or small twigs. Nest is placed very close to water on moss or sedge and may be near the base of a dwarf birch or other small tree (Palmer 1967, Harrison 1978).

Water: No additional data found.

Pattern: In nonbreeding season in California, intertidal, estuarine mudflats are the most important habitat used.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Occurs in much of California as a migrant; only winters in numbers on a few of the larger estuaries. The major fall migration typically occurs 1 mo to 6 wk before that of the morphologically similar long-billed dowitcher (McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

Home Range: In Alberta, Canada, 4 nests were at least 45 m (150 ft) apart 1 yr, but the following season, 4 nests were found in a clearing 18 x 7 m (60 x 25 ft). Two of these more closely-spaced nests were only 1 m (3 ft) apart (Bannerman 1961).

Territory: Very little is known of the breeding season behavior (Johnsgard 1981). A flight song is given while hovering (Johnsgard 1981). Does not defend a feeding territory in estuarine habitats in winter (Myers et al. 1979).

Reproduction: Little information is available. Nesting begins in May or early June (Bent 1927). Nesting may be semicolonial at times (Bannerman 1961). Average clutch size is 4 eggs, with occasional sets of 5 reported. Both sexes incubate, for about 21 days (Johnsgard 1981). Only 1 brood is raised in a season (Harrison 1978). Precocial young leave the nest within hours of hatching, and are tended mostly by the male (Johnsgard 1981).

Niche: Useful field methods for distinguishing this species from the very similar long-billed dowitcher are given in McCaskie et al. (1979).

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