

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

WILSON'S SNIPE

Gallinago delicata

Family: SCOLOPACIDAE
B199

Order: CHARADRIIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A fairly common winter visitant from October to April on wet meadow and short, emergent wetland habitats throughout much of California. At this season, typically occurs in the Sierra Nevada foothills, Central and Imperial valleys, and coastal mountain ranges and lowlands, the length of the state. A year-round resident in parts of northeastern California (Airola 1980). Wintering habitats include coastal meadows, wet pastures, rice fields, sloughs, canals and ditches, and other fresh emergent wetlands with rich, decomposed organic material (White and Harris 1966, Tuck 1972). Also occurs less commonly in saline emergent wetlands bordering estuarine habitats. During the breeding season (April to August), uncommon to locally common in the Cascades (chiefly Siskiyou, Modoc and Lassen cos.) the northern Sierra Nevada, and Great Basin regions as far south as the Mono Basin (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Most nesting occurs from 300-2000 m (1000-6700 ft) in elevation. There is 1 recent nesting record (1971) for the Owens Valley (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Nesting is suspected in the Central Valley near Red Bluff, Tehama Co. (McCaskie et al. 1979), and near Woodward Reservoir, eastern Stanislaus Co. The only nest records for southern California are several from the late 1800s and early 1900s for San Bernardino and Los Angeles cos. (Garrett and Dunn 1981). During migration, occurs throughout most of the state.

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Feeds by probing in water-saturated soils, and by seizing prey from the surface. While probing, much of the food is ingested without withdrawing the bill from the substrate. The main foods are insects (especially beetle and fly larvae), earthworms, freshwater crustaceans and mollusks, and occasionally fish. Also takes grass and sedge seeds, and grit (Bent 1927, White and Harris 1966, Johnsgard 1981). Typically forages in saturated organic soils, soft mud, or shallow water of marshes and wet meadows. Usually does not forage on open mud flats, but remains close to vegetation. Plowed fields, grazed pastures, and lawns are other foraging habitats.

Cover: Typically takes cover in moderate to dense vegetation of wet meadows and fresh emergent wetlands.

Reproduction: Breeding habitats typically are marshy areas of decomposed organic material, peatlands (bogs, fens, and swamps), and wet areas adjacent to ponds and rivers. Wet meadows and shallow marshes with a dense cover of medium to tall grass, or shrubs, are required for breeding (Airola 1980). In Canada, breeding densities were highest in alder swamps, and lowest in shrub swamps (Tuck 1972). The nest is a grass or leaf-lined depression, and often is concealed in a grass tussock or at the base of a small shrub. Sometimes the nest cup is built up several inches above the ground. Surrounding grasses and sedges often are woven into a canopy over the nest.

Water: Drinks large amounts of water daily (Tuck 1972).

Pattern: Wet meadows and fresh emergent wetlands used year-round, but in fall and winter also uses marshy borders, particularly diked wetlands near bays.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity, but largely crepuscular in feeding. Courtship activities are most intense at dusk, and may continue all night during the peak of the breeding season. Migrates at night.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Descends from breeding areas in meadows of mountains and Great Basin to lower elevations after the nesting season. Fall migrants may appear in the Central Valley and on the coast as early as August, but in most years do not arrive in great numbers until mid-September or early October (White and Harris 1966, McCaskie et al. 1979, Page et al. 1979). Some remain in Great Basin in winter (Airola 1980). Wintering population departs for breeding areas in April and May.

Home Range: In Canada, breeding density ranged from 1.4 to 7.0 pairs/40 ha (100 ac) (Tuck 1972). No data found on home range. Christmas bird counts give crude indications of maximum winter densities: Over 400 found (by numerous observers) within a 24 km (15 mi)-diameter area near Humboldt Bay and Point Reyes, over 100 in the Sacramento area, and up to 1000 in coastal Orange Co. (see recent Audubon Field Notes, American Birds).

Territory: Territory is larger earlier in the nesting season, but becomes reduced as the incubation period advances (Tuck 1972). Territory ranged from 2-16 ha (5-40 ac) before incubation, and shrank to 0.4 to 1.2 ha (1-3 ac) during incubation (Tuck 1972). In *Carex* marsh and irrigated agricultural land, territory size varied from 0.5 to 5.0 ha (1.4 to 12.4 ac) (Johnson and Ryder 1977). A territory is held for about 3 wk, and contains a nest site, feeding areas, and male loafing sites (Tuck 1972).

Reproduction: The breeding season extends from mid-April to August. Not colonial, but nesting pairs may aggregate where suitable habitat exists. Clutch size usually 4 eggs, and apparently only 1 brood is raised in a season (Tuck 1972). Incubation period 17-20 days, and only the female incubates. Precocial young are cared for by both parents until they fledge at 19-20 days.

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