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

RED-BREASTED SAPSUCKER *Sphyrapicus ruber*
Family: PICIDAE Order: PICIFORMES Class: AVES
B299

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

An uncommon to fairly common, yearlong or summer resident in openly wooded, mountainous parts of California. Occurs from Oregon border south in Coast Ranges and along coast to Marin Co., and along both the eastern and western slopes of the Cascade Range and Sierra Nevada south to Kern Co. In southern California, an uncommon summer resident locally in the higher mountains. Breeds from sea level to about 2200 m (7000 ft) in northern California, and from about 1200 m (4000 ft) to 2500 m (8000 ft) in the Sierra Nevada and southern California. Preferred nesting habitats include montane riparian, aspen, montane hardwood-conifer, mixed conifer, and red fir, especially near meadows, clearings, lakes, and slow-moving streams. A fairly common winter resident throughout much of lowland, cismontane California, though uncommon in coastal lowlands from Los Angeles Co. south, and in the Central Valley. Uncommon transient and winter resident on Channel Islands, and rare in the deserts. In winter, prefers deciduous woodlands, orchards, and shade trees such as pepper and poplar (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Devillers 1970, Gaines 1977b, Garrett and Dunn 1981, McCaskie et al. 1988).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Eats insects, especially ants. Drills both horizontal and vertical holes about 0.6 cm (0.25 in) in diameter in trunks of deciduous hardwoods and, less often, in conifers, producing perennial sap wells. Feeds on sap, cambium, and other soft tissues. Prefers aspen and other trees of willow and birch families, also orchard trees. Frequently hawks insects over meadows, lakes, and other open habitats. Also feeds on small berries and other fruits.

Cover: Nests and roosts in a tree cavity for cover.

Reproduction: Requires snag or live tree with rotted wood in which to excavate nesting cavity. Excavation by both sexes. In Sierra Co., nest cavity was placed an average 13.5 m (42 ft) above ground, varying from 0.6 to 35 m (2-115 ft) (Raphael and White 1984). Entrance about 3.8 cm (1.5 in) in diameter; cavity 15-25 cm (6-10 in) in depth (Bent 1939).

Water: No specific information found, but typically nests near stream or wet meadow.

Pattern: Most numerous in riparian, deciduous hardwood, or in mixture of hardwood and conifer habitats. Frequents sparse to moderate canopy with suitable snags for nest and roost excavation, especially in vicinity of aspens, wet meadows, clearings, lakes, and other open habitats.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Yearlong, resident in lower parts of breeding range. Displays pronounced altitudinal migration in most parts of range. Usually arrives in higher elevations (above about 1200 m = 4000 ft) in April and departs by October. Arrives on winter range by October and departs by end of April. Postnesters frequently disperse upslope to near tree line.

Home Range: No information found, but probably same as territory (Lawrence 1967).

Territory: Howell (1952) reported territory in Modoc Co. of a minimum of 45 m (150 ft) radius around the nest, and up to 6.1 ha (15 ac). Defends sap wells from warblers, hummingbirds, and other species.

Reproduction: Peak of egg laying early June to early July. Monogamous; clutch size 3-7, usually 4-5 in California. Incubation 12-14 days (Bent 1939). Both sexes incubate eggs and tend altricial young (Howell 1952, Harrison 1978).

Niche: Sometimes considered a nuisance because of drilling of tree trunks in orchards (Bent 1939). Trees usually not damaged, and feeding on arthropods is beneficial. This primary cavity-nester performs important ecological function of excavating roost and nest cavities. These used in turn by secondary cavity-nesters, which cannot excavate their own (Raphael and White 1984). Warblers, hummingbirds, and other species use sap wells.

Comments: Until recently this species was classified as a race of S. varius, the yellow-bellied sapsucker (e.g., Grinnell and Miller 1944).

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