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

NORTHERN FLICKER *Colaptes auratus*
Family: PICIDAE Order: PICIFORMES Class: AVES
B307

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Ranges commonly throughout California below 2,750 m (9,000 ft) in all forest and shrub habitats (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Occurs yearlong except in high mountains, and in Mojave and Colorado deserts where it mostly is a migrant. Breeds locally in Owens Valley and Mojave Desert (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Commonly breeds on Santa Cruz and Santa Catalina Islands; otherwise a winter migrant on Channel Islands. The gilded flicker (C. chrysoides), which occurs in the Colorado River Valley, recently elevated from a subspecies of northern flicker to species level on the basis of reproductive isolation and differences in genetic and life-history traits (Johnson 1969, Koenig 1984, American Ornithologists Union 1995).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Annual diet about 55% animal matter (mostly insects) consumed primarily in spring and summer, and 45% plant matter, eaten mostly in fall and winter. Eats many ants (50-75% of animal diet); also beetles, grasshoppers, crickets, moths, caterpillars, various larvae. In fall, eats acorns and seeds (20% of annual diet); winter diet includes berries and other fruits (Bent 1939). Forages in open forest areas, on ground, in shrubs, and occasionally on branches and trunks of trees. Uses bill to probe, dig, and glean.

Cover: Trees, shrubs, nest and roost cavities provide cover. Commonly uses riparian deciduous areas and mature, open stands with snags.

Reproduction: Nest cavity excavated in soft wood of snag or dead branch of live tree; occasionally in post, pole, bank, or other structure. Nest cavity usually up to 30 m (100 ft) above ground (Lawrence 1967). Averaged 7-8 m (23-26 ft) above ground at Sagehen Creek, Sierra Co. (Raphael and White 1984). Minimum snag size suitable for nesting is 48 cm (19 in) dbh and 1.8 m (6 ft) in height. Courtship and mating occur in trees with potential nest sites (Bent 1939).

Water: Drinks occasionally (Hering 1948).

Pattern: Suitable habitat consists of open forest and shrub habitats with abundant ecotones for feeding, and snags for nest cavities.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: In winter, usually migrates down-slope to areas below snowline. Some remain in mountains, often in foraging flocks. In desert areas,

frequents desert riparian and pinyon-juniper habitats in winter.

Home Range: Territory and home range apparently same. Sierra Nevada hardwood habitats supported a mean of 14 pairs per 40 ha (100 ac); riparian and mixed conifer habitats supported means of 8.7 and 2.9 pairs per 40 ha (100 ac), respectively. Burned eastside pine forest at Sagehen Creek, Sierra Co. supported 6 breeding pairs per 40 ha (100 ac) (Raphael and White 1984).

Territory: A territory of 16 ha (40 ac) was estimated for a breeding pair in a conifer forest in Ontario (Lawrence 1967).

Reproduction: Breeds from April through July. Clutch size 4-14 eggs; mean 6-7 (Bent 1939). Incubation 11-16 days, by both sexes. Male provides most of care for altricial young, which fledge at 25-28 days. Adults apparently pair for life.

Niche: Mammals prey on eggs and young. Falcons, accipiters, and buteos have been reported as predators of adults. Potentially competes with European starlings, screech-owls, and other cavity nesters for nest sites (Ingold 1996). High temperatures in desert areas contribute to mortality of newly arriving fall migrants (Wauer 1962). An important excavator of nest cavities in soft wood (Thomas 1979). The most terrestrial of woodpeckers in North America (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

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