

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

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RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH

*Sitta canadensis*

Family: SITTIDAE  
B361

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A fairly common resident in conifer forests from low to high elevations throughout the state. Also a summer resident in the Sierra Nevada, Cascades, Trinity Mts., and other ranges in ponderosa pine, mixed conifer, red fir, lodgepole pine, Jeffrey pine, eastside pine, and coastal conifer habitats. Irregularly disperses to lowlands in winter where it sometimes forages on deciduous trees. An irregular visitor to the Channel Islands in winter. A highly irregular fall transient in desert regions, varying from common to absent. A sporadic fall transient and winter visitant to interior, Great Basin, and coastal California (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1988, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Gleans insects from trunks, branches, twigs, foliage of trees, especially conifers (Airola and Barrett 1985). Eats conifer seeds, especially in winter (Bent 1948, Martin et al. 1961), which it pries from cones and hammers open with bill. Rarely flycatches or gleans from herbage or ground.

**Cover:** Finds cover in conifers, especially with dense canopy. Frequents mixed conifer forests, firs, lodgepole pines in summer. In winter all types of conifers used, and occasionally deciduous trees.

**Reproduction:** Excavates own hole in rotted wood in stump, tree or branch, or snag; sometimes uses old woodpecker hole or natural cavity. In Sierra Co., nest tree averaged 16 m (50 ft) high, range 3.3-33 m (10.2-103 ft); nest hole height averaged 9.8 m (30 ft), range 1.7-28 m (5.2-86 ft). Nest tree dbh averaged 71 cm (28 in), range 19-164 cm (7.5-64 in) (Raphael and White 1984). May smear pitch around nest entrance, perhaps to dissuade nest predators.

**Water:** No information found.

**Pattern:** Frequents conifer forests. Shows a preference for mature stands for breeding, especially with snags.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Yearlong, diurnal activity.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Resident in California mountains, but may disperse erratically in fall and winter to lowlands. For example, on South Farallon Islands, 330 were recorded in fall of 1969 and 172 in fall of 1972, but rare in 1968 and 1971 (DeSante and Ainley 1980).

Home Range: No data found.

Territory: Apparently territorial all year. In Arizona, Carothers et al. (1973) found 6.7 breeding pairs per 40 ha (100 ac) in spruce-fir forest. In Idaho, Johnston (1949) found 20-45 breeders per 40 ha (100 ac) in Douglas-fir forest. Density reported in American Birds (1948-1976) for Sierra Nevada coniferous forests ranged from 3.7-5.1 pairs per 40 ha (100 ac) (average 5, N = 10) (summarized by Raphael and White 1978).

Reproduction: Solitary and monogamous; breeds from late April to early August, with peak in early June. Clutch usually 5-6 eggs, range 4-7. Incubation about 12 days, by female. Altricial young tended by both parents. Nestling period 18-21 days (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Subject to the same predators as most other small passerines: accipiters, domestic cats, snakes, corvids, and small mammals.

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