

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

MARSH WREN

Cistothorus palustris

Family: TROGLODYTIDAE
B372

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common, yearlong resident along northern and central coast, in the Central Valley, and in scattered locations in transmontane California. Breeding is restricted to cattails, bulrushes, sedges, and other vegetation in emergent wetland habitat. An uncommon to common summer resident and breeder on Northeastern Plateau and east of Sierra Nevada, where some individuals remain all year. Winters commonly in southern coastal districts. Migrants and winter residents may occur in any low vegetation growing in water or on damp ground. In southern California, breeds mainly in Imperial and Colorado River valleys, locally along the coast, and in a few desert wetlands. A rare to uncommon migrant in late summer and fall at lower elevations in the Sierra Nevada (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Garrett and Dunn 1981, Verner and Boss 1980).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Eats insects, spiders, other small invertebrates, and rarely seeds and grains. Gleans from emergent stems and foliage, surface of water, ground, and litter. Occasionally hawks flying insects (Bent 1948).

Cover: Cattail, bulrush, sedge, and other emergent vegetation provide cover during breeding season; in nonbreeding season any low vegetation growing in water or on damp ground may be used.

Reproduction: Nests in cattail, bulrush, or sedge in emergent wetland habitat. Builds nest over water in emergent vegetation. Nest is a woven ball of herbage with entrance concealed on side (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

Water: Standing water below nest apparently a requirement for successful breeding; deters predators and expands food source (Verner and Engelsen 1970).

Pattern: Breeds and feeds in tall, straight-stemmed emergent vegetation; occasionally forages in adjacent upland vegetation.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Northeastern populations mostly migratory, as are some along northern coast.

Home Range: No data found on home range; may coincide with territory in nonmigratory populations. In Georgia salt marsh, Kale (1965) reported density of 44-57 pairs per ha (18-23 per ac) of suitable nesting habitat.

Territory: In coastal Washington, Verner (1965a) found 82 territories averaging 0.12-0.16 ha (0.3-0.4 ac), range 0.02-0.36 ha (0.06-0.9 ac). In prime habitat in eastern Washington, Verner (1965a) reported 60 territories averaging 0.04 ha (0.1 ac), range 0.02-0.08 ha (0.04-0.20 ac), and Verner and Engelsens (1970) reported 80 territories averaging 0.05-0.07 ha (0.13-0.17 ac). In Georgia salt marsh, Kale (1965) reported territory averaging 0.008 ha (0.02 ac), range 0.0004-0.02 ha (0.001-0.05 ac).

Reproduction: Breeds from late March to late August, with peak in May and June. Male often polygynous; may build several nests per season. Clutch size 3-8, average 5-6 eggs. Raises 2 broods per yr, rarely 3. Incubation 12-15 days, by female only. Altricial young tended by female alone or by both parents; leave nest at 13-15 days. Male may continue to feed young for 1 wk (Harrison 1978).

Niche: An interspecifically aggressive species; may destroy eggs of other marsh-nesting passerines. Some populations apparently subject to relatively high nest predation by mammals (e.g., Kale 1965).

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