

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

BLACK-TAILED GNATCATCHER

Polioptila melanura

Family: SYLVIIDAE
B378

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: T. Kucera, 1997

DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The black-tailed gnatcatcher and the California gnatcatcher (*P. californica*) recently were elevated from subspecies to the specific level (Atwood 1988, American Ornithologists' Union 1989). Each is distinct in plumage, voice, habitat preference, and abundance. The black-tailed gnatcatcher is a fairly common resident below about 300 m (1,000 ft) in desert wash habitat from Palm Springs and Joshua Tree National Monument south, and common along the Colorado River. Now rare in eastern Mojave Desert north to the Amargosa River, Inyo Co. Nests primarily in wooded desert wash habitat, but also occurs sparingly in desert scrub habitat, especially in winter (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Glean insects and spiders from foliage of shrubs (Bent 1949). Also eat a few seeds.

Cover: Shrubs provide roosting, nesting, and other cover.

Reproduction: Weave a small, deep cup from hemp-like fibers, leaves, plant down, spider silk, in a shrub 0.6-0.9 m (2-3 ft) above ground (Woods 1928).

Water: No information found, but probably not a requirement.

Pattern: *P. melanura* is most numerous in desert wash habitat with dense mesquite, paloverde, ironwood, acacia. Absent from areas where introduced saltcedar or other exotic vegetation dominates (Small 1994).

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Resident in nesting areas.

Home Range: Probably equal to territory, at least in breeding season. In New Mexico, Raitt and Maze (1968) reported 0.6 to 2 pairs per 40 ha (100 ac). In Arizona, Emlen (1974) reported 1.6 per 40 ha (100 ac).

Territory: In desert riparian habitat along the lower Colorado River in Arizona, territory varied from 1.01 to 1.78 ha (2.5 to 4.4 ac) in different study areas and years (Laudenslayer 1981).

Reproduction: Monogamous. Peak egg laying in April and May. Incubation 14-15 days, by both sexes. Clutch averages 4 eggs, range 3-5. Both sexes feed altricial young, which fledge at 9-10 days (Bent 1949).

Niche: Friedmann (1963) reported 13 records of cowbird parasitism, but suggested may be victimized more frequently than records suggest. Taylor (1966) found 3 parasitized pairs.

Comments: The black-tailed gnatcatcher is a California Species of Special Concern (Remsen 1978) and has declined in numbers markedly in recent decades (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Remsen 1978).

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Life history accounts for species in the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships (CWHR) System were originally published in: Zeiner, D.C., W.F.Laudenslayer, Jr., K.E. Mayer, and M. White, eds. 1988-1990. *California's Wildlife.* Vol. I-III. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, California. Updates are noted in accounts that have been added or edited since original publication.