

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

NORTHERN SHRIKE

Lanius excubitor

Family: LANIIDAE
B409

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

An uncommon, winter resident (mostly October to March) east of the Cascade-Sierra Nevada crest from the Oregon border south into Inyo Co. Rare elsewhere in northern California. Occurs primarily at lower elevations in open, wooded, or brushy habitats, and in herbaceous habitats with utility poles and lines, fence posts, and other suitable perches. Considerably more numerous and widespread some years than others. Does not breed in California (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Feeds on mice and other small mammals, birds, insects; also on reptiles and amphibians (Bent 1950). Takes prey from ground, air, and shrubbery. Drops onto prey or pursues from a perch; may move through vegetation to flush prey into open. Frequently skewers prey on thorn, sharp twig, wire barb to feed on or to cache for feeding later. Hunts from elevated perch such as shrub, tree, utility pole or line, fence post.

Cover: Uses scattered shrubs and trees for cover.

Reproduction: Breeds in Canada and Alaska. Builds nest in a conifer, willow, or shrub 1.5 to 6 m (5-20 ft) above ground, usually in open habitat or on forest edge (Terres 1980).

Water: Probably meets water needs from prey (Bartholomew and Cade 1963).

Pattern: Winters in open Great Basin shrub habitats and in open fields with scattered shrubs, posts, trees, and other perches. Also uses lowland riparian habitats.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Occurs in California mostly from October through March. Migrates to breeding grounds in Canada and Alaska.

Home Range: No data found. Individuals often spaced widely in nonbreeding season.

Territory: On arctic breeding grounds, hunting territory estimated to be 1.3 km² (0.5 mi²) (Cade 1967).

Reproduction: Does not breed in California. Breeding season begins in May. A monogamous, solitary nester; clutch size 4-9 eggs, usually 5-7. Incubation lasts 15-16 days. Altricial young tended by both parents and leave nest at 19-20 days. Young become independent at about 35 days (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Prey may be cached for several months. Numbers in California may be affected by abundance of cyclic small mammals in north (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

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