

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

WESTERN Tanager
Family: THRAUPIDAE
B471

Piranga ludoviciana
Order: PASSERIFORMES Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Occurrence in California complex. From May through August, a common breeding resident of montane forests throughout most of the state, including coastal ranges. Common and widespread in migration in foothills and lowlands. Winters rarely along coast mostly south of Monterey Bay. For breeding, prefers moderately open, mature coniferous forests with associated hardwoods, but also frequents edges of denser stands. Probably most common in mixed conifer and montane hardwood-conifer habitats; also nests in montane hardwood habitat, including stands dominated by live oaks. Occurs widely in other wooded habitats in migration; in winter prefers groves of exotic trees, especially flowering eucalyptus. Breeds in coast ranges, usually avoiding fog belt, but only in very small numbers from Marin Co. south to Santa Barbara Co. In southern California, breeds in White and Panamint Mts., as well as in mountain ranges west of the deserts. Occurs as a rare winter resident, mostly from Santa Barbara south but also, very rarely, in northern coastal counties (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: In California, diet was 82% insects and 18% fruit (Bent 1958). In breeding season, feeds mostly on insects by gleaning or plucking from tree foliage or hawking in air. In a western Sierra Nevada mixed conifer forest, foraged mostly in middle and upper canopy, 5-30 m (16-93 ft) above ground (Airola 1979, Airola and Barrett 1985). Postbreeding and in migration, eats more fruit, plucking it from shrubs and trees. Also eats buds.

Cover: Trees and shrubs provide nesting, roosting, and other cover. Male usually sings from middle or upper canopy of a tree.

Reproduction: Nest usually built near distal end of a large branch of a conifer, sometimes in a smaller deciduous tree. Nest usually placed 1.8 to 15 m (6-50 ft) above ground (Bent 1958), often in middle or upper canopy (Grinnell and Miller 1944).

Water: Migrants in coastal California commonly drank water (Williams and Koenig 1980).

Pattern: Frequents moderately open, mature coniferous forests that include some hardwoods; also frequents edges of denser stands.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Most California breeders winter from Mexico to Costa Rica, departing in August or September and returning in April or May. Small numbers winter in southwestern U.S., including southern California coast.

Home Range: No information found. Breeding density per 40 ha (100 ac) reported as: 25-30 pairs in Idaho Douglas-fir forests (Johnston 1949), 5-18 individuals in Wyoming coniferous forests (Salt 1957), 21-46 individuals in an Oregon coniferous forest (Wiens and Nussbaum 1975), and 4-30 individuals in coniferous forests in the Sierra Nevada (Beedy 1982).

Territory: No data found, but does defend a territory.

Reproduction: Breeding season is from May into August. A monogamous, solitary nester. Clutch size 3-5; apparently a single brood per yr. Altricial young tended by both parents. Probably breeds first at 1 yr (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Apparently parasitized infrequently by brown-headed cowbird in Sierra Nevada: only 1 of 21 nests or family groups contained cowbirds (Rothstein et al. 1980, Verner and Ritter 1983, Airola 1986).

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