

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

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CALIFORNIA TOWHEE  
Family: EMBERIZIDAE  
B484

*Melospiza crissalis*  
Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The former brown towhee recently has been split into the California towhee and the canyon towhee, *M. fusca* (American Ornithologists' Union 1989). The California towhee is a common, characteristic resident of foothills and lowlands in most of cismontane California. Frequents open chaparral and coastal scrub, as well as brush-land patches in open riparian, hardwood-conifer, cropland, and urban habitats. Commonly uses edges of dense chaparral and brushy edges of densely wooded habitats. Also occurs in lowest montane habitats of similar structure in southern California, and locally in Siskiyou and western Modoc cos. Local on coastal slope north of southern Humboldt Co., and apparently absent from western San Joaquin Valley (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981). The Inyo California towhee, *M. c. eremophilus*, occurs only in the Argus Mountains of southwestern Inyo Co.

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Feeds on seeds, insects, and some fruits. Gleans and scratches in litter, picks seeds and fruits from plants, and rarely flycatches (Davis 1957). Prefers to forage on open ground adjacent to brushy cover. Insects are important in breeding season, often constituting a third of the diet (Martin et al. 1961).

Cover: Shrubs in broken chaparral, margins of dense chaparral, willow thickets, and brushy understory of open wooded habitats provide cover.

Reproduction: Nest is a bulky cup of thin twigs, forb stems with leaves and flower-heads, and grasses; lined with fine stems, grasses, and hairs. Nest concealed in low, dense foliage of a shrub or tree, or occasionally on ground. Nest usually placed 0.9 to 3.6 m (3-12 ft.) above ground, occasionally as high as 10.7 m (35 ft.) (Terres 1980).

Water: Drinks freely in captivity and in the wild (Bartholomew and Cade 1963), although in drier habitats may meet most water needs from insects and succulent foods (Dawson 1954).

Pattern: Breeds and seeks cover in brush and dense thickets and forages in adjacent open areas.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Not migratory.

Home Range: Marshall (1960) reported a home range of about 6 ha (15 ac) for the closely related canyon towhee in riparian woodland in Arizona. In broadleaf evergreen habitat in Alameda Co., Cogswell (1973) reported 29 males per 40 ha (100 ac). Gaines (1974a) reported 10-18 males per 40 ha (100 ac) in Central Valley riparian cover. In California chaparral, Yeaton (1974) found 20 pairs per 40 ha (100 ac). In California oak-riparian habitat, Bontrager (1974) reported 39 males per 40 ha (100 ac).

Territory: Territory in California averaged 0.4 to 0.8 ha (1-2 ac) and varied up to 2 ha (5 ac) (Bent 1968). Territory held all year but defended mostly in breeding season.

Reproduction: Breeding season early April into early August with peak from early May to mid-June. Apparently a monogamous, solitary breeder. Clutch usually contains 3 or 4 eggs, sometimes 5; may raise 2 or 3 broods each yr.

Incubation about 11 days, by female. Altricial young tended by both parents and leave nest at about 8 days. First brood driven away when next brood hatches; otherwise may remain 4-6 wks. (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Has increased numbers and range as logging, farming, and urbanization have increased habitat. Apparently an uncommon cowbird host (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

Comments: The tiny, isolated race of Inyo California towhee is classified as Federal Threatened and California Endangered. Population now restricted to southern Argus Mts.; may be fewer than 150 individuals remaining (California Department of Fish and Game 1989).

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