

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

ABERT'S TOWHEE

Melospiza aberti

Family: EMBERIZIDAE
B485

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: D. Dobkin, S. Granholm

Reviewed by: L. Mewaldt

Edited by: R. Duke

DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common resident of desert riparian and desert wash habitats in lower Colorado River Valley; also fairly common in Imperial and Coachella valleys. Frequents dense vegetation; thickets of willow, cottonwood, mesquite, saltcedar (Davis 1951, Marshall 1960). Occurs in brush in yards and orchards at Brock Ranch, southern Imperial Co. (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Takes insects and seeds from ground and low in shrubs (Laudenslayer 1981). Scratches in litter and gleans from ground and shrubs, often in shade.

Cover: Davis (1951) reported mesquite, willow, and arrowweed most important in providing cover. Also uses saltcedar (Garrett and Dunn 1981) and quailbush (Grinnell and Miller 1944).

Reproduction: Builds nest in desert riparian vegetation, especially willow and mesquite. Nest usually 2-10 m (6-30 ft) above ground.

Water: Makes extensive use of water when available (Dawson 1954).

Pattern: Requires dense riparian thickets or tracts of desert wash brush, especially willow for breeding and mesquite for cover. Feeds under, between, and in shrubs.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: None reported.

Home Range: Home range encompasses, but is somewhat larger than, breeding territory (Marshall 1960). Laudenslayer (1981) reported density of 4.5 pairs per 40 ha (100 ac) in screwbean mesquite-saltcedar habitat in Arizona; Anderson and Ohmart (1977) reported density of 12.3 per 40 ha (100 ac) in similar habitat. Austin (1970) reported a density of 2-4 breeding pairs per 40 ha (100 ac) in bosque habitat in southern Nevada.

Territory: In Arizona, territory varied from 1.1 to 2.6 ha (2.7 to 6.4 ac) (Marshall 1960). Laudenslayer (1981) reported territory of 1.4 to 2.5 ha (2.76 to 6.1 ac) along the lower Colorado River.

Reproduction: Nests from late February into early August. Clutch size 2-4 eggs, usually 3 (Bent 1968). According to Cooper (1870), raises 2 or more broods per season. Incubation 12-13 days; young may hatch asynchronously. Female broods altricial young, which leave

nest in about 2 wk.

Niche: A common cowbird host. May form long-term pair bond on a permanent territory. Cowbird parasitism and habitat degradation and loss apparently reducing numbers in recent decades (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

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