

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

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CHIPPING SPARROW

*Spizella passerina*

Family: EMBERIZIDAE  
B489

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common migrant and summer visitor throughout most of California, excluding Central Valley, southern deserts, and alpine areas. Winters less commonly in Central Valley and southern California lowlands. Prefers open wooded habitats with a sparse or low herbaceous layer and few shrubs, if any. Although apparently requires trees for resting and singing, and prefers trees for nesting, often forages in nearby herbaceous and open shrub habitats, including dry margins of wet meadows. Less common in breeding season in southern and interior foothills than in montane habitats, northern coastal ranges, and Great Basin. Fairly common in Imperial and Colorado River valleys in winter, but rare elsewhere. May breed or winter in orchards (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Eats mostly insects and spiders in breeding season, and mostly grass and forb seeds remainder of year (Martin et al. 1961). Feeds insects and spiders to young. Gleans from ground and low plants; rarely hawks insects in air. In eastern Texas, perched 30-40 cm (12-16 in) above ground, peered at lower vegetation, and then dropped on insects (Allaire and Fisher 1975).

**Cover:** Mostly uses trees for nesting, resting, singing, and other cover; also shrubs and ground herbage used (Grinnell and Miller 1944).

**Reproduction:** In California, usually nests in a conifer, but deciduous tree or shrub also used (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Nest rarely more than 12 m (40 ft) above ground; usually 0.3 to 1.8 m (1-6 ft) or, rarely, on ground (Bent 1968). Nest usually concealed in dense foliage near end of branch.

**Water:** Drinks water regularly (Smyth and Coulombe 1971), and sometimes bathes in streams (Hering 1948), but can subsist for 3 wk on dry seeds only (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

**Pattern:** Frequents open woodlands with sparse or low herbaceous cover and a low density of shrubs, if any. Often forages in herbaceous or open shrub habitats nearby.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Yearlong, diurnal activity.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Breeders mostly leave California in September or early October and return in April or May. Some move downslope to winter from Central Valley to southern Mexico, but it is not known what portion of breeding population remains to winter in the state and what portion migrates farther south. Present year-round in parts of southwestern California, but breeding population may be replaced or augmented by a different

wintering population. In portions of winter range not occupied in breeding season, present mostly from September to April.

Home Range: No information found.

Territory: In Michigan, territory varied from 0.4 to 0.6 ha (1 to 1.5 ac), and a territory measured by Sutton (1960) was 0.25 ha (0.65 ac). A pair in Georgia defended 3.1 ha (7.6 ac) during nest-building and incubation, but only 1.1 ha (2.7 ac) while feeding nestlings (Odum and Kuenzler 1955). In Minnesota, territory varied from 0.2 to "about" 0.4 ha (0.5 to 1 ac) (Bent 1968). Average territory in an Arizona pinyon-juniper-ponderosa pine ecotone was 2.7 ha (6.7 ac) (Laudenslayer and Balda 1976).

Reproduction: Breeding season usually begins in April or May. A monogamous, solitary nester; clutch size 3-5, usually 4. May be double-brooded (Terres 1980). Incubation 11-14 days, by female. Altricial young tended by both parents; leave nest at 9-12 days, but do not fly until about 14 days. Apparently breeds first at 1 yr (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Elsewhere in U.S., one of the most common hosts of brown-headed cowbird; more than 600 records reported by Friedmann (1963). Apparently an infrequent host in Sierra Nevada. Only 1 of 64 nests or family groups contained cowbird eggs or young (Rothstein et al. 1980, Verner and Ritter 1983, Airola 1986). May wander or drift upslope in family groups postbreeding. May forage in small flocks in winter with juncos, Brewer's sparrows, and other sparrows (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

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