

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

VESPER SPARROW

Pooecetes gramineus

Family: EMBERIZIDAE
B494

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common summer resident east of the Cascade-Sierra Nevada crest, occurring in sparse or open stands of sagebrush, low sagebrush, and similar habitats. Breeds south to White and Inyo Mts. and at Baldwin Lake in San Bernardino Mts. Formerly bred in high mountain meadows in Sequoia National Park and vicinity (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Recently noted breeding regularly in coastal Del Norte Co. Uncommon in Central Valley and bordering foothills, and fairly common locally in southern deserts in winter. Occupies grasslands, croplands, and open brushlands in winter. Most common in winter at Colorado River and Salton Sea, but occurs very locally north to Owens Valley, Carrizo Plain, and Antelope Valley. Also occurs regularly, but uncommonly, on coastal slope (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979, 1988, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Annual diet about half insects and spiders, and half grass and forb seeds (Bent 1968, Ehrlich et al. 1988). Insects and spiders especially important in breeding season. Gleans from ground and herbage.

Cover: Uses scattered shrubs and patches of tall herbs for cover.

Reproduction: Builds nest on ground, often in a small depression, concealed under a shrub or at base of grasses or forbs.

Water: Can live on air-dried seeds without drinking (Bartholomew 1972). Ohmart and Smith (1971) observed drinking, but also recorded individuals 16-24 km (10-15 mi) away from known surface water. Captives drank 19.7% of body weight per day, but could survive on dry seeds without water.

Pattern: Breeds in sagebrush and other shrub habitats with sparse vegetation. Occupies grasslands and croplands in winter, often using scattered shrubs and patches of tall herbs for cover.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Mostly arrives on breeding grounds in April and departs by October. Wintering individuals often arrive in September and depart in March or April. Not known if California breeders also winter in the state; at least part of winter population comes from north of California. An uncommon, but regular, fall migrant in September and October on Farallon Islands (DeSante and Ainley 1980).

Home Range: No information found. Breeding density per 40 ha (100 ac) reported as: 17.5 to 33 pairs in sagebrush-grassland in Montana (Best 1972), and 5 pairs in the Missouri River Breaks (Walcheck 1970); 9-50 pairs in Michigan (Bent 1968).

Territory: In Wisconsin, Wiens (1969) recorded 5 territories averaging 0.9 ha (2.2 ac) and varying from 0.6 to 1.1 ha (1.5 to 2.7 ac).

Reproduction: Breeding season late April into mid-August, with a peak in May and June. Apparently a solitary breeder. Clutch size 3-6 eggs, usually 4 or 5. Sometimes raises 2 broods per yr. Incubation 11-13 days. Altricial young tended by both parents; leave nest at 9-13 days, still unable to fly. Young dependent on parents an additional 20-22 days (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Decline in populations in areas of former abundance in Mono Co. attributed to overgrazing, which has decreased herbage cover and increased sagebrush density (Gaines 1977b).

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