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

BLACK-THROATED SPARROW *Amphispiza bilineata*
Family: EMBERIZIDAE Order: PASSERIFORMES Class: AVES
B496

Written by: D. Dobkin, S. Granholm
Reviewed by: L. Mewaldt
Edited by: R. Duke

DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common summer resident east of the Cascade-Sierra Nevada crest and in southern deserts; an uncommon, local winter resident of Colorado and eastern Mojave deserts. Occupies a variety of chaparral and desert scrub habitats with sparse or open stands of shrubs, especially cholla, ocotillo, creosotebush, saltbush. Often found in areas with scattered Joshua trees. A rather local breeder in Colorado Desert, occurring mostly on canyon slopes in desert succulent shrub habitat. On western slope of Sierra Nevada, breeds west from Walker Pass to upper Kern Basin and, apparently, in some isolated localities to the north. Another isolated breeding population occurs along the northern Santa Barbara/Ventura Co. border. More widespread in migration than in winter in southern deserts. There are scattered fall and winter records as far north as Sacramento, Placer, and Butte cos. (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979, 1988, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Eats insects, spiders, seeds, and green shoots of grasses and forbs (Bent 1968). Apparently seeds predominate in winter and insects are more important in breeding season. Feeds primarily by gleaning and scratching on ground; also gleans from shrubs and herbs, and occasionally hawks aerial insects.

Cover: Cover is provided by a variety of shrubs, cactus, and small trees, especially cholla, ocotillo, creosotebush, and saltbush, in sparse to open stands.

Reproduction: Nest concealed in dense, often thorny shrub or among joints of a cactus. Nest usually placed 15-45 cm (6-18 in) above ground, occasionally higher (Harrison 1978).

Water: May not require drinking water (Bartholomew and Cade 1963), although apparently will drink when water is available (Bent 1968, Ehrlich et al. 1988).

Pattern: Breeds, feeds, and winters in sparsely vegetated chaparral or upland desert scrub habitat, both on sloping and level terrain. Frequents rocky desert slopes and alluvial fans.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Summer residents mostly arrive in March or April and depart by October. Mostly leaves areas north of Mojave Desert in winter, and numbers decline in Mojave and Colorado deserts, indicating that many breeders winter elsewhere.

Home Range: No data found. A density estimate for California creosote-burrobrush

desert scrub was 7 per 40 ha (100 ac) (Kubik and Remsen 1977). Raitt and Maze (1968) estimated 3.9 to 10.5 individuals per 40 ha (100 ac) in New Mexico creosotebush communities. Johnson et al. (1948) estimated the equivalent of 20 pairs per 40 ha (100 ac) in Providence Mts., where it was the most frequently observed species. Stamp (1978) reported 8 pairs per 40 ha (100 ac) in Arizona mesquite riparian habitat.

Territory: Heckenlively (1967) reported territory in New Mexico creosote brush varied from 1.1 to 1.8 ha (2.7 to 4.4 ac), with a mean of 1.5 ha (3.7 ac). Dixon (1959) reported territory varied between 0.4 and 0.8 ha (1 and 2 ac) in upland desert scrub in Texas.

Reproduction: Breeds from mid-April into early June with a peak in May. Pair apparently nests solitarily. Clutch size 2-4 eggs, usually 3 or 4. Young are altricial (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Timing of breeding varies from year to year; likely related to precipitation and food abundance. May gather in small flocks in winter, often with sage, Brewer's, and other sparrows (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

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