

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

GOLDEN-CROWNED SPARROW

Zonotrichia atricapilla

Family: EMBERIZIDAE
B509

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common winter visitor from October to April throughout much of California; uncommon in high montane and transmontane regions. Does not breed in California. Prefers moist, open brushlands, riparian thickets, and understory of open-canopied forest habitats. Often occurs in moist chaparral with open patches, but typically avoids more arid sites. Sometimes feeds in nearby grasslands, croplands, and meadows. Although a few occur in montane habitats in fall, most descend below heavy snows after first storms. Small numbers regularly linger in the state until late May (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: In California, eats almost 100% plant foods (Martin et al. 1961), mostly buds, seedlings, flowers, and seeds of grasses and forbs. Usually forages on ground; sometimes scratches in leaf litter. May eat leaf buds of oaks and other trees in spring (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Also eats insects and some fruits on breeding grounds.

Cover: Requires shrubs for resting and protective cover.

Reproduction: Breeding habitat, mainly in Canada and Alaska, is in thickets of willow, alder, birch, or other dense shrubs (Bent 1968). Builds nest on ground at base of a small shrub or tree, or in a bank under overhanging plants; rarely low in a dense shrub or tree (Harrison 1978, Ehrlich et al. 1988).

Water: No additional information found. Frequents moister sites than white-crowned sparrow.

Pattern: Frequents shrublands with herbaceous openings along borders or scattered throughout. Trees apparently not required. Uses denser habitats than white-crowned sparrow.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Winter visitors migrate to breeding grounds from northern Washington to Alaska. Leave California in April and May, and often return to same wintering site the following September or October (Ralph and Mewaldt 1975).

Home Range: In San Jose, winter home range of each of 2 flocks was about 1.2 ha (3 ac) (Robertson 1957). Flocks in San Mateo Co. had home ranges of 6.1 to 8.1 ha (15-20 ac) (Price 1931).

Territory: No information found.

Reproduction: Does not breed in California; breeding season in more northern regions begins in late May or early June. Apparently a monogamous, solitary nester. Clutch size usually 3-5. Young probably breed first at 1 yr (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Often frequents somewhat cooler, shadier foraging sites than its congener, the white-crowned sparrow (Grinnell and Miller 1944). However, commonly feeds in flocks with white-crowned sparrow and dark-eyed junco. Removal experiments in Monterey Co. demonstrated that golden-crowned sparrows excluded juncos from vicinity of a willow thicket that the sparrows favored for cover (Davis 1973).

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