

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

BREWER'S BLACKBIRD

Euphagus cyanocephalus

Family: ICTERIDAE
B524

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common to abundant resident throughout most of California. Occurs primarily in herbaceous, urban, and cropland habitats, in sparse woodlands and brushlands, and in vicinity of lacustrine and riverine habitats. Uses trees or tall shrubs for nesting, roosting, and lookout perches. Most withdraw from montane habitats in winter, and many migrate southward from northeastern California. A rather local resident of southern deserts, and primarily a winter resident in Imperial and Colorado River valleys. In Sierra Nevada, has nested as high as 2200 m (7300 ft) in Fresno Co. (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Eats mostly insects, also spiders, crustaceans, snails in spring and summer; seeds and cultivated grains form majority of fall and winter diet (Martin et al. 1961). In Sacramento Valley, peak summer consumption of invertebrates by adults was 43% (Crane and DeHaven 1978). Nestlings fed almost entirely insects (Orians and Horn 1969). Gleans from ground or low vegetation in open meadows, grasslands, croplands, beaches, shores of rivers and lakes, and edges of wetlands. Apparently prefers moist ground in breeding season. Pecks and probes, turns over objects, digs for food; occasionally forages in tree foliage or hawks flying insects.

Cover: Frequently rests on transmission lines and poles. Dense foliage of trees and shrubs, and emergent vegetation, provide nesting, roosting, loafing, and other cover.

Reproduction: Nests in meadow, grassland, cropland, urban habitats, margins of lakes and streams, and sparse woodlands and brushlands. Frequently builds nest in dense foliage of a tree, especially conifer, or in a tall shrub; also nests on broken top of a tree trunk, in emergent vegetation, or on ground (Bent 1958). Nest may be up to 46 m (150 ft) above ground. Apparently prefers moist habitat, but not required.

Water: Drinking water probably required, at least when eating mostly seeds and grains.

Pattern: Frequents moist, open habitats, often with trees or tall shrubs for roosting and nesting.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Mostly not migratory, but locally nomadic in nonbreeding season. May move upslope in late summer, with small numbers reaching treeline (Gaines 1977b). East of Sierra Nevada, part of population migrates south for winter (Grinnell and

Miller 1944), and in Colorado River and Imperial valleys present only as a winter visitor. Montane habitats mostly deserted in winter, except in southern mountains near urban areas (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

Home Range: In Monterey Co., Williams (1952) found banded individuals as far as 10 km (6 mi) from nest in breeding season. In eastern Washington, breeders usually foraged near nest, but occasionally ranged as far as 1.6 km (1 mi) away (Horn 1968).

Territory: Only immediate nest area defended (Williams 1952, Horn 1968). Most aggression is between females, although male sometimes assists mate(s); male mostly defends mate(s) rather than nest site (Williams 1952).

Reproduction: Breeding season March into early August. Often polygynous; typically breeds in a loose colony of 20 nests or fewer; occasionally as a solitary pair. Clutch size 4-6, range 3-7; may raise 2 broods per yr. Incubation lasts 12-13 days. Altricial young tended by both parents. Young leave nest at 13-14 days and are fed by parents up to 26 days longer. Probably breeds first at 1 yr (Bent 1958, Harrison 1978).

Niche: Eggs and young taken by a variety of corvids, raptors, predatory mammals, and snakes (Bent 1958). Hawks and owls frequently prey on adults. Persistently mobs hawks, owls, corvids, other large birds, as well as mammalian predators. A common host of brood parasitism by brown-headed cowbird (Friedmann 1963). Joins large winter flocks with other blackbirds. Has increased range and numbers in North America along with increased human activity (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

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