

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System

California Department of Fish and Wildlife

California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

CASSIN'S FINCH

Family: FRINGILLIDAE
B537

Haemorhous cassinii

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common montane resident; breeds in most higher mountain ranges in California. Prefers tall, open coniferous forests, in lodgepole pine, red fir, and subalpine conifer habitats, particularly in breeding season. Most numerous near wet meadows and grassy openings; also frequents semi-arid forests, unlike purple finch. Occurs regularly in Cascade Range and Sierra Nevada, Great Basin ranges south to Inyo Mts., inner coastal ranges south to Mendocino Co., and southern California ranges south to Santa Rosa Mts., Riverside Co. May nest in Kingston and New York Mts. Apparently more winter on relatively arid eastern slopes of mountain ranges than on more snowy western slopes (Salt 1952). Sometimes fairly common in winter in pinyon-juniper habitat east of Cascade Range and Sierra Nevada. A rare migrant in southern deserts, and irregular elsewhere in California foothills and lowlands (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Diet consists primarily of seeds of grasses and forbs, supplemented in spring by conifer buds, and in summer and winter by conifer seeds; some insects and berries also eaten (Salt 1952). Most often forages on ground, but also picks seeds and buds from trees, and gleans insects from foliage. Often feeds in meadows and grassy openings near forest edges. Has learned to scavenge waste grain at pack stations in Yosemite National Park (Gaines 1977b).

Cover: Requires conifers for nesting, resting, singlng perches, other cover needs.

Reproduction: Usually builds nest high in a tall conifer on a flat spray of foliage near end of a branch, where exposed to sun on top (Salt 1952). Nest height usually 1.5 to 46 m (5-150 ft) above ground.

Water: Can exist "without drinking water in any great quantity" (Salt 1952).

Pattern: Prefers tall trees in open, montane coniferous forests for nesting and resting, and nearby grassy meadows or other openings for foraging.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Present year-round in lower portions of breeding range. Apparently leaves higher breeding elevations in winter, at least in some areas, and moves downslope to lower montane zones, or even lower, but winter status poorly understood. Small numbers also winter in several southern mountain ranges not occupied during breeding season (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Rare but regular as a migrant in Mojave Desert, but

irregular elsewhere in southern foothills and lowlands.

Home Range: No information found. Density was 1.4 to 2.2 individuals per 40 ha (100 ac) in a Wyoming lodgepole pine-spruce-fir forest (Salt 1957), and 6 males per 40 ha (100 ac) in an Oregon study area (Archie and Hudson 1973).

Territory: In Utah, males did not defend territories, merely defended mates from other males (Samson 1976). During nest-building, defended an area 7.3 to 30 m (24-100 ft) in diameter around female.

Reproduction: Nesting season in California begins in late May or June (Bent 1968). A monogamous, social breeder, often nests in a loose colony, even when similar habitat nearby is vacant (Samson 1976). Lays 3-6 eggs per clutch, usually 4 or 5; may be double-brooded. Incubation lasts 12-14 days. Altricial young tended by both parents (Harrison 1978). Although male does not acquire reddish-purple adult plumage until second yr, apparently breeds first at 1 yr (Grinnell and Storer 1924).

Niche: Occurs in flocks all year; even flocks of nonbreeding (?) males occur in nesting season. Pair bond may last more than 1 season (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

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