

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

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LESSER GOLDFINCH

*Spinus psaltria*

Family: FRINGILLIDAE  
B543

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common resident of most of California, but in montane regions breeds mostly at lower elevations. Numbers in winter greatly reduced in mountains, Great Basin, and southern deserts. Prefers open habitats, especially valley foothill hardwood, valley foothill hardwood-conifer, and valley foothill riparian, with scattered trees, shrubs, or thickets of forbs. Also frequents edges of denser brushlands and woodlands. Mostly limited to vicinity of riparian areas and human habitations in deserts. Fairly common in winter in Imperial Valley. Small numbers move upslope post-breeding, sometimes reaching subalpine conifer forests (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Gaines 1977b, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Diet consists mostly of seeds, with some buds, fruits, leaves, and a few insects. Commonly feeds on thistles, other composites, and shrubs, plucking seeds directly from the plants. Also gleans from ground, but feeds only occasionally in trees (Grinnell and Miller 1944).

**Cover:** Trees, shrubs, and herbs provide cover. Rests in treetop less often than American goldfinch and pine siskin, but male often sings from treetop (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Linsdale 1957, Coutlee 1968a, 1968b).

**Reproduction:** Often builds nest in deciduous shrub or tree, occasionally in tall herb. Nest often placed on a drooping branch, shaded by dense outer foliage (Coutlee 1968a). Nest height usually 0.6 to 9 m (2-30 ft) above ground (Grinnell and Miller 1944).

**Water:** Drinking water required daily, but may be as far as 0.8 km (0.5 mi) from nest (Coutlee 1968a).

**Pattern:** Requires open habitats with scattered trees or shrubs, or bordered by dense shrubland. Must be a water source within usual daily flying distance.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Yearlong, diurnal activity.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Mostly not migratory in California. Often moves upslope postbreeding, some even to treeline; may be considerable local movement in winter. Breeders in mountains, and most that breed in Great Basin and southern deserts, move downslope or southward to winter.

**Home Range:** Has ranged as far as 0.8 km (0.5 mi) from nest for water (Coutlee 1968a). Density per 40 ha (100 ac) 15-18 males in riparian habitats (Gaines 1974a), and 5 pairs in

Sonoran Desert in Arizona (Hensley 1954).

**Territory:** An area about 10-30 m (32-98 ft) in diameter around nest was defended in California (Coutlee 1968a).

**Reproduction:** Typically begins nesting in April; but in southern and west-central California, occasionally nests again in fall (Grinnell and Miller 1944). A monogamous, usually solitary breeder. Clutch size 3-6, usually 4 or 5 (Harrison 1978). May raise 2 or 3 broods per season (Dawson 1923, Grinnell and Miller 1944). Incubation lasts about 12 days. Altricial young tended by both parents, and leave nest at 12-15 days (Coutlee 1966). Probably breeds first at 1 yr (Harrison 1978).

**Niche:** May be competition between lesser and Lawrence's goldfinches for nest-sites (Coutlee 1966). Plath (1919) reported that 8 of 13 broods examined included nestlings infested with parasitic fly larvae. Attracted to salt licks and other salt sources. Highly gregarious; may form winter flocks of up to 400, sometimes with siskins and other goldfinches (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

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