

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

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH

Carduelis tristis

Family: FRINGILLIDAE
B545

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common resident of lowlands and foothills of cismontane California. Primarily an uncommon transient and winter resident in transmontane California. Nests near water, commonly in valley foothill riparian habitat; also uses valley foothill hardwood, valley foothill hardwood-conifer, orchard-vinyard, and cropland habitats. Often forages in nearby herbaceous and chaparral habitats. Less restricted to riparian deciduous habitats in winter, but usually forages in or near woodland, and requires drinking water nearby. According to McCaskie et al. (1979), may breed very locally in Great Basin, but Grinnell and Miller (1944) and Airola (1980) considered it a nonbreeder there. More widespread in winter in that region, and occurs south through Owens Valley. Overwinters regularly in southern deserts only in Imperial and Colorado River valleys. Rare in winter in coastal areas north of Marin Co. Rare but regular at low elevations in mountains in fall (Grinnell and Miller 1944, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Primarily a seedeater, but in spring about half of diet consists of insects, mostly aphids and caterpillars (Martin et al. 1961, Bent 1968). Buds of trees also important, especially in late winter and spring (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Plucks seeds from top and other parts of trees, shrubs, and forbs, especially from thistles and other composites. Gleans insects and seeds from flowers, foliage, and from ground. Requires herbaceous openings for feeding, especially in breeding season.

Cover: Cover provided by trees, shrubs, tall herbs. Flocks frequently; tree tops and transmission lines important for flock assembly and resting places. Trees probably required as roosts.

Reproduction: Often builds nest in willow, cottonwood, or other riparian deciduous tree; sometimes in an oak, orchard tree, shrub, or even in a patch of stout herbs, especially thistles (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Usually builds nest near water, 0.9 to 1.8 m (3-6 ft) above ground, but height varies from 0.3 to 10 m (1-33 ft) above ground (Nickell 1951).

Water: Requires drinking water regularly (Beal 1910). Captives drank and bathed frequently (Coutlee 1963). Usually nests near bodies of water.

Pattern: Usually nests in riparian deciduous woodland, near feeding areas in brushy or herbaceous habitats. Parents may feed as far as 0.8 km (0.5 mi) from nest (Coutlee 1967). Trees probably required for roosting, and a source of water is essential.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Mostly resident within breeding range, but there is upslope and other local movement postbreeding. Apparently only small numbers breed in transmontane California, but transients and winter residents are present there from September or October to March or April. In coastal counties north of Marin, breeding population mostly withdraws for winter (McCaskie et al. 1979).

Home Range: In 2 studies in Michigan, nesters fed up to 274 m (900 ft) from nest (Nickell 1951), and at least 0.8 km (0.5 mi) from nest (Coutlee 1967). Density per 40 ha (100 ac) was 53-205 pairs in Michigan study areas (Berger 1957), and 10-33 males in riparian habitats in California (Gaines 1974a).

Territory: In Michigan, males defended a territory about 30 m (100 ft) in diameter around nest, and built nests at least 35 m (115 ft) apart (Coutlee 1967). In a Wisconsin park and marshland, territory was 9.1 to 27 m (30-90 ft) in diameter around nest (Stokes 1950).

Reproduction: Nesting season in California lasts from April into July. A monogamous, solitary nester with a clutch size of 4-6, usually 5. Two broods uncommon. Incubation 10-14 days, mostly by female. Altricial young tended by both parents, and leave nest at 11-17 days. Probably breeds first at 1 yr (Harrison 1978).

Niche: A frequent host of brown-headed cowbird brood parasitism in southern California and other areas (Friedmann 1963, Ehrlich et al. 1988). Occurs in winter flocks of up to 300, often with siskins and other goldfinches.

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