

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

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CALIFORNIA GNATCATCHER

*Polioptila californica*

Family: SYLVIIDAE  
B553

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: T. Kucera, 1997

#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

*Polioptila californica californica* is the only representative subspecies of *Polioptila californica* regularly occurring in California. The California Gnatcatcher and the Black-tailed Gnatcatcher (*P. melanura*) recently were elevated from subspecies to the specific level (Atwood 1988, 1993, American Ornithologists' Union 1989). Each is distinct in plumage, voice, habitat preference, and abundance. *P. californica* is a local, uncommon, obligate resident of arid coastal scrub below about 500 m (1,500 ft) from eastern Orange and southwestern Riverside cos. south through the coastal foothills of San Diego Co.; along the immediate coast at Palos Verdes Peninsula, Los Angeles Co.; at Camp Pendleton and in Tijuana River Valley, San Diego Co. May still occur along lower, coastal slopes of San Gabriel and San Bernardino Mts., Los Angeles and San Bernardino cos., but status uncertain (Grinnell and Miller 1964, Garrett and Dunn 1981, Atwood 1990, 1993).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Glean insects and spiders from foliage of shrubs, especially California buckwheat and coastal sage (Atwood 1993). Also eat a few seeds.

**Cover:** Shrubs provide roosting, nesting, and other cover.

**Reproduction:** Weave a small, deep cup from hemp-like fibers, leaves, plant down, spider silk, in a shrub 0.6-0.9 m (2-3 ft) above ground (Bent 1949, Atwood 1993).

**Water:** No information found, but probably not a requirement.

**Pattern:** *P. californica* is most numerous in low, dense coastal scrub habitat in arid washes, on mesas, and on slopes of coastal hills. California buckwheat, coastal sage, and patches of pricklypear are particularly favored.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

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

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Resident in nesting areas.

**Home Range:** Probably equal to territory, at least in breeding season. Varies from 10 to 27 ha (4-11 ac; Atwood 1993)

**Territory:** Varies from 10 to 27 ha (4-11 ac; Atwood 1993).

**Reproduction:** Monogamous. Peak egg laying in April and May (Atwood 1993).  
**Incubation** 14-15 days, by both sexes. Clutch averages 4 eggs, range 2-5. Both sexes feed altricial young, which fledge at 9-10 days (Bent 1949, Atwood 1993).

Niche: Atwood (1993) reported brood parasitism by cowbirds in most of the counties where California Gnatcatchers historically occurred. Eggs and nestlings subject to predation by a variety of mammals, birds, and reptiles (Atwood 1993).

Comments: *P. californica* formerly was much more common and widespread, ranging northwest to the lower Santa Clara River and the northern San Fernando Valley, Ventura Co., and northeast to San Geronio Pass, Riverside Co. Decline has been attributed to destruction and fragmentation of habitat for human development (Atwood 1993).

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