

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System

California Department of Fish and Wildlife

YELLOW-BELLIED
SAPSUCKER
Family: PICIDAE
B709

Sphyrapicus varius
Order: PICIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Common summer resident of mixed coniferous, valley-foothill riparian, and montane riparian habitats in the North Coast, Klamath and Cascade Ranges. Also occurs on the western and eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada. Breeds locally in the Transverse and Peninsular Ranges and in the White Mountains. Winters throughout the entire state, except for high altitude regions in the Sierra Nevada above 2,750 m (9,000 ft).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Yellow-bellied sapsuckers are omnivorous. Their diet includes sap, ants, beetles, wasps, caterpillars, spiders, small amounts of fruit (dogwood, Virginia creeper, blackberries) and cambium. They drill holes through the bark and cambium in a variety of deciduous trees, as well as some conifers.

Cover: Breeds in a variety of habitats with low to intermediate canopy coverage.

Reproduction: These birds excavate cavities in dead or live trees with dead heartwood. They use aspen, ponderosa pine, Jeffery pine, birch, elm, cottonwood, alder, willow and other species. They apparently prefer to nest in deciduous riparian habitats. In Sierra County, cavities ranged from 1.1 to 35 m (3 to 109 ft) above the ground, and averaged 13.5 m (42 ft). Minimum dbh required for a nest tree is speculated by Thomas (1979) to be approximately 25 cm (10 in).

Water: No data.

Pattern: Yellow-bellied sapsuckers utilize edges in mature mixed hardwood-conifer forest, mixed conifer, and deciduous riparian habitats.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Year-long diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: These woodpeckers migrate altitudinally during spring and summer, and fall and winter. There is also some movement south during the winter.

Home Range: Lawrence (1967) noted that home range and territory are probably the same.

Territory: In northern California, Howell (1952) found 14 nests in an area 2.4 x 0.8 km (1.5 x 0.5 mi). The nests were from 91 to 457 m (300 to 1,500 ft) apart, and rough sketch maps suggested territory sizes of 0.6 to 6 ha (1.6 to 15 ac). Lawrence (1967) found that 2 territories in mature coniferous forests in Ontario averaged 2.1 ha (5.3 ac).

Reproduction: Sapsuckers breed from early May to late July or early August, with peak activity in June. One clutch is produced per year. Average clutch size is 4 eggs and range from 3 to 7.

Niche: Drilling into trees to release sap sometimes fatally damages trees (Bent 1939). Conversely, these birds may benefit trees by consuming many harmful insects. Yellow-bellied sapsuckers are primary excavators of cavities in sound wood (Thomas 1979).

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