CALIFORNIA WILDLIFE HABITAT RELATIONSHIPS SYSTEM
maintained by the
CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
and supported by the
CALIFORNIA INTERAGENCY WILDLIFE TASK GROUP
Database Version 8.1 (2005)

B315 Willow Flycatcher Empidonax traillii
Family: Tyrannidae Order: Passeriformes Class: Aves

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Updated by: CWHR Program Staff, July 2005

DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A rare to locally uncommon, summer resident in wet meadow and montane riparian habitats at 600-2500 m (2000-8000 ft) in the Sierra Nevada and Cascade Range. Most often occurs in broad, open river valleys or large mountain meadows with lush growth of shrubby willows (Serena 1982). Has been observed breeding along the Santa Ynez river in Santa Barbara Co., and along the Santa Clara river in Ventura Co. (J. Greaves pers. comm). May still nest elsewhere in lowland California, as in San Diego Co., but definite records are lacking. Common spring (mid-May to early June) and fall (mid-August to early September) migrant at lower elevations, primarily in riparian habitats throughout the state exclusive of the North Coast (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Gaines 1977a, 1977b, Remsen 1978, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Makes short sallies for flying insects from exposed perches in willow thickets or from low perches in adjacent meadows. Occasionally eats berries and seeds (Bent 1942).

Cover: Dense willow thickets are required for nesting and roosting. Low, exposed branches are used for singing posts and hunting perches. In the Sierra Nevada, consistently absent from otherwise apparently suitable areas where the lower branches of willows had been browsed heavily by livestock (Serena 1982).

Reproduction: Open, cup nest is placed in an upright fork of willow or other shrub, or occasionally on a horizontal limb, at height of 0.5 to 3.0 m (1.5 to 10 ft) (Stein 1963).

Water: No specific information found, but nesting site usually near languid stream, standing water, or seep.

Pattern: Most numerous where extensive thickets of low, dense willows edge on wet meadows, ponds, or backwaters.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Arrives from Central and South American wintering grounds in May and June. Departs in August; transients noted through mid-September.

Home Range: In breeding season, probably equal to territory. Density estimates range from 9.2 pairs per 40 ha (100 ac) in eastern Washington scrub habitat (King 1955), to 60.7

individuals per 40 ha (100 ac) in Michigan scrub habitat (Berger 1957).

Territory: In Michigan, Walkinshaw (1966) found average territory of 0.7 ha (1.7 ac), range 0.3 to 1.2 ha (0.8 to 2.9 ac).

Reproduction: Monogamous; peak egg laying in June. Incubation 12-13 days. Clutch averages 3-4 eggs; probably single-brooded. Both sexes care for altricial young. Fledging age 13-14 days (Stein 1963).

Niche: Frequently parasitized by brown-headed cowbird. Formerly bred commonly in willow thickets throughout most of lowland and montane California (Grinnell and Miller 1944), but numbers have declined drasticalIy in recent decades because of cowbird parasitism and habitat destruction (Gaines 1977a, Remsen 1978, Serena 1982). Heavy grazing of willows by livestock apparently reduces numbers (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

Comments: Formerly known as Traill's flycatcher (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Empidonax flycatchers are very difficult to identify in the field.

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Species notes are designed to support the species-habitat relationships database models in the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships (CWHR) System and are also published within the current version of the CWHR software. Please cite as: California Department of Fish and Game. California Interagency Wildlife Task Group. 2005. California Wildlife Habitat Relationships version 8.1 personal computer program. Sacramento, California.