

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

GREEN HERON

Butorides virescens

Family: ARDEIDAE
B058

Order: PELECANIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The green heron is an uncommon, yearlong resident in foothills and lowlands throughout most of California. Primarily, it nests and roosts in valley foothill and desert riparian habitats, and feeds in fresh emergent wetland, lacustrine, and slow-moving riverine habitats. Not found regularly east of the Cascades and Sierra Nevada, or on Channel Islands. Found rarely in fresh emergent wetland bordering estuarine habitats, in spring and fall (Cogswell 1977). In winter, sometimes found along estuarine waters away from trees and emergent wetland (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Fairly common April to October in the northern coastal ranges, August to March in the southern coastal ranges, in summer along the Colorado River, and all year at the Salton Sea.

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Eats mostly fish, crustaceans, insects, miscellaneous invertebrates, and rarely small mammals. Forages in shallow water of aquatic habitats or edges of fresh emergent habitats, usually along wooded shores. Often waits motionlessly, but sometimes stalks slowly (Kushlan 1976a). Sometimes dives from the shore or a branch, or stirs bottom with feet to flush prey. Rarely uses bait to lure prey (Lovell 1958, Sisson 1974), or catches flying insects while standing (Warburton 1948).

Cover: Roosts and rests in trees near water.

Reproduction: In California, nests are built of sticks among the outer or upper branches of trees, and rarely on the ground (Cogswell 1977); most often in willows (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Occasionally nests in conifers or in orchards. Usually nests near water, but sometimes far from water (Palmer 1962). Nests on ground in emergent wetlands have been reported.

Water: No additional data found.

Pattern: Prefers to nest and roost in trees near good aquatic and wetland foraging habitat.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity. Feeds primarily in early morning and late afternoon (Terres 1980).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Apparently a local migrator; at least part of population shifts southward August to March, especially in northwest. Disperses widely during migration, especially April to May and August to September (Grinnell and Miller 1944).

Home Range: No information found.

Territory: Breeding territory used for courtship, copulation, and nesting. One territory in New England, about 0.07 ha (0.2 ac) during pair formation, contracted later to the immediate vicinity of the nest (Meyerriecks 1960). Feeding territory defended vigorously in some areas, but not in others (Palmer 1962).

Reproduction: In California, breeds late March to July (Cogswell 1977). Monogamous, usually solitary nester, but sometimes nests in small groups. Clutch size usually 4-5, sometimes 3-6. Often single-brooded, sometimes double-brooded, and incubates for 19-21 days. Semi-altricial, downy young are tended by both parents (Harrison 1978). They fly at 21-23 days, and are independent at about 30-35 days. Some individuals begin breeding at 1 yr (Palmer 1962).

Niche: Population has declined greatly in California from removal, fragmentation, and disturbance of riparian woodlands. Egg predators include crows.

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B058

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