

California Gnatcatcher

Polioptila californica

A tiny gray bird with a tiny range, the California Gnatcatcher flits through coastal sage scrub and desert scrub from southern California to southern Baja California, Mexico. This petite bird flicks its long, narrow black tail as it hops through the dry waist-high scrub. The male is distinguished by his black cap and the female by her gray head, thin white eyering, and brown-washed sides. Much of their California coastal scrub habitat has been developed into suburbs, placing the California subspecies on the Endangered Species List.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

- About the size of a Bushtit but smaller than a Wrentit.

Color Pattern

- Dark gray overall with paler gray underparts and a black tail, very narrowly edged in white. Males have a black cap. Females have a thin white eyering and a brownish wash on the sides, wings, and undertail.

Behavior

- Flits through coastal sage scrub picking insects from leaves or briefly hovers before snatching an insect from a shrub. Tends to stay down in the shrubs but pops up on occasion, often flicking its long tail about or holding it straight up.

Habitat

- Restricted to coastal sage scrub in California. Also found in desert scrub and coastal dune scrub in Baja California, Mexico.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 4.3 inches
- Weight - 0.2 - 0.3 oz.
- Wingspan - 5.5 inches



Cool Facts

- California Gnatcatchers haven't been observed bathing in standing water, instead they clean their feathers using water collected on leaves by rain or coastal fog.
- Despite their small size, California Gnatcatchers mob potential nest predators including birds more than quadruple their size such as California Scrub-Jays, Cactus Wrens, and Greater Roadrunners.
- Male and female California Gnatcatchers incubate the eggs with just the top of their head and their tail visible above the nest.