

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

PACIFIC LOON

Gavia pacifica

Family: GAVIIDAE
B002

Order: GAVIIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Common to abundant transient November to early December in marine subtidal and pelagic habitats along the entire California coast. Fairly common to common in late October, and late December to early April in marine subtidal (including large bays) habitats, from Sonoma Co. south. Rare along North Coast, and few within estuaries, except near open ocean. Very rare along entire coast in summer. Does not breed in California (Cogswell 1977, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Dives for food, usually in deep water to a maximum reported depth of 21 m (69 ft) (Palmer 1962). Eats small fishes, crustaceans, mollusks, aquatic insects, and aquatic plants; apparently eats mainly fish on wintering grounds.

Cover: Sometimes comes ashore to rest and preen (on breeding ground only). Cannot take off from land, and requires considerable open water for labored take off. Often dives to escape enemies, and may stay submerged up to 2 min (Palmer 1962).

Reproduction: No record of reproduction in California. Nests in arctic and subarctic regions near water, on islets or shore, but often on shallow water. Rarely, nests are many meters from water. Nests are beside brackish or freshwater lakes or ponds, in treeless or forested habitats, near the coast to far inland (Palmer 1962, Peterson 1979).

Water: No additional data found.

Pattern: No additional data found.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Primarily in California as a migrant, with most individuals wintering in Baja California and migrating to northern breeding grounds. They depart April to May and return late October to early December.

Home Range: No additional data found.

Territory: Defends a breeding territory, which is used for courtship, nesting, resting, and some feeding. Adults commonly feed elsewhere, but size of territory or home range not measured (Palmer 1962). Apparently non-territorial in winter.

Reproduction: Courtship occurs on breeding grounds in May or June, and eggs are laid beginning in June. Monogamous, solitary nesters. Clutch size usually 2 eggs, range 1-3. Single-brooded. Incubation averages 29 days. Precocial young are tended by both parents. Young fly at about 60 days, remain with parents until late summer or autumn, and breed first at 2 yr, or older (Palmer 1962, Peterson 1979).

Niche: Predation on eggs, mainly by jaegers, gulls, and foxes, caused nest failures of 95%, 68% in 1973 and 1974 in a study area in western Alaska (Peterson 1979). Weasels sometimes kill chicks.

Comments: On wintering grounds, some mortality occurs from illegal shooting, oiling, and probably entanglement in fishing nets. Some nests are lost to bad weather; and freezing weather in late spring and early summer may prevent breeding, if breeding lakes and ponds fail to thaw sufficiently. Formerly considered conspecific with arctic loon (American Ornithologists' Union 1985).

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