

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

COMMON LOON

Gavia immer

Family: GAVIIDAE
B003

Order: GAVIIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: S. Granholm
Reviewed by: D. Raveling
Edited by: R. Duke, D. Airola

DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

From September to May, fairly common in estuarine and subtidal marine habitats along entire coast, and uncommon on large, deep lakes in valleys and foothills throughout state. Common migrant along coast, including offshore, in November and May. Recorded rarely on large mountain lakes such as Lake Tahoe in April to May and October to December. A few formerly bred in mountain lakes east of Mt. Lassen in Shasta and Lassen cos., in May to July or later, and still may breed there. In summer, rare along northern California coast (Cogswell 1977, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Diet varies; usually about 80% fish, with crustaceans the next largest item. Aquatic plants, including algae, may constitute up to 20% of diet (Palmer 1962). Most fish eaten are not sought by humans. Other foods taken, mostly on breeding grounds, include snails, leeches, frogs, salamanders, aquatic insects, and occasionally aquatic birds. Dives from water surface, sometimes as deep as 61 m (200 ft), and pursues prey underwater, or takes from bottom; rarely dips for food in shallow water.

Cover: Needs at least 18 m (60 ft) of open water for running take-off from water surface (Palmer 1962). Often dives to escape danger, and may remain underwater up to 3 min; deep water provides better cover.

Reproduction: For territory, requires deep freshwater lakes, either large or small, with sufficient food fish. Prefers to nest on small islets, but also uses protected sites on shore; usually less than 1.2 m (4 ft) from water and concealed by rocks or vegetation, but sometimes in open (Palmer 1962, Vermeer 1973). Disturbance by humans and motorboats must be minimal (Terres 1980). Same nest site often used year after year. Will use artificial islands as readily as natural ones (McIntyre and Mathisen 1977).

Water: No additional data found.

Pattern: No additional data found.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Nearly entire wintering population migrates north to main breeding grounds in northern U.S. and Canada, departing California April to May and arriving again in September to November.

Home Range: While breeding, home range is limited to the territory, except for aerial

displays and, in some cases, feeding and resting (Palmer 1962).

Territory: Territory actively defended, especially after young hatch. Territories in Minnesota were 6-8 ha (15-20 ac) in bays of large lakes (n=42), and up to 40 ha (100 ac) on entire small lakes (n=10) (Olson and Marshall 1952). If several territories occur on one lake, each is separated by points, narrows, etc. Territories in Iceland were up to 25 ha (62 ac) (Sjolander and Agren 1972). In winter, along the Virginia coast, individuals defended foraging territories of 4-8 ha (10-20 ac) during the day, and rafted together at night (McIntyre 1978).

Reproduction: Pair bonds often established before arriving on breeding grounds. Arrive in April or May, set up territories and lay eggs mainly May to June (Palmer 1962). Monogamous pairs often nest solitarily. Clutch size 1-3, usually 2, and single-brooded. Incubation averages 29 days. Precocial young are cared for by both parents at least until they can fly, at 12 wk (Palmer 1962). Probably breed first at 2 yr.

Niche: Have been observed chasing black ducks and common mergansers out of nesting territory, and wood ducks appear to avoid common loon territories (Palmer 1962). Mortality is caused by hunters in populated areas, and locally by oil spills. Nest failures sometimes caused by human disturbance, especially by motorboats.

Comments: The common loon should be looked for in its former breeding range in northeastern California. Any individuals found in suitable nesting habitat in the breeding season should be protected from disturbance, and assisted to again breed in California. A California Species of Special Concern (Remsen 1978).

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