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

SNOW GOOSE *Chen caerulescens*
Family: ANATIDAE Order: ANSERIFORMES Class: AVES
B071

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The snow goose is an abundant winter resident found primarily in the Central Valley. Preferred habitats are fresh emergent wetlands, adjacent lacustrine waters, and nearby wet croplands, pastures, meadows, and grasslands. Occasionally found in saline (brackish) emergent wetlands and adjacent estuarine waters. Abundant from November to early March, and fairly common in October and April in Central Valley south to Merced Co. Less common southward in interior, but abundant in Imperial Valley, and locally common along Colorado River, mainly mid-November to February. In Coast Ranges and along immediate coast, very rare, and found regularly only in southern California. In northeastern California, abundant October to November and February to April, but much less numerous December to January (Cogswell 1977, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1978, 1979, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: In California, the major foods are seeds and young shoots of cultivated grains and wild grasses, as well as shoots, tubers, and rootstocks of emergent marsh plants (Bellrose 1976). On the breeding ground, eats a variety of seeds, stems, roots, and berries. In the Northwest Territories, breeding adults ate almost 100% green shoots of grasses, sedges, and reeds (Harwood 1977). Usually forages in large flocks, by gleaning or grazing in wet fields, or grubbing in mud of fields or in shallow water. Also feeds in dry fields.

Cover: Usually rests and roosts in large flocks, mainly on open water of emergent wetlands or lakes, but occasionally on coastal bays (Grinnell and Miller 1944); also rests in fields used for feeding.

Reproduction: Nests in Canada and Siberia, usually in large colonies. Typically chooses a nest-site that is slightly elevated, usually inland, and on relatively flat terrain with low ground cover, and near water.

Water: Bodies of fresh water are required for drinking and preferred for resting.

Pattern: Prefers to rest on open water of lakes or emergent wetlands and feed either in the emergent wetlands or in nearby fields. May commute considerable distances, however, to feed.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, typically diurnal activity, feeding mostly early and late in day. Under strong hunting pressure, sometimes shifts to nocturnal feeding (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: California wintering population migrates to breeding grounds in northern Canada, and eastern Siberia (Bellrose 1976), and mostly is absent May to September.

Home Range: Wintering individuals in Texas fed up to 48 km (30 mi) from their roosting area (Glazener 1946).

Territory: Breeding territory is used for displays, nesting, and some feeding. Area defended declines during egg-laying from roughly 0.4 ha (1 ac) to a minimum of 3.3 m^2 (36 ft^2), or less (Palmer 1976).

Reproduction: Does not breed in California. Breeding season in Canada and Siberia begins early to mid-June. Monogamous, highly colonial nester, with several hundred thousand adults in some colonies (Bellrose 1976). Clutch size is usually 3-5, range 2-7, and 1 brood is raised per yr. Incubation lasts 22-25 days. Precocial young are tended by both parents, and remain with them until following spring. Most breed first at 3 yr, a few at 2 yr, and some possibly not until 4 yr (Palmer 1976, Harrison 1978).

Niche: Occasionally deposits eggs in nests of other birds (Palmer 1976). Major egg predators apparently are foxes, jaegers, gulls, and ravens. Egg predation can be frequent, especially in small nesting colonies, or at the periphery of large ones (Johnsgard 1975b). The major cause of death for adults is hunting, but other important factors are disease and lead-shot poisoning (Bellrose 1976). Livestock may be important competitors for green shoots.

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