

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

NORTHERN PINTAIL

Anas acuta

Family: ANATIDAE
B080

Order: ANSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

By far the most abundant wintering waterfowl species in California, usually making up about 50% of the total in midwinter (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1978). Typically occurs in lacustrine and estuarine habitats, fresh and saline emergent wetlands, and wet croplands, pastures, grass lands, and meadows. Common to abundant August to March, fewer in July and April, in Central Valley, Salton Sea area, along Colorado River, and in shallow coastal bays and lagoons. Similar abundance patterns occur in northeastern California, with fewer individuals present from November-January, except in mild winters. Uncommon to common in winter in lowlands elsewhere in state; rare and irregular in mountains. Remains to breed in summer in small numbers, common only on northeastern plateau, and rare to uncommon, and local, elsewhere (Cogswell 1977, Gill 1977, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1978, 1979, McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Eats seeds of aquatic plants, wild grasses and forbs, and cultivated grains; insects, crustaceans, mollusks, and worms, and stems and leaves. Many reports are based on fall and winter and, therefore, underestimate the importance of invertebrates, particularly for ducklings and for females before egg-laying (Krapu 1974a, 1974b). In Alberta, ducklings fed mainly on surface invertebrates during the first week and gradually shifted to aquatic species, mainly feeding on the bottom in water less than 30 cm (12 in) deep (Sugden 1973). Prefers to forage in very shallow water, taking food from surface, subsurface, or bottom, often tipping up, and rarely diving. Also gleans foods in moist fields and often feeds in grainfields, moist or dry.

Cover: Prefers to rest on exposed muddy or sandy shores, and also on shallow water. During wing molt, July to August, hides in dense stands of emergent vegetation (Palmer 1976). When highly disturbed, coastal flocks sometimes take refuge on deeper water or even on open ocean, beyond the breakers (Cogswell 1977).

Reproduction: Nests on dry sites in open habitats, often where cover is low or sparse, and avoids timbered or extensive brushy areas. Nests may be screened by grasses, forbs, marsh plants, or small clumps of brush. Nests in farmlands more than other waterfowl, especially in stubble fields. Also tends to nest farther from water than other ducks, up to 1.6 km (1 mi), but usually within 90 m (300 ft) and averaging about 37 m (120 ft) (Bellrose 1976). Also nests in emergent wetland (Cogswell 1977), often on drier sites (Palmer 1976). In Alberta, some pairs nested on artificial islands (Giroux 1981). Young reared in shallow-water habitats.

Water: No additional data found.

Pattern: Requires a dry nest site, preferably fairly near a suitable shallow-water feeding area.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, circadian activity, but most often feeds early and late in day. Under hunting pressure, regularly feeds at night.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Wintering population mostly migrates north to breeding grounds in northern continental U.S., Canada, and Alaska, departing mostly March to April, and returning July to August. Resident yearlong on northeastern plateau, and rarely elsewhere in California.

Home Range: Breeding home ranges of radio-tagged individuals in North Dakota were: 5 unpaired males, 234-1067 ha, ave. 579 (578-2637 ac, ave. 1431); 8 paired males, 498-1477 ha, ave. 896 (1230-3650 ac, ave. 2214); 15 paired females, 177-1387 ha, ave. 480 (437-3427 ac, ave. 1186); 7 pairs, during prenesting plus nesting, ave. 509 ha (1273 ac); 4 pairs, during nesting only, ave. 167 ha (418 ac) (Derrickson 1978). According to Dzubin (1955), breeding home ranges in Manitoba "may well extend over 5 mi" (8 km) in any direction from a central point. Evans and Black (1956) found that broods were quite mobile, making frequent overland trips between potholes.

Territory: Not known to be territorial. Drakes rarely even defend their mate from advances by other males (Palmer 1976). Males often chase, and attempt to mate with, females other than their mates, and this tends to disperse nesting females (Smith 1968).

Reproduction: In California, nests May to July (Cogswell 1977). Pair formation begins in winter, but continues in migration and on breeding grounds. Despite pair-bonds, there is much promiscuous mating. A solitary breeder, but may occur in high densities in good habitat. Clutch size usually 7-9, range 6-12; single-brooded (Harrison 1978). Incubation 21-25 days, usually 23. Precocial young, tended by female only, first fly and become independent at 6-8 wk. First breeds at 1 yr (Palmer 1976).

Niche: There is no evidence of competition with other ducks for nest-sites or other habitat requirements (Johnsgard 1975b). Often nests near gulls or terns. Because nests early and in open sites, may lose more nests than other ducks to avian predators such as crows, magpies, gulls (Bellrose 1976). Nests lost also to mammalian predators, especially skunks, ground squirrels, and raccoons, but including coyotes, foxes, and badgers. Many nests in farmlands destroyed by farming operations, including burning. Many adults harvested by hunters; disease and lead poisoning also important mortality factors.

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