

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

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REDHEAD

*Aythya americana*

Family: ANATIDAE  
B090

Order: ANSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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Updated by: CWHR Program Staff, August 2005 and August 2008

#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

From October to March, the redhead is uncommon to locally common south from Modoc county to Mono in eastern California in lacustrine waters where it is also a common breeder during summer. During this season it is also found in the Central Valley and central California foothills and coastal lowlands, and along the coast from Monterey county south to Ventura county and along the Colorado river. Also breeds locally in the Central Valley, coastal Southern California, eastern Kern County, and the Salton Sea. Nests in fresh emergent wetland bordering open water (Cogswell 1977, McCaskie et al. 1979, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1979).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** In fall and winter, eats primarily leaves, stems, seeds, and tubers of aquatic plants, mostly submergents, with smaller amounts of aquatic insects. On Manitoba breeding grounds, adult males and females ate more insects and snails than plant foods, and juveniles ate about equal amounts of plants and animals (Bartonek and Hickey 1969a, 1969b). Dives for food, usually in water less than 1.8 m (6 ft) deep (Palmer 1976), and grubs in bottom mud. Also tips up in shallow water, and takes food from surface.

**Cover:** Rests on open water, often far from shore, but stays in shallow water near protected shorelines during high winds.

**Reproduction:** The nest is built of marsh plants amidst tall, emergent vegetation with open water nearby. Usually over shallow water, but occasionally on dry ground, or over water as much as 1.3 m (4 ft) deep (Palmer 1976). In northeastern California, most nest sites were in bulrush, usually over 0.9 m (3 ft) tall (Miller and Collins 1954).

**Water:** No additional data found.

**Pattern:** For nesting, prefers large lakes with extensive areas of emergent vegetation.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Yearlong, apparently circadian activity. According to Cornelius (1977), winterers in southeastern Texas commonly fed during the day, although a previous study had found nocturnal feeding more common.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Breeds in northeastern California, but in some years many depart September to February. Small numbers breed elsewhere in California, but most winterers migrate to breeding grounds in other western states and Canada.

**Home Range:** Marked breeding redheads in Montana regularly moved between nesting

potholes and nearby potholes where they fed and rested (Lokemoen 1966). For 11 pairs, the distance moved regularly was 46-613 m (150-2010 ft), and averaged 165 m (540 ft). A map by Lokemoen (1966) indicated that broods may have moved at least 457 m (1500 ft) from the nest site to larger, deeper bodies of water.

**Territory:** Does not defend a territory, but a drake will defend mate when she is approached closely by another drake, or by a pair (Palmer 1976).

**Reproduction:** Pair-formation occurs in winter and migration. In California, eggs or young have been noted April to August (Cogswell 1977). Monogamous, solitary nester, with strong parasitic tendencies. Some females lay eggs only in their own nest. Most lay about 10 eggs in nests of other birds (mostly ducks), and lay a clutch in their own nest as well. Some females apparently are completely parasitic. Most clutches are 8-10 eggs, but higher averages often are reported because of frequent parasitism by other redheads (and other ducks). Single-brooded; incubation 23-29 days, usually 24. The precocial young are tended by the female only, attaining independence at 3-5 wk, and first flying at 60-65 days. Most first breed as yearlings (Palmer 1976).

**Niche:** Commonly parasitizes the nests of water birds, including other redheads, 7 other species of ducks, coots, American bitterns, and black terns. Redhead nests occasionally are parasitized by other ducks. One of the main causes of nest desertion is parasitism by other redheads (Bellrose 1976). Other causes of nest failure include predation by skunks, raccoons, crows, magpies, gulls, and flooding. The entire population has been reduced by drought and drainage of breeding wetlands (Cogswell 1977).

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Life history accounts for species in the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships (CWHR) System were originally published in: Zeiner, D.C., W.F.Laudenslayer, Jr., K.E. Mayer, and M. White, eds. 1988-1990. California's Wildlife. Vol. I-III. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, California. Updates are noted in accounts that have been added or edited since original publication.