

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

SURF SCOTER

Melanitta perspicillata

Family: ANATIDAE
B099

Order: ANSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The surf scoter is abundant October to April, and common late September and early May, on estuarine and marine waters near shore along the entire California coast. Very uncommon (locally common) through summer, when it occurs especially at river mouths and along outer coast. Does not breed in California. Uncommon migrant at Salton Sea, March to May, and rare through remainder of year (Garrett and Dunn 1981). In some years, an uncommon spring migrant on southern mountain lakes. Very rare and irregular elsewhere in interior, mainly as a fall migrant (Cogswell 1977, McCaskie et al. 1979, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Eats mainly animal foods, especially bivalve and gastropod mollusks, but also crustaceans, miscellaneous invertebrates, and a few fish (e.g., herring roe). Also consumes small amounts of plant material, and on the breeding grounds, aquatic insects. Dives and takes food from bottom, usually just beyond the breakers, or in quieter waters of large bays, in water as deep as 12 m (40 ft), or more (Cogswell 1977), and as shallow as 1.8 m (6 ft) (Bellrose 1976).

Cover: Usually rests in flocks on open water beyond the surf, or on quieter waters of large bays. Occasionally comes ashore in areas undisturbed by humans or large land animals (Cogswell 1977).

Reproduction: Does not nest in California. Based on very little information, typical nest-site is on dry land near quiet or slow-moving water. Nest usually concealed by brush or trees, in the forest zone, or semibarrens, of northern Canada and Alaska (Palmer 1976).

Water: No additional data found.

Pattern: For nesting, prefers brush or trees for nest concealment, not too far from a pond, lake, or slow-moving stream.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, mostly diurnal activity. Forages most actively early and late in day; some nocturnal foraging may occur (Johnsgard 1975b). Migrates day and night (Palmer 1976).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Except for a small nonbreeding summer contingent, the California wintering population migrates to breeding grounds in northern Canada and Alaska, and is absent from late May to early September.

Home Range: No information found.

Territory: No information found.

Reproduction: Does not breed in California. Pairs typically form on wintering grounds. Breeding begins mid-June (Harrison 1978). Monogamous, solitary nester. Clutch size reportedly is about 7, ranging from 5-9. Single-brooded. Incubation period unknown. Precocial young are tended by the female only, and may be deserted before attaining flight. Age at first flight is unknown. Minimum breeding age is thought to be 2 yr.

Niche: Little information found. Some adults die from internal parasites and floating oil. Few are taken by hunters.

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