

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

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK

Buteo lagopus

Family: ACCIPITRIDAE
B125

Order: FALCONIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Migrant and winter resident in a variety of habitats in the Modoc Plateau, northern valleys, throughout the Central Valley, and along the coast from Sonoma to Santa Barbara cos. Occurs regularly at northern desert areas, Salton Sea, Antelope Valley, and southern California lakes. Abundance varies from year to year; usually common to uncommon. Food availability appears to determine winter abundance and distribution. Tends to concentrate where small mammals are numerous. Numbers often follow the 3-4 yr cycles of small mammal abundance.

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Feeds primarily on small mammals. Also takes small birds, game birds, and occasionally fish, insects, and reptiles. Frequently hunts in wet meadows, marshes, and swamp and riparian edges. Soars in search of prey, and pounces from a hover or low, quartering flight over open areas (Bent 1937, Brown and Amadon 1968).

Cover: Cover and perches provided by riparian habitat and by isolated trees and shrubs.

Reproduction: Does not breed in California. Nests on cliffs, river bluffs, and rock outcrops in tundra regions of Canada and Alaska. Steep north-facing slopes preferred for nest site. Nest constructed of grasses and sticks. Often uses previous nest site.

Water: No data on water requirements found, but free water is available in most habitats used in winter.

Pattern: Frequents open areas near riparian or other wooded habitats.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal and crepuscular activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Spring migration begins in March or April; follows snow-melt as approaches nesting areas (Kessel 1967, Brown and Amadon 1968). Fall migration often begins in response to storms on northern breeding grounds. Usually arrives in California in October or November.

Home Range: In Michigan, winter home ranges varied from 10-16 km² (4-6 mi²) (Craighead and Craighead 1956). In Illinois, travelled as much as 3.2 to 4.8 km (2-3 mi) between roosts and hunting areas (Schnell 1969).

Territory: Frequently maintains individual territory on wintering grounds, generally 10-15 km² (3.9 to 5.8 mi²). Roosts in winter in conifer groves in groups of up to 15 (Schnell 1969).

Reproduction: Breeds in Alaska and northern Canada May through June. Single-brooded; clutch size averages 2-3, and ranges up to 7 in years of small mammal abundance. Incubation 28-31 days, by both parents. Female cares for semialtricial young and male provides food.

Niche: Predators include foxes, wolves, and golden eagles, taking mostly eggs and young (Bent 1937). Gyrfalcons, peregrine falcons, and ravens may compete for nesting sites. Red-tailed hawks may compete for food.

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B125

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