

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

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COMMON MOORHEN

*Gallinula chloropus*

Family: RALLIDAE

Order: GRUIFORMES

Class: AVES

B148

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#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

The common moorhen is a fairly common year-round resident and breeder in the Central Valley and the Imperial and Colorado River valleys. Also a winter visitor to coastal districts from Alameda Co. south to San Diego Co. At all seasons, it is closely restricted to fresh emergent wetlands such as tule or cattail marshes, ponds, and lowland streams. It is a casual visitor to the north coast and Great Basin (McCaskie et al. 1979) but has not been recorded on any coastal islands (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Garrett and Dunn 1981). Breeds rarely in coastal southern California. Formerly more common, but numbers have been reduced from habitat destruction (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Irrigation ditches provide habitat in areas where natural wetlands have been destroyed (Grinnell and Miller 1944).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Forages in dense, emergent vegetation, shallow water, or nearby muddy shores (Cogswell 1977). Often walks on floating plants and picks food from water or vegetation surface (Bent 1926), or feeds by dabbling or diving. Major foods include seeds, grasses, soft parts of water plants, insects, mollusks, larval amphibians, and small fish (Ripley 1977). Young eat mostly insects (Harrison 1978).

**Cover:** Requires dense, emergent vegetation for escape cover. Seldom swims in open water, as does close relative the American coot (Cogswell 1977). Sometimes roosts in dense brush near water (Eckert and Karalus 1981).

**Reproduction:** Nest hidden amidst emergent vegetation; constructed from dead cattails, bulrushes, reeds, or other water plants. May be floating, suspended above water, or perched on tussock at edge of water (Terres 1980). Runway to nest built through vegetation, and pair builds additional platforms to brood young (Terres 1980). Rarely nests in trees, or in abandoned nests of other birds (Harrison 1978).

**Water:** Prefers areas with both deep water (0.9-1.3 m) (3-4 ft) and shallow water (15-30 cm) (6-12 in) (Terres 1980), such as marshes and ditches, lakes and rivers.

**Pattern:** Lives in fresh emergent wetlands, with thick aquatic vegetation, occasional muddy openings and some open water. Wetlands need not be large; small patches of cattails in farm ponds, or urban parks, often provide sufficient habitat for this species (Terres 1980).

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Active yearlong, primarily diurnal. Secretive, and lives in relatively inaccessible habitats (Johnsgard 1975a). As other Rallidae, gives a great variety of call notes throughout the day. In general behavior similar to rails (Cogswell 1977).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Does not breed in western North America north of California. Winters sparingly throughout the breeding range in California (Dawson 1923), but also moves into south coastal districts, where rarely remains through the summer (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

Home Range: No data found.

Territory: Mean territory size, calculated from nest densities in an Illinois marsh, was 0.5 ha (1.2 ac) (Gullion 1953). Ripley (1977) reported common moorhen to be pugnaciously territorial in the breeding season.

Reproduction: Breeds from late April to mid-August, with peak in June. Pair monogamous (Johnsgard 1975a) but may nest in small colonies (Terres 1980). Mean clutch size 7-12 eggs (Fredrickson 1971), but may range from 2-21 (Harrison 1978). Young precocial, and tended by both parents. Able to feed alone after 3 wk, and can fly in 6-7 wk (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Vulnerable to pesticides in wetlands. Destruction of natural wetlands in the Central Valley has reduced available habitat; densest populations remain in hunting clubs, wildlife areas, and along other managed water channels (Cogswell 1977).

Comments: Formerly called common gallinule (Cogswell 1977).

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