

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

SNOWY PLOVER

Charadrius alexandrinus

Family: CHARADRIIDAE
B154

Order: CHARADRIIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

In fall and winter, common on sandy marine and estuarine shores. Nests locally in these same habitats from April through August, but the major nesting habitat now appears to be on salt pond levees (Cogswell 1977). Inland nesting areas occur at the Salton Sea, Mono Lake, and at isolated sites on the shores of alkali lakes in northeastern California, in the Central Valley, and southeastern deserts (Jurek and Leach 1973, Page et al. 1979, 1983, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Gleans insects and amphipods from the dry sand of upper beaches along the coast (Cogswell 1977). Occasionally forages in wet sand for young sand crabs. At salt ponds and alkali lakes, feeds primarily on brine flies.

Cover: Crouches motionless on sandy substrate and relies on camouflage for cover.

Reproduction: Requires a sandy, gravelly or friable soil substrate for nesting. Nests are shallow depressions in the sand or soil, sometimes lined with small pebbles, glass fragments, or gravel. Frequently locates nest near or under objects such as driftwood, rocks, or defoliated bushes. Nests also may be on barren ground with no nearby cover (Bent 1929, Jurek and Leach 1973).

Water: May stand in water for cooling at some of the hotter inland nesting areas.

Pattern: Nests, feeds, and takes cover on sandy or gravelly beaches along the coast, on estuarine salt ponds, alkali lakes, and at the Salton Sea.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Beginning in July and August, may move from northwest Oregon to as far as Baja California. Remains on wintering grounds from September through March. Smaller numbers remain year-round at the Salton Sea and at salt ponds on San Francisco Bay (Cogswell 1977).

Home Range: During the breeding season, adult generally does not wander far from the nest (Page et al. 1977). At Mono Lake, breeding adult feeds at freshwater seeps up to 1.5 km (0.94 mi) away from the nest site (Page et al. 1995).

Territory: Nesting density and territorial defense appear to depend on predators. Nesting

density was 1 nest/6 ha (15 ac) at Mono Lake, where predatory pressure was high, while density was 20 nests/6 ha (15 ac) at Monterey Bay, where predators were infrequent (Page et al. 1983).

Reproduction: Present at nesting sites from April through August. Solitary nester; clutch size 2-6, average = 3 eggs. Incubation, mostly by the male, lasts approximately 24 days. The young are precocial, following the adults to feeding areas within 1 day. The young are agile and able to avoid predators within 2 days after hatching. Fledging age reported as 29-47 days (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

Niche: Gulls, ravens, coyotes, and skunks are important predators of adults, eggs, and young at Mono Lake (Page et al. 1983). The historical nesting area for snowy plovers, sandy marine beaches, has brought them into constant contact with humans using these areas for recreation. The increase in nesting populations at salt ponds and other inland areas is opportunistic and compensates somewhat for increased human disturbance at the coastal nesting sites (Jurek and Leach 1973, Cogswell 1977).

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