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

CALIFORNIA GULL *Larus californicus*
Family: LARIDAE Order: CHARADRIIFORMES Class: AVES
B215

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A fairly common nester at alkali and freshwater lacustrine habitats east of the Sierra Nevada and Cascades, and an abundant visitor to coastal and interior lowlands in nonbreeding season (Grinnell and Miller 1944). In April, begins to depart for breeding grounds. California's nesting population is scattered across the northeastern plateau region and at Mono Lake. Negit Island colony in Mono Lake was estimated at 25,000 pairs in 1976 (Gaines 1977b), but continued survival of this population is threatened by receding water. Evidence of former breeding exists for the Central Valley (Dawson 1923). The first recorded estaurine colony, established on 2 islands in a salt pond on San Francisco Bay, grew from about 30 nests in 1980 to 670 nests in 1983 (Rigney 1983). In late summer, migrates westward across the Sierra Nevada from interior nesting grounds to winter in California and the Pacific Northwest (Cogswell 1977). Preferred habitats along the coast are sandy beaches, mudflats, rocky intertidal, and pelagic areas of marine and estuarine habitats, as well as fresh and saline emergent wetlands. Inland, frequents lacustrine, riverine, and cropland habitats, landfill dumps, and open lawns in cities (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Throughout the winter range in California, often among the most abundant species (McCaskie et al. 1979, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: In winter, this omnivore feeds on garbage, carrion, earthworms, adult insects, and larvae. It frequents landfill dumps, fields, and pastures. On breeding grounds, young fed larval insects, brine shrimp, young birds, garbage, earthworms, and insects (Vermeer 1970).

Cover: Adults roost in large concentrations along shorelines, landfills, pastures, and on islands. Young require protective cover from wind and heat.

Reproduction: Nests on islands in alkali or freshwater lakes and salt ponds in California (Bent 1921, Johnston and Foster 1954, Lederer 1976, Rigney 1983). Nest is a scrape lined with grasses, feathers, or rubble, on sparsely vegetated portion of isolated island. Nest often located on leeward side of obstructions (Beck 1942).

Water: No additional data found.

Pattern: Needs undisturbed, isolated islands for nesting. Food supplies must be close to nesting areas.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: After breeding, moves northwest to the coast as far north

as British Columbia, west and southwest to the coast of California. In August and September, this is the most common gull at dumps, but later displaced by influx of larger gulls (Cogswell 1977).

Home Range: In Montana, breeding home ranges had radii up to 32 km (20 mi) from nesting lakes (Rothweiler 1960).

Territory: Territory on breeding grounds centers around the nest. Average inter-nest distances have varied from 1.3 m (4 ft) (Johnston and Foster 1954) to 1.5 m (5 ft) (Vermeer 1970).

Reproduction: Nests from mid-April through mid-August, with peak nesting occurring in late May through June. Usually nests in colonies, often in association with other water birds (Harrison 1978). Clutch size 1-3, usually 2 (Harrison 1978). Single-brooded, and both parents incubate. Incubation period 23-27 days. The young are precocial and capable of flight 35-41 days after hatching (Smith and Diem 1972). Begins breeding in 3d yr.

Niche: The world's largest colony nested at Mono Lake until 1979 (Winkler 1983). This colony was destroyed when mainland predators crossed to Negit Island on a landbridge that emerged with receding lake waters. Diversion of feeder streams from Mono Lake into the Los Angeles Aqueduct has caused the lake to lose about half its volume since the early 1940s. Although several thousand gulls continue to breed on smaller islands nearby, survival of this population is threatened if water diversions are not curtailed (Gaines 1981).

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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 Depart. of Fish and Game, Sacramento, California. Updates are noted in accounts that have been added or edited since original publication.