

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

WESTERN GULL

Larus occidentalis

Family: LARIDAE
B220

Order: CHARADRIIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Abundant, yearlong resident of coastal California, including San Francisco Bay and the Channel Islands. Occupies coastal islands, cliffs, harbors, bays, river mouths, and garbage dumps. Nearly 85% of the California population breeds on the Farallon and Channel Islands. Populations have increased along the coast of California in response to establishment of numerous dumps (which now are being phased out), and commercial fishing.

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Forages over open water using aerial dives; on the water surface feeds by dipping. Also forages in intertidal areas for invertebrates, on nesting islands for small avian prey (auklets, petrels, gull chicks, and eggs), and scavenges in a variety of habitats, including dumps, harbors, beaches, and near fishing boats. Foods at the Farallon and Channel Islands included anchovies, rockfish (*Sebastes*), Pacific sauries (*Coloabis saira*), midshipmen (*Porichthys*), cephalopods, euphausiids, and offal (Ainley and Sanger 1979, Hunt et al. 1979).

Cover: Requires protected areas, such as offshore rocks, islands, or remote beaches for roosting at night.

Reproduction: Nests in a wide variety of habitats affording protection from terrestrial predators, including coastal rocks or islands, steep mainland cliffs, and occasionally human-made structures such as salt pond dikes, bridges, or anchored boats. On offshore islands, prefers flat or gradually sloping areas for nest site. Occupies nesting areas up to 6 mo prior to egg laying, and engages in courtship and mating behavior near the nest site. Nest is constructed in a depression on the ground, among vegetation or rocks, or on a ledge, and consists of a loose, bulky arrangement of seaweed, other vegetation, debris, or feathers.

Water: Most water needs probably met by food. However, capable of drinking salt water (Schmidt-Nielsen 1959, 1975).

Pattern: Always associated with marine or estuarine habitats. Requires protected islands or rocky cliff areas for nesting.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity; highly mobile.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: After nesting, subadult tends to disperse southward, where a milder climate and proximity to dumps contribute to survival during winter. Adult moves north or south after breeding.

Home Range: No data found, but probably forages up to tens of miles away from colonies.

In San Francisco Bay, may fly more than 8 km (5 mi) from roost to feeding sites at dumps.

Territory: Inter-nest distances have been reported from 16-24 m (53-79 ft) at Moss Landing (Pierotti 1976, Harvey 1982). Minimum distances as short as 1.5 m (5 ft) were found on the Farallon Islands (Coulter 1973). A territory may be occupied in consecutive years by the same adults.

Reproduction: Breeds colonially from early April through August. Nesting is more synchronized among members, and a colony begins later, in northern California (Sowls et al. 1980). Clutch size 1-4; averages of 2.4 (Harper 1971) to 3.0 (Pierotti 1976) reported. Hatching success has varied from 47-84%, and fledging success from 36-90% (Harper 1971).

Niche: Eggs and chicks are preyed upon by adults, but adults have few predators. Increase in gull populations in California in recent decades has resulted in greater predation on smaller seabird species, as well as displacement of smaller seabirds from nesting habitat.

Comments: This species hybridizes extensively with the glaucous-winged gull in the northern part of its range (Sowls et al. 1980). High concentrations of DDT residues in individuals in southern California apparently have caused feminization of males, and a decline in numbers of breeding males (Sowls et al. 1980).

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