

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

COMMON MURRE

Uria aalge

Family: ALCIDAE

Order: CHARADRIIFORMES

Class: AVES

B237

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Abundant yearlong in marine subtidal and pelagic habitats off rocky coasts and islands of northern and central California (Cogswell 1977). Usually found in greatest numbers near island breeding colonies (Cogswell 1977, Sowls et al. 1980). In southern California, an irregular winter visitor, and very few occur there in summer (Garrett and Dunn 1981). The estimated 363,000 in California breed at 19 sites from Del Norte Co. to the north end of Big Sur (Sowls et al. 1980). Some of the larger colonies include Castle Rock off Del Norte Co., Farallon Islands off San Francisco, Green Rock and Flatiron Rock off Humboldt Co., and False Klamath Rock off Del Norte Co. (Sowls et al. 1980). Can be found on colonies and nearby waters even in fall and winter, though in lesser numbers than in the breeding season (Ainley 1976).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Will take almost any available fish 18 cm (7 in), or less, in length, particularly sand lances (Ammodytidae), herring (Clupeidae), rockfish (Scorpaenidae), and anchovies (Engraulidae) (Tuck 1960). Also takes a variety of crustaceans and cephalopods (Tuck 1960, Sowls et al. 1980). Forages by pursuing prey underwater. Although has been recorded down to 71 m (240 ft), most feeding occurs at lesser depths (Tuck 1960). Typically forages up to 15 km (10 mi) from the breeding colony. Often returns from these long-distance trips bearing a single fish to feed young (Tuck 1960).

Cover: Congregates in large numbers on waters near breeding colony (Sowls et al. 1980).

Reproduction: Nests on cliff ledges of rocky islands and seacoasts, and on the flat tops of low rocky islands (Harrison 1978). Constructs no nest; lays the egg on bare rock or soil (Sowls et al. 1980). Courtship and copulation take place on the nesting ledges (Tuck 1960).

Water: No known requirement for fresh water.

Pattern: Requires undisturbed islands or coastal cliffs with productive marine habitat nearby.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity. Forages during the day; returns to roost or to incubate egg on rocky island ledges at night (Tuck 1960).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Many remain near the breeding colony off central and northern California all year (Cogswell 1977). Some, however, disperse after breeding to southern California as irregular winter visitors. Rare south of Point Conception, Santa Barbara Co. (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

Home Range: Packed closely together in the breeding colony, often less than a body length apart (Tuck 1960). Krasovski (1937) considered the upper limit of nesting density to be 37/m² (4/ft²).

Territory: Tuck (1960) reported that some territorial interactions occurred early in the breeding season when finding nest sites. After nest site established, aggressive behavior occurred only if unfamiliar individuals approached breeders too closely (Tuck 1960).

Reproduction: On the Farallon Islands, lays egg from late April to late June, hatches young from late May to mid-July, and fledges young from mid-June to mid-August (Sowls et al. 1980). Colonial and monogamous; pair may remain together and use same nest for several years (Tuck 1960). Usually lays a single egg once each year, but can produce 2nd or 3d replacement egg if the 1st is lost (Tuck 1960). Incubation by both sexes begins immediately after the egg is laid, and lasts 28-34 days (Tuck 1960, Sowls et al. 1980). The altricial, downy young remains at the nest for 20-28 days and then jumps to the ocean below (Sowls et al. 1980). Thereafter, the half-grown, flightless chick is accompanied and fed at sea by the male (Sowls et al. 1980) for about 3 wk (Harrison 1978). Some nest first at 4 yr, but most do not breed until the 5th yr (Birkhead and Hudson 1977).

Niche: Can be disturbed by boats, low-flying aircraft, and intruding humans. Disturbed adults not only knock eggs and chicks off nesting ledges, but also leave them vulnerable to predation from western gulls and ravens (Sowls et al. 1980). Because congregates in large numbers on waters adjacent to nesting colony, vulnerable to contamination from oil spills (Sowls et al. 1980), and to gill-net commercial fishing (Henema 1983).

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