

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

COMMON NIGHTHAWK

Chordeiles minor

Family: CAPRIMULGIDAE
B276

Order: CAPRIMULGIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A common summer resident below 2100 m (6900 ft) in mountains and inter-mountain valleys from eastern Siskiyou and Modoc cos. south to Alpine Co., thence east of the Sierra Nevada crest south to Owens and Fish Lake valleys, Inyo Co.; also occurs about coastal cities and towns in Del Norte and Humboldt cos. Locally uncommon to common summer resident in Sierra Nevada foothills from Tehama Co. south to Yuba Co., and along the Sacramento River between Redding and Red Bluff. Rare to occasional summer resident along the coast from Sonoma Co. north (McCaskie et al. 1979), in the central and southern Sierra Nevada, and in the San Bernardino Mts. of southern California. Although there is a nesting record in an alpine fell-field at 3300 m (10,750 ft) in the southern Sierra Nevada, this altitude is exceptional (Sumner and Dixon 1953). Transients outside the breeding range are rare (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Hawks flying insects. An opportunistic feeder, taking those insects that are most abundant and most easily captured (Caccamise 1974). Preferred foraging habitats include broad, open fly-ways over wet meadow, emergent wetland, lacustrine, and riverine habitats and shrub-covered valleys and plains. In addition, often forages at lights, and over most habitats, including forests.

Cover: Territory usually includes a perch for male within 23 m (75 ft) of nest, usually in a tree (Weller 1958).

Reproduction: Does not construct a nest, but lays eggs on bare ground. Preferred nesting habitats include bare, rocky or gravelly ground, burns, and gravel roofs; usually trees in the vicinity.

Water: No data found.

Pattern: Breeders are most numerous where suitable nesting sites, such as barrens, burns, gravel bars, lava flows, dunes, occur near favorable foraging areas, such as meadows, wetlands, lakes and other mesic, insect-rich habitats.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Active yearlong; primarily crepuscular, but frequently diurnal or nocturnal as well.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Arrives in California from wintering areas in South America (?) in late May and June, and departs by September.

Home Range: Little information found, but breeders apparently range many miles from nest site. East of the Sierra Nevada, individuals descend from the mountains for evening foraging in the valleys (Grinnell and Miller 1944). In Kansas, (Fitch 1958) reported a "home range" (territory?) of at least 0.8 km (0.5 m) radius. In Florida, Sutherland (1963) recorded 16 nesting pairs on a 10 ha (25-ac) flat.

Territory: Breeders defend nesting, and frequently feeding, territories. In Michigan, Armstrong (1965) observed 13 aerial feeding territories averaging 10.4 ha (26.5 ac); range 4-23 ha (10-57 ac). Caccamise (1974) found similar-sized territories in New Mexico. If food is locally abundant, e.g., large swarms of flying insects, forages in flocks (Rust 1947).

Reproduction: Peak of egg-laying mid-June to late July. Monogamous. Clutch usually 2 eggs, rarely 1. Incubation 18-20 days, mostly by female (Bent 1940, Rust 1947). Often raises 2 broods; male feeding young of first while female incubates second (Weller 1958). Young semiprecocial; fledge at about 21 days after hatching (Bent 1940).

Niche: May be excluded from desert habitats by lesser nighthawk (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

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