

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

COMMON POORWILL

Phalaenoptilus nuttallii

Family: CAPRIMULGIDAE

Order: CAPRIMULGIFORMES

Class: AVES

B277

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Common to abundant the length of the state in summer in a wide variety of habitats. Recorded only as a migrant in the Central Valley, and rare on the coast north of Sonoma Co. (McCaskie et al. 1979). Absent from interior agricultural regions in southern California. Prefers desert scrub and desert wash, as well as sagebrush and bitterbrush habitats, but also found in open stages of coniferous forests to 2100 m (7000 ft) (Gaines 1977b); wanders higher after breeding. Winter distribution not well understood. Can reduce metabolism; overwintering individuals have been found in a torpid state in the San Francisco Bay area. This may be a widespread phenomenon; perhaps more common in winter than previously thought. Winter records mostly from southern deserts and coastal areas; rarely detected elsewhere in winter. Moves downslope from mountains in winter (Gaines 1977b), in addition to a southward migration of some breeders.

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Feeds on insects caught in the air during short, vertical flights from the ground. Often feeds from cleared areas or roads in brush or open woodlands. Captures some insects on ground.

Cover: Barren to brushy areas in deserts; open, brush stages of woodlands and forests; chaparral and coastal scrub all provide cover. Prefers rocky outcrops, canyon walls or slopes in some habitats.

Reproduction: Nest is a scrape on the ground, on rock, gravel or litter of forest floor (Bent 1940). Typically, nest is placed near a log, rocky outcrop, shrub, or herbage for some shade, yet with a wide-angle view of surroundings (Harrison 1978). May move eggs several feet (Evans 1967).

Water: May drink from lakes in flight (Fears 1975, Smyth and Coulombe 1971). Inhabits many regions where open water is not available.

Pattern: Inhabits all stages of shrub areas, preferring clearings and open stages for foraging; also in sparse and open woodlands and forests.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Nocturnal in habits. Overwinters in some areas in a torpid state.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Resident in the south. Numbers detected in winter greatly reduced from numbers found spring through fall, resulting in part to latitudinal migration and also to decreased activity and torpor. Downslope movement in winter from mountains.

Home Range: No data found.

Territory: No data found. Gaines (1975) reported 9 breeding males on 40 ha (100 ac) of chaparral in Napa Co.

Reproduction: Breeds from late March through August, with peak activity in May and June. Pair nests solitarily; lays 2 eggs. One brood per season. Nestlings are semiprecocial (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Eggs and young preyed upon by mammals and snakes. Adults occasionally taken by hawks and owls.

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