

CALIFORNIA GULL

Larus californicus

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Management Status: Federal: None
California: Species of Special Concern (CDFG, 1998)

General Distribution:

California Gulls breed in the western interior of North America from Mono Lake, California north to lakes of the Canadian Northwest Territories. Breeding colonies extend east through the northern Great Basin and northern Rocky Mountain states to the Dakotas and western Manitoba. Within this range, breeding sites are widely distributed and year to year occupation is variable (AOU, 1983; Winkler, 1996). Coastal nesting occurs only at San Francisco Bay (Winkler, 1996). Recently, a small nesting colony has become established along the southern shores of the Salton Sea, California (K. C. Molina, unpubl. data), extending the species' southern breeding limit some 600 km.

Jehl (1987) proposed two subspecies of California Gull based on morphological differences: (1) *albertaensis*, generally larger in size and with a lighter mantle, breeds in the Canadian provinces and in the Dakotas, while (2) smaller, darker-mantled *californicus* generally breeds farther south and west within the Great Basin region (and includes the California breeding range of the species). This subspecific delineation has not been supported by limited allozyme studies (Karl et al., 1987).

In winter, California Gulls range along the Pacific Coast from British Columbia south through Mexico to the states of Nayarit and Guerrero, including both coasts of Baja California (AOU, 1983). In the interior of California, large numbers of California Gulls winter in the Central Valley (Small, 1995; Christmas Bird Count data), with smaller flocks of up to several hundred aggregating at the north end of the Salton Sea (Christmas Bird Count data), and along the Colorado River, particularly at Davis Dam (Rosenberg et al., 1991).

Distribution in the West Mojave Planning Area:

California Gulls are generally considered to be rare spring and winter transients in the WMPA (Garrett and Dunn, 1981), but in some areas such as Mojave Narrows and in the Antelope Valley region they are regular and locally abundant in winter. At the China Lake Naval Weapons Center, California Gulls are uncommon to fairly common winter transients (CNDDDB). Far fewer are present during winter in Victorville, at Spring Valley, Silver and Harper lakes, and at Silverwood Lake adjacent to the WMPA (Stephen J. Myers, unpubl. data). The presence of California Gulls at Harper Lake was recorded in 6 of 10 annual bird surveys conducted from 1978 through 1988 (ERT 1988).

The spring influx of northbound migrants through the WMPA begins in early February and continues through April (Garrett and Dunn, 1981). The first fall transients are usually noted in mid- to late July; hatching year birds in juvenile plumage may be noted as early as about 20-25 July (Garrett and Dunn 1981), but have been found in early July elsewhere in interior southern California (C. McGaugh and M. A. Patten, unpubl. data). The presence of mid-summer flocks (up to 60 individuals in June) at Piute Ponds and the Lancaster Sewage Ponds

(Los Angeles County Museum files) suggest that varying numbers of non-breeding birds remain well away from breeding colonies through the summer. In recent years, flocks of up to 400 California Gulls have been observed at Mojave Narrows during February through late April, and up to 3000 at the Hesperia landfill in March (S. J. Myers, unpubl. data).

During migration, California Gulls likely occur on other permanent bodies of water within the WMPA.

Natural History:

California Gulls are medium-large (21 in.; 54 cm) gulls with a medium-dark gray mantle (Scott, 1993), and exhibit little sexual size dimorphism. Winkler (1996) reported mean mass for males and females of the subspecies *californicus* as 657 and 556 g, respectively. Breeding adults have a bright yellow bill with a red spot near the gonys that merges with a black subterminal mark. Legs are bright yellow and the head is completely white. Adult plumage is generally attained at four years of age (Grant, 1986). Non-breeding adults show some dusky mottling and streaking on the head and nape, and bill and leg color becomes pale greenish-yellow. Juveniles are largely brownish, with crisp pale feather edges on the mantle and wing coverts. Subsequent plumages are progressively whiter on the head and underparts, and grayer on the mantle (Grant, 1986).

California Gulls adults are slightly larger and have darker mantles than Ring-billed Gulls; they also differ in bare part colors, with California Gulls having dark eyes and a red spot on the bill (Grant, 1986).

California Gulls begin nesting by mid-April at Mono Lake and by early June at the northern limit of the breeding range. Nest composition and degree of development varies but often includes bones, feathers and vegetation found near the nest site. Complete clutches consist of 2-3 eggs with incubation periods ranging from 24-26 days. Fledging occurs after 40-60 days (Winkler, 1996). Both mates participate in incubation and chick-rearing.

California Gulls are highly opportunistic and may eat small mammals, young chicks and eggs, fish, and a great variety of invertebrates. These gulls commonly scavenge garbage and occasionally pirate food from other species. California Gulls also forage well offshore, following ships and fishing boats (Winkler, 1996). They have also been known to forage on fruit in orchards (Cottam, 1935).

Habitat Requirements:

In the interior, California Gulls require isolated islands in rivers, reservoirs and natural lakes for nesting, where predation pressures from terrestrial mammals are diminished, using both fresh and saline aquatic habitats at variable elevations and degrees of aridity for nesting and for opportunistic foraging (Winkler, 1996). In San Francisco Bay, California Gulls nest on levees forming salt evaporation ponds. During fall and winter, these gulls move from their predominately inland breeding locations to the Pacific Coast. A few birds may remain in the breeding range during winter. As opportunistic foragers, wintering California Gulls make use of most, if not all, marine habitats (e.g., beaches, rocky coasts, mudflats, estuaries, etc.) and commonly forage in urban areas and at landfills (Winkler, 1996).

Habitats utilized by transient and wintering California Gulls in the WMPA include garbage dumps, urban areas with abundant litter (parks, playgrounds, schoolyards), sewage ponds, reservoirs, lakes and marshy areas.

Population Status:

Although many aspects of California Gull demography remain unclear, Winkler (1996) suggested that this species' current population size is greater than that during the last century. The largest breeding aggregations of California Gulls occur in Alberta, Canada, the Great Salt Lake/Snake River area and Mono Lake. Estimates by Conover (1983) indicate that California Gull populations breeding in the United States comprised some 276,000 individuals in 1982. The California Gull breeding colonies nearest to the WMPA are the major colony at Mono Lake and the small, recently established one at the southern end of the Salton Sea.

Wintering California Gulls are becoming increasingly abundant in some areas of the WMPA (K.L. Garrett, unpubl data). Currently, as many as 500 California Gulls are recorded regularly on winter bird counts in Lancaster (Christmas Bird Count data), whereas during the 1980s annual coverage of Lancaster Sewage Ponds, Piute Ponds, Apollo Lake, and Palmdale Sewage Ponds sporadically yielded only up to several dozen California Gulls during the Lancaster Christmas Counts. Several hundred California Gulls are also regularly noted on the recently established Mojave River Valley mid-winter count (Christmas Bird Count data).

Threats Analysis:

As summarized by Winkler (1996), California Gulls are not considered as agricultural or aquacultural pests, and thus, are not often shot or trapped. California Gull populations are, however, susceptible to frequent human and animal disturbances at nesting sites and to the degradation of suitable nesting habitats (e.g., land bridge connections, inundation of low-lying sites, excessive vegetative growth, etc.). Limited analyses of pesticide contamination indicated little or no threat of mortality. The ingestion of, or entanglement in, plastic, while foraging at landfills may be a potential source of mortality.

Biological Standards:

California Gulls have not bred historically, nor do they breed currently, in the WMPA. California Gulls are opportunistic foragers and it is likely that increases in southern interior California wintering populations are related to expanding residential development and subsequent enhancement of food availability (e.g., refuse dumps) in the Mojave River and Antelope valleys. The continued existence of lakes, reservoirs and other wetlands in the WMPA will provide habitat for migrating and wintering California Gulls. Given the species' absence from the WMPA as a breeder, and its opportunistic foraging repertoire, no special management policies appear to be necessary at present.

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