

A California Riceland Success Story

Despite historic declines, this graceful elegant duck is the most numerous waterfowl species in the Central Valley, and the Sacramento Valley rice country is increasingly important to the regional and continental wintering population.



Current and past population data and Regional population objectives

Unlike for most other dabbling ducks, current pintail abundance remains well below the species' long-term average and North American Waterfowl Management Plan objectives. The North American population declined from about 10 million birds in 1955 to 2 million during a period of drought in the Prairie Pothole Region in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The 2011 population estimate of 4.4 million was well below the continental population objective of 5.6 million. The Central Valley Joint Venture's mid-winter population objective for pintail is 2.4 million.

Information regarding each species' benefit to rice growers

Large flocks of waterfowl, including pintail, help in the decomposition of rice stubble in flooded fields.



CALIFORNIA RICE

NORTHERN PINTAIL

Anas acuta



SPECIES IN FOCUS

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PRBO Conservation Science

NORTHERN PINTAIL

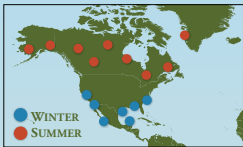
Anas acuta

Appearance



Size: 20–30 in
Weight: 18–51 oz

Males and females both have a slender build, long, thin necks, and pointed tails. Breeding males with chocolate-brown head and hindneck; thin white stripe on head meets white of foreneck, chest, and underparts; sides and back mainly grey with elongated feathers of black, grey, and white; long black central tail feathers; upperwings grey with bronzy green speculum edged buffy in front, white behind; bill mainly bluish grey, eyes dark, legs grey. Females, immature birds and eclipse males mottled brown flecked with black, buff, and white.



Range

In North America, breeds across Alaska, Canada, and in western Greenland south

to the western and central United States. Occurs year round in portions of the interior West, but winters mainly on the Pacific and Atlantic coasts and in the southern United States, Mexico, and portions of Central America and the Caribbean south to northern Columbia. Over half of the North American population migrates through California, with the majority of these wintering in the Central Valley.

Habitat



In migration and winter, pintails use a wide variety of shallow freshwater and intertidal habitats with limited emergent vegetation, such as managed wetlands, lakes and reservoirs, tidal estuaries, and bays. Also important are flooded fields of various

agriculture crops, including rice, corn, wheat, and pasture. Birds may forage in dry harvested grain fields, and at night may occur in dense emergent stands of food plants. Nests primarily in open country with shallow wetlands and low vegetation.

Food/feeding



Birds forage by picking up food items from the ground, water, or standing seed heads while walking in dry fields, very shallow water, or at the water's edge. They also dabble for items on the water's surface, tip up in shallow water, or occasionally dive to reach bottom seeds. Principal foods include grains (rice, wheat, corn, barley), seeds of moist-soil and aquatic plants, pond weeds, aquatic insects, crustaceans, and snails. In the Sacramento Valley, pintail consume predominately plant food from wetland and rice habitats in winter; animal foods increase to about a third to two-thirds of the diet in late winter and spring.

Behavior



Pintail may feed singly, in pairs, or in small to large flocks. Because of their use of shallow seasonal or intermittently available wetlands, breeding pintail have a strong tendency to pioneer new areas when wetlands are dry in otherwise favorable regions. In the Central Valley in winter, most pintail from Suisun Marsh and the San Joaquin Valley move to the Sacramento Valley by December.

Predation

In winter, adult pintail are taken by large raptors, including Bald Eagles, Peregrine Falcons, Northern Harriers, and Red-tailed Hawks. During breeding,



adults (mainly hens at nest) are preyed on by various mammals, hawks, and large owls. Eggs are lost to various mammals, crows, gulls, and ducklings to these and hawks and owls.

Conservation Status



Once one of the most abundant ducks in North America, the Northern Pintail has declined drastically since the 1950s from continued wetland drainage and cultivation of preferred upland nesting sites in grasslands in the heart of the breeding range in the Great Plains (Prairie Pothole Region).

Benefits of rice cultivation to species/group

With the expansion of winter flooding of rice fields since the early 1990s, pintail numbers have increased substantially in the Sacramento Valley, while declining in other regions of the Central Valley, and their winter survival has increased to rates higher than reported elsewhere in North America.

Additional benefits of adjacent managed wetlands to species/group

Public and private wetlands provide additional foraging opportunities for pintail, but are particularly important as daytime roosting areas during the hunting season.