

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

HERRING GULL

Larus argentatus

Family: LARIDAE
B216

Order: CHARADRIIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: E. Beedy
Reviewed by: L. Mewaldt
Edited by: R. Duke

DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Common to abundant visitor to California from October through April, and a few stragglers remain through the summer (Cogswell 1977). Most common coastally (Grinnell and Miller 1944), frequenting bays, harbors, river mouths, sewage outfalls, and refuse disposal areas (Terres 1980). Large numbers can be found in the San Francisco Bay area (McCaskie et al. 1979), the San Diego area, Santa Clara River estuary, Ventura Co., and at the Santa Maria River mouth in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara cos. (Garrett and Dunn 1981). May be seen far offshore in pelagic waters during migration, sometimes with glaucous-winged gull (Sanger 1973). Inland, rather common winter visitor to the Salton Sea, but casual elsewhere in southern California. In the Central Valley, a regular winter visitor to dumps, lakes, emergent wetlands, rivers, wet fields, and grasslands (Cogswell 1977).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: An omnivorous scavenger; quick to exploit food available in harbors, dumps (Cogswell 1977), and the wakes of fishing boats (Bent 1921). Forages for small fishes near the water surface (Terres 1980), and occasionally dives like a tern (Tinbergen 1953). Commonly feeds at edge of water for crustaceans, mollusks, echinoderms, and other invertebrates, which may be opened by dropping on rocks from heights (Tinbergen 1953). Inland, feeds on worms and insect larvae in croplands, in addition to rats, mice, moles, small rabbits (Tinbergen 1953). Cannibalism of chicks by unrelated adults reported for breeding colonies in Wales (Harris 1964).

Cover: Roosts on a variety of substrates, including rocky areas, mudflats, sandy beaches, open water, piers, and buildings (Tinbergen 1953).

Reproduction: Breeds along seacoasts, inland lakes, and rivers. Range extends across Eurasia, and in North America from Alaska to the northeastern U.S. (Cogswell 1977). Nesting substrates include rocky marine terraces, turf-covered marine slopes, grassy meadows (Pierotti 1982), and sand dunes (Harris 1964). Inland, nests on cliffs or edges of islands among gravel, rocks, and grasses (Harrison 1978). Nest is a shallow scrape in the ground, lined with grasses or seaweeds (Bent 1921). Unusual stick platforms found on conifer branches (Bent 1921), and tops of houses (Harrison 1978, Terres 1980).

Water: Occurs in both freshwater and saltwater habitats.

Pattern: In winter, frequents coastal habitats: beaches, offshore islands, harbors, and bays. Inland, lakes, rivers, dumps, and wet pastures preferred (Cogswell 1971).

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity. Often soars in loose flocks with other gulls.

Frequently lands to roost, preen, and rest in small or large groups when not feeding (Tinbergen 1953).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: A long-distance migrant from arctic breeding grounds to wintering areas throughout the U.S., south at least to Panama (Terres 1980). Arrives in California in October, and remains in large numbers through April. A few nonbreeders stay through summer (McCaskie et al. 1979).

Home Range: No data found.

Territory: In Europe, color-banded individuals returned to same colonies, and often same sites, in successive years (Tinbergen 1953). In Scotland, pairs defended small areas of about 2.5 m² (8 yds²) around the nest sites (Parsons 1976a). In New Jersey colonies, there were 3 types of territories, which varied in size with the stage of the reproductive cycle: 1. primary territory averaged about 22 m² (26 yds²) and defended against neighbors; 2. secondary territory averaged 26 m² (32 yds²) and defended against non-neighbors; 3. unique territory averaged 20 m² (24 yds²) defended against all intruders. All size estimates based on observations of 15 pairs (Burger 1980).

Reproduction: Nesting begins in late April, but eggs laid in May are most successful (Parsons 1975). Pair monogamous and may remain together for several years (Tinbergen 1953). Nests in small or large colonies. Clutch size 1-3 eggs; usually 3 (Kadler and Drury 1968). Indeterminant layer; can compensate for early egg losses by additional laying (Parsons 1976b). Single-brooded (Harrison 1978); incubation 30 days, or less (Pierotti 1982). Young semiprecocial and tended by both parents (Harrison 1978). Juveniles reach adult size at 30-40 days (Harris 1964), and fly 42-49 days after hatching (Terres 1980).

Niche: Perhaps the best known and widely studied gull of North America and Europe (Bent 1921, Tinbergen 1953). New England populations have increased dramatically since the early 1900s resulting from greater availability of food at harbors, sewage outfalls, and dumps (Kadlec and Drury 1968). Colonies with human disturbances have reduced hatching success (Hunt 1972). Sources of chick mortality include cannibalism and predation by other gulls and corvids (Harris 1964). Erwin (1971) noted reduced nesting success when nesting occurred in close proximity to great black-backed gulls. DDT was suggested as a factor that reduced reproductive success in Lake Erie (Morris and Haymes 1977). A probable herring x glaucous gull hybrid was collected in San Diego (Jehl 1971), and additional evidence of hybridization is given by Terres (1980).

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