

BONAPARTE’S GULL *Larus philadelphia*

Conservation Status

ALASKA: Not at Risk

N. AMERICAN: Moderate Concern

GLOBAL: Least Concern

Breed	Eggs	Incubation	Fledge	Nest	Feeding Behavior	Diet
May-Aug	2-4	22-25 d	unknown	coniferous trees	dip, dive, glean	insects, fish, crustaceans, worms

Life History and Distribution

This elegant gull is named after a nephew of Napoleon, Charles Lucien Bonaparte, who was a leading ornithologist in the 1800s in America and Europe. It is a small, delicate gull, silvery gray above with white, wedge-shaped patches on the leading edge of the outer wing. Bright orange-red legs and feet accent the plumage and the bill is small and black. The head is hooded in black with narrow white eye crescents in breeding adults, and is white in winter with a dark spot behind the eye. At the beginning of the breeding season, the breast may show a rosy-pink tinge.

The species has a light, buoyant, tern-like flight which helps them to capture insects in mid-air and to gather them from the surface of lakes or ponds. During the breeding season, their diet consists primarily of insects, but throughout the rest of the year they also feed on small fish, crustaceans, snails, and marine worms.

Bonaparte's Gulls (*Larus philadelphia*) are abundant on ocean bays, islands, lakes, rivers, and marshlands. However, it is one of the least known gulls with respect to breeding. It winters in large flocks in coastal areas close to human activity, but it breeds solitarily or in very loose colonies, mostly in habitats remote from humans. This is the only gull that almost always nests in trees. The combination of high latitude, widely dispersed nesting and a nest hidden among coniferous branches, makes it difficult to study the breeding habits of this species. A solitary Bonaparte's Gull may be the only sign that you are near a nest or small colony. Intruders are greeted at a distance of 300 feet or more by gulls flying overhead, calling loudly, and sometimes dive-bombing the intruder, while the nesting birds remain well-hidden.

Most of North America is home to this beautiful gull during some part of the year. In Alaska, they breed from western Alaska (Kobuk and Kuskokwim deltas), southwest to the base of the Alaska peninsula, central and south-coastal Alaska (including Anchorage, the Kenai Peninsula and Prince William Sound), and rarely in Southeast Alaska. Breeding continues east in Canada to James Bay and south to south-central British Columbia, central Alberta, Saskatchewan, and central Ontario.

At high latitudes, the breeding season is short. Flocks of hundreds and eventually thousands form as they move along major river valleys to the Pacific Coast, the Gulf of



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Mexico, the Mississippi Flyway, and the Atlantic Coast. Some migrate as far south as Panama.

Alaska Seasonal Distribution

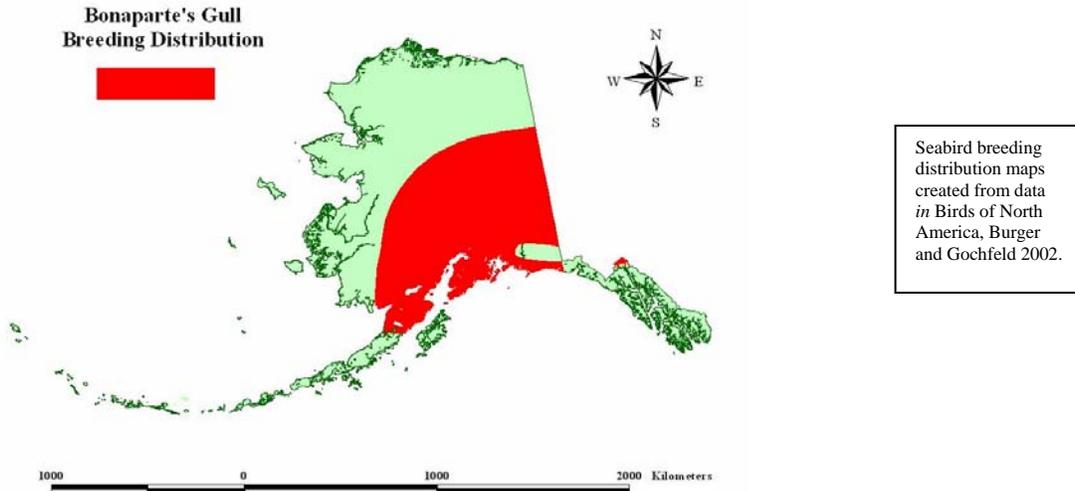
AK Region	Sp	S	F	W
Southeastern *	C	U	C	+
Southcoastal *	C	C	C	+
Southwestern *	U	U	U	-
Central *	U	U	U	-
Western *	U	U	U	-
Northern	-	+	-	-

C= Common, U= Uncommon, R= Rare, += Casual or accidental, - = Not known to occur, * = Known or probable breeder, Sp= Mar-May, S= June and July, F= Aug-Nov, W= Dec-Feb. © Armstrong 1995.

Population Estimates and Trends

The global population of Bonaparte's Gulls is between 85,000-175,000 breeding pairs. However, observations on Christmas Bird Counts of 100,000+ individuals at a single location suggest that this figure may be conservative. The Alaskan population is estimated at several tens of thousands.

This species does not appear to be globally threatened. However, there are no data on trends.



Conservation Concerns and Actions

Bonaparte's Gulls remain among the least studied of any gulls regularly nesting in North America. Data are completely lacking regarding most aspects of breeding (e.g. mating systems and sex ratios, pair bonds, fledging, age of first breeding). There is also no quantitative information about annual and lifetime reproductive success, life span and survivorship, causes of death, or population regulation.

This gull requires large lakes, bogs, and muskegs which are not disturbed by people for nesting. Such marshes are vulnerable to natural drought and draining, but degradation of the nesting habitat may also occur when development projects increase the contact between Bonaparte's Gulls and humans.

There are no continent-wide programs for management of this species other than protection provided by the Migratory Bird Convention between the U.S. and Canada. Additionally, there are no national or province-wide breeding surveys. In many regions it is difficult to obtain accurate population estimates of this bird because of its dispersed nesting pattern. Yet, such estimates are necessary for determining trends and possible human effects on numbers.

A great deal of further study is needed to understand and manage this species.

Recommended Management Actions

- Determine Alaskan Bonaparte's Gull breeding population numbers.
- Develop standardized methods for monitoring populations.
- Implement a regional monitoring program.
- Complete a nesting inventory.
- Measure productivity.
- Determine wintering areas and migration routes.

Regional Contact

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References

Armstrong 1995; Burger and Gochfeld 2002; IUCN Internet Website (2005); Kushlan *et al.* 2002. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2002.

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