

HERRING GULL *Larus argentatus*

Conservation Status

Alaska: Low

N. AMERICAN: Low Concern

GLOBAL: Least Concern

Breed	Eggs	Incubation	Fledge	Nest	Feeding Behavior	Diet
June-Aug	1-4	24-28 d	~ 35 d	ground scrape, trees, buildings	surface dip, shallow dive	fish, insects, birds, eggs, chicks, carrion, refuse

Life History and Distribution

Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) are very social, noisy birds that prefer to nest in colonies. These large, white-headed gulls inhabit a wide variety of environments including offshore islands, coastlines, lakes, and large rivers. Successful nesting requires a site near water and safe from terrestrial predators. Frequently, the nests are on flat ground, but nests are also built on cliffs, possibly to avoid predatory mammals. In some places, where food from human activities is abundant, these gulls have begun to nest on roofs and window ledges of buildings.

They are very adaptable, and eat almost anything. Populations breeding on offshore islands, or in remote parts of the Arctic, exist on a natural diet of fish, marine invertebrates, and insects. Some birds forage on breeding colonies by taking eggs and young of other Herring Gulls and other species of seabirds. In urban areas, they can survive on fish waste from fish processing plants and from human refuse. Gulls drink fresh water when it is available; if none is around, they will drink seawater. Special glands located over the eyes allow gulls to excrete salt. The salty excretion can be seen dripping out of the nostrils and off the end of the bill.

The head, body, and tail of this species are white, the bill is yellow with a red spot on the lower tip, the legs are pink or flesh-colored, and the eyes are golden with a yellow or orange orbital ring around them. Backs and upper wing surfaces of adults are gray, and the tips of their outermost flight feathers are black with white spots. In winter, the heads of the adults are streaked with brown. Immature birds are mottled brown and have about three plumage stages before full adult plumage is developed.

This species has a circumboreal breeding range. It extends from southern Alaska, inland across Canada to Hudson Bay, and south to the North Carolina coast. Breeding also occurs in Iceland, Europe, and Russia. In North America, it is a year-round resident on the Aleutian Islands, Alaska Peninsula, Kodiak Island, throughout Southeast Alaska, south through British Columbia, on the Great Lakes, and on the east coast from Newfoundland to North Carolina.

In winter, birds are usually found near open fresh or salt water. Only nonbreeding birds appear migratory; most adults remain near breeding grounds throughout the year. First-year birds winter in the southern portions of the



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range, with second- and third-year birds moving intermediate distances. Herring Gulls that nest in North America, winter throughout their breeding range and south into tropical waters, primarily along coastlines in the southern United States, Baja California, and the Gulf of Mexico.

At least nine subspecies have been recognized. The only subspecies that breeds in North America is *Larus argentatus smithsonianus*. In Alaska, Herring Gulls hybridize with Glaucous-winged Gulls (*Larus glaucescens*) on the Kenai Peninsula and in Southeast Alaska and with Glaucous Gulls (*Larus hyperboreus*) in northern Alaska. "American Birds" records suggest that the Asian race (*L. a. vegae*) is a regular visitor to western Alaska.

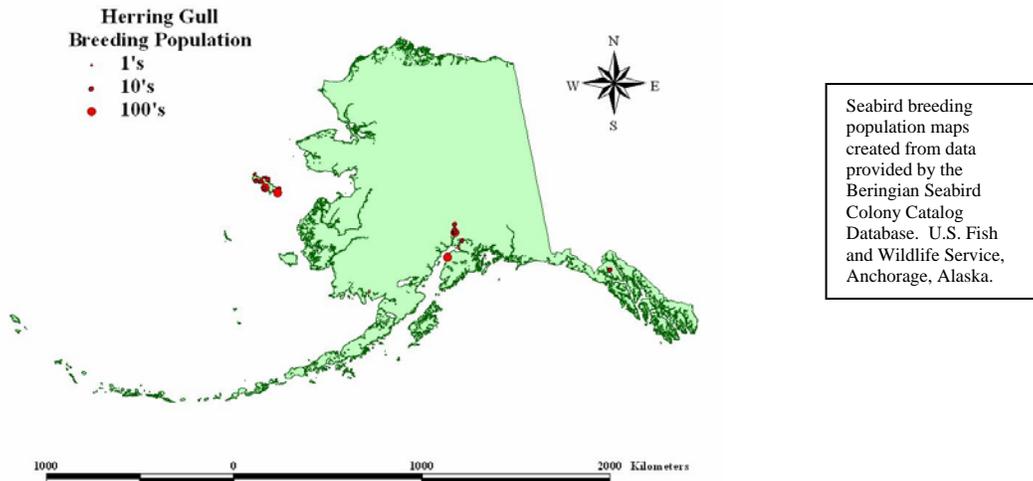
Alaska Seasonal Distribution

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

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

There are few data available for Herring Gulls



breeding in Alaska, especially those that may be nesting on inland lakes and rivers. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Beringian Seabird Colony Catalog lists 1,567 individuals at 36 colonies in Alaska. Approximately 55% of the 1,567 individuals are on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea. Other colonies or sites are located on Grassy Island near Dillingham, in the Anchorage area at the Port and at Potter Marsh, Duck Flats near Palmer, on the Kenai Peninsula at Shadura Lake, at various sites around the river systems between Anchorage and Talkeetna, and in Adams Inlet in Southeast Alaska. No trend information is available for Herring Gull populations in Alaska.

The total North American breeding population according to Pierotti and Good (1994) is approximately 250,000 individuals. Herring Gulls were nearly extirpated in North America during the nineteenth century by feather hunters and egg collectors. Partly due to protection by the 1916 Migratory Bird Convention between Canada and the United States, they recovered and may have exceeded historical numbers by the 1960s. The recovery may have been facilitated by plentiful food derived from human sources. In recent years, increases have come mostly from range expansion southward. The species has expanded south into Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina.

Conservation Concerns and Actions

The attraction of gulls to fish waste discarded by fishing vessels can result in birds being entangled or drowned in nets. In Alaska, gulls (Herring Gulls, Glaucous Gulls, Glaucous-winged Gulls) are the second most frequently taken species group as bycatch in the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands demersal groundfish longline fisheries and the third most frequently taken species group in the Gulf of Alaska. Between 1993-2003, gulls comprised 20% of the total bycatch in the longline fisheries in the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands (2,571 individuals per year) and 12% (106 individuals per year) of the total bycatch in the Gulf of Alaska. In 1999, gulls were taken as bycatch in the Upper Cook Inlet salmon setnet and driftnet fisheries. Additionally, small numbers of gulls have been taken as bycatch in the Alaskan trawl fisheries.

High levels of chlorinated hydrocarbons (pesticides) have been recorded in Herring Gulls in recent decades, and

were especially acute in the Great Lakes during the 1960s and 1970s. Many eggs failed to hatch and chicks showed growth retardation and deformities. The problem was alleviated during the 1980s as contaminant levels declined. Herring Gulls probably take in contaminants (e.g. chlorinated hydrocarbons) while feeding, but the lethal or sublethal effects on the population are unknown.

Other effects of human activity include hunting. In Alaska, Herring Gulls and their eggs are taken by Native subsistence hunters. Between 1995 and 2000, an average of 62 adult Herring Gulls and 2,453 eggs were taken annually. An additional 16,992 gull eggs were harvested, but not identified to species. Herring Gull eggs could also be included in this number. Effects on the populations are not directly known, but current harvests are not thought to cause severe impacts.

Recommended Management Actions

- Determine Alaskan Herring Gull breeding population numbers and establish a regional monitoring program.
- Continue to work with state and federal agencies and fisheries councils to measure and minimize the negative impacts of fisheries interactions.
- Work with the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council (AMBCC) to monitor subsistence use of Herring Gulls.
- Measure contaminant levels in Herring Gull eggs.

Regional Contact

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References

Armstrong 1995; IUCN Internet Website (2005); Kushlan *et al.* 2002; Manly 2004; NOAA Internet Website (2005); Pierotti and Good 1994; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2006, 2002; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Internet Website (2005).

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