

Gulls migrate great distances for summer on the Kenai

by Todd Eskelin

Spring has finally sprung and the first migrant birds have returned to the Kenai Peninsula. Many people would assume the first migrant species is a robin or maybe a Canada Goose. Actually, the goose is a very good guess and would net you the number two spot in the migration game. Number one on our list is the gull. Most people would say that gulls are not migratory, they are just dump birds. Well, after reading about some of the fascinating results from some early studies of gulls on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, you may have a different opinion of gulls.

In the early 1980s refuge staff and folks from the Migratory Bird office in Anchorage set out to learn about the colony of Glaucous-winged Gulls nesting on Skilak Lake. They found a similar colony on Lake Louise north of Anchorage and did similar studies up there, as well. I am only going to tell you about what they found with the Kenai population, but the Lake Louise population basically mirrored what was found down here.

The method these scientists chose to study the gulls was to band the chicks with a standard aluminum band on the right leg and a bright yellow plastic band on the left leg. The plastic bands had unique alphanumeric codes that could be read from a great distance with binoculars. So, toward the end of July and early August 1983 they banded a large number of gull chicks. They repeated this exercise again in 1984.

As the birds dispersed, reports began coming in from various locations where the color-banded birds were spotted. The researchers were shocked to discover that these birds actually migrated great distances each year and then returned to Alaska in the spring.

There were too many re-sightings to list individually, so I will just summarize the results. Basically, the young gulls would move up and down the Kenai River as soon as they could fly. They concentrated at the Russian River, the outlet of the Kenai River where it empties into Skilak Lake and down at the mouth of the river near the Port of Kenai. They hung around until the end of August and early September then started their journey south. Over the next two months, sightings were scattered from Kodiak to Prince William Sound.

By December the birds were moving through Southeast Alaska and British Columbia with a few arriving in California. The ultimate wintering grounds were split into several areas along the Pacific Coast, with concentrations on the Columbia River near Portland and another centered around San Francisco Bay on the California coast. Birds were sighted at these areas through February.

Surprisingly, there are no spring sightings of the banded birds on their northbound journey. No sightings were recorded until May, when they begin showing up around the Kenai Peninsula. It may just be a coincidence, but the birds might have routed over the Gulf of Alaska, making them impossible to view.

Gulls are slow to mature, and they don't actually return to the breeding grounds until they are around 5 years old. For the next few summers the banded birds spent summers around coastal Alaska and usually didn't return to their birthplace on the Kenai. Eventually, when they reached breeding age, many returned to the rocks on Skilak Lake.

The book record for the oldest banded Glaucous-winged Gull is 24 years 9 months. So, it is possible that some of the banded gulls are still around. While counting the gulls at the Skilak Lake colony a few years ago, I was able to spot several banded gulls. The plastic leg bands had all worn off, but the aluminum bands were still present.

So, as the migrant birds begin to filter in, take notice of the Glaucous-winged Gulls. These hardy birds have traveled a great distance to enjoy the beautiful weather and bountiful food that the Kenai Peninsula provides.

Also, remember to call the Central Peninsula Bird Hotline (262-2300) and report the first arrival date of any migrant birds in our area. The Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is sponsoring a contest for the person who documents the first arrival date for the most species between now and June 15th.

Todd Eskelin is a Biological Technician at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He specializes in birds and has conducted research on songbirds in many areas of the state. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.