

## Kenai Peninsula gulls: worth a second look

by Toby Burke

Our local winter landscape often seems austere and lifeless especially those vistas that take in the Cook Inlet and the lower Kenai River Flats on a somber, gray day. The Kenai Flats are vast and seemingly empty in winter if not for the occasional lone raven glimpsed and heard crying in the distance, merely emphasizing the area's bleakness.

But look more closely against the monochrome landscape and with some difficulty you may see a few random gulls flying and gathering on the lower stretches of the river to feed and rest. The gulls barely stand out from their dull surroundings and appear nondescript to most. But to the discerning eye these gulls represent several hardy resident species and not too infrequently exotic species, distant wanderers from foreign shores.

Gulls are renowned for their habit of wandering far and wide from their normal breeding and winter ranges. These wandering gulls are usually juveniles that are not yet tied to normal breeding ranges or adults that have dispersed after a successful or failed breeding season. Accordingly, exotic gull species are discovered with remarkable regularity throughout the year but especially in fall and winter. So when it comes to gulls expect the unexpected.

One of the very best places to observe gulls on the entire Kenai Peninsula is the lower five river miles of the Kenai River, from the Warren Ames Bridge downstream to the mouth. The gulls reach their greatest concentration along the lowest one and a half miles, from the Port of Kenai downstream to Spruce Street at the mouth.

Exceptional numbers of gulls are present on the lower Kenai River continuously from mid-April through the early-September. This area is the home of a colony of no less than ten-thousand breeding Herring and Glaucous-winged Gulls and the various hybrid forms of the two species as well as a scattering of Mew Gulls.

Gull numbers peak from mid-July to mid-August and occasionally exceeding fifty-thousand individuals. At this time the massive Kenai dip-net, sport, and commercial salmon fisheries are in full swing; commercial fish processors are working at full capacity; lo-

cal breeding gulls have recently fledged their young; and breeding gulls and their recently fledged young from other colonies as well as local and distant non-breeding gulls descend on the smorgasbord of fish waste along the lower Kenai River.

This same area provides opportunities to observe gulls in winter. Though the gull numbers are greatly diminished as the vast majority of gulls have migrated out of our area, it is a time when limited fish processing occurs and with it relatively small but diverse concentrations of winter gulls form. These smaller concentrations of gulls are easier to scrutinize than the vast summer flocks and occasionally yield species that are uncommon or even rare to the Kenai Peninsula.

Jaegers, skuas, gulls, kittiwakes, and terns all belong to the family Laridae or gull family. Twenty-eight species of "gulls" have been documented on the Kenai Peninsula and its nearby waters.

Our three resident, or year round, gull species are Glaucous-winged, Herring, and Mew Gulls. Bonaparte's Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Parasitic Jaeger, Arctic and Aleutian Terns also breed on the Kenai Peninsula but are not year round residents.

Sabine's Gull, Pomarine and Long-tailed Jaegers are uncommon annual migrants through the Kenai Peninsula. Likewise, Caspian Terns have not yet been documented breeding on the Kenai Peninsula but they are also seen annually after their post-breeding dispersal from colonies in Prince William Sound. Non-breeding Glaucous Gulls also frequent our area. Juveniles are observed in small numbers year round but most frequently in winter.

Slaty-backed and Thayer's Gulls are vagrants encountered almost annually. Ring-billed, California, and Franklins Gulls are vagrants observed every one to three years. While Black-headed, Ivory, and Iceland Gulls are vagrants observed irregularly, at intervals of three to five years.

South Polar Skua, Western, Heermann's, Ross', and Black-tailed Gulls, Red-legged Kittiwake, and White-winged Tern are all extremely rare with only one or two documented sighting of each species on the Kenai Peninsula.

Another location to study concentrations of gulls

is the Kenai Peninsula Borough Dump located south of the city of Soldotna off the Sterling Highway. Gulls are often found feeding in the main dump basin or roosting nearby along its perimeter. Though this locale lacks ambiance it often rewards with excellent views of roosting gulls.

If you observe any of these less common gull species mentioned above please take time to report them to the Central Peninsula Bird Hotline sponsored by the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. So get off the

couch and shake off those winter doldrums with a winter outing and maybe a serendipitous discovery of an uncommon winter gull.

*Toby Burke is a refuge biological technician who is intrigued by the status and distribution of Alaska and Kenai Peninsula birds and enjoys birding with his wife and family. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*