

## **Status and Occurrence of Laughing Gull (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) in British Columbia.**

**By Rick Toochin and Louis Haviland.**

### **Introduction and Distribution**

The Laughing Gull (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) is a medium sized gull found in the southern regions of North America (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The northeastern portion of this species' population is migratory, and breeds along the Atlantic coastline from north-central Maine to Delaware and the Chesapeake Bay area (Burger 2005). Birds south of this area along the Atlantic Coast to Florida and extending west along the Gulf Coast through to Texas are more resident in nature (Burger 2015). Within this area, breeding colonies tend to be very locally distributed (Burger 2005). The Laughing Gull is a regular breeder in good numbers (2000-3000 pairs) on 3-4 islands in the Gulf of Maine since the mid-1980s (Burger 2005). This species is now managed at tern breeding colonies, so expansion of this population has been artificially controlled (Burger 2015). In the Bay of Fundy, the Laughing Gull has nested occasionally on Machias Seal Island (Burger 2015). In Massachusetts, this species is confined to the southeastern portions of the coast, primarily Monomoy Island, with small numbers also possible on Boston Harbor islands (Burger 2015). In Maryland, the Laughing Gull is a regular breeder in modest numbers with about 70-790 pairs, with only 3 colony sites active in any one year, in southeastern Atlantic coastal sites and lower Chesapeake Bay (Burger 2005). These colony locations may change in some years (Brinker *et al.* 2010). In Delaware, there was a single large nesting colony in the 1990's in Rehoboth Bay (Burger 2015). In Virginia, the Laughing Gull is widespread, but declining along the coast with concentrations found along the barrier island and lagoon system of the Delmarva Peninsula (Watts and Paxton 2014). In Georgia, recent Breeding Bird Atlas efforts found just one nesting colony in the state which was at the mouth of the Altamaha River (Keyes 2010). In Texas, the Laughing Gull is fairly widespread along Gulf Coast islands (Burger 2015).

Birds generally leave their breeding colonies in late July to August, and are considered a medium distance migrant (Olsen and Larsson 2004).

In Mexico, the Laughing Gull breeds along the Gulf Coast on islands off the states of Campeche and Yucatán; and locally along the Pacific mainland coast from the north Gulf of California south to Colima (Howell and Webb 2010), including the Marietas islands off the coast of Nayarit (Rebón-Gallardo 2000). This species also breeds locally in the West Indies from the Bahama Islands, Cuba and Puerto Rico south, and east through the Lesser Antilles (Bradley and Norton 2009, Lowrie *et al.* 2012). The Laughing Gull is also on Aruba and Bonaire and on other islands off the coasts of South America (Bradley and Norton 2009); and perhaps French Guiana (Condamin 1978).

Nonbreeding summer Laughing Gulls occur locally 30–60 km inland from coastal breeding sites throughout their range. This includes birds being regularly found on the Great Lakes (more commonly toward the southeast), at the Salton Sea in southern California (Small 1994), along both coasts of southern Baja California (Massey and Palacios 1994), south throughout the remainder of the breeding range, and in appropriate habitats throughout Middle America (Ridgely and Gwynne 1989, Howell and Webb 2010).

The Laughing Gull winters from northern North Carolina, south through the remainder of its breeding range (Burger 2005). It also winters along the west coast of southern Baja California; along the Pacific Coast from Colima, Mexico, south to northern Peru and casually north to northern California, but is regular in small numbers on the Salton Sea in southern California (Patten *et al.* 2003). This species also winters west to the Galapagos Islands and other oceanic islands, and south to Chile (Hoogendoorn 1993, Small 1994, Howell and Webb 2010). The Laughing Gull is also found in winter along the Atlantic and Caribbean coast from Tamaulipas and eastern Nuevo León, Mexico, south through Panama and northern South America to Maranhão, Brazil (Ridgely and Gwynne 1989, Sick 1993, Howell and Webb 2010). This species is also found in the interior of Middle America from northern Durango and San Luis Potosí, Mexico, south to northwestern Honduras and El Salvador (Howell and Webb 2010). The Laughing Gull is most common in Middle America on the Pacific Coast (Burger 2005). This species is rare in winter in Bermuda (Amos 1991). The Laughing Gull is the predominant pelagic species of gull in the northern part of the Gulf of Mexico in winter (Peake and Elwonger 1996).

The Laughing Gull is a rare species in the winter along the Atlantic Coast, north to southern New Jersey; and is a casual species farther north into Maritime Canada, Quebec and Ontario (Burger 2015). This species wanders frequently in eastern North America, and is a casual in winter vagrant at various interior locations (Burger 2015).

Along the west coast north of California, the Laughing Gull is an accidental vagrant. There are 3 accepted records for Oregon by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). In Washington State, there are 7 accepted records by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). In British Columbia, the Laughing Gull is an accidental vagrant with only a handful of records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This species has wandered well north, and is accidental in Alaska with a couple of state records (Gibson *et al.* 2013). The Laughing Gull is accidental in Japan (Brazil 2009). It has occurred as a casual vagrant in the Hawaiian Islands; and is an accidental vagrant to Phoenix Island, Line Island, and the Samoan Islands (Pratt *et al.* 1987).

This species is classified as a casual vagrant in Greenland (Am. Ornithol. Union 1983). In Europe, the Laughing Gull is a rare vagrant with most records found in the fall and winter in Great Britain, but there are other records scattered throughout Europe (Lewington *et al.* 1992). There is even an amazing record of an adult Laughing Gull found breeding in Africa, in Senegal, with Grey-headed Gull (*Larus cirrocephalus*) (Erard *et al.* 1984). The Laughing Gull has also been recorded as an accidental vagrant in Australia (Burger 2015).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of the Laughing Gull is covered in all standard North American field guides. This species is medium sized: measuring 42 cm in length, with a wingspan of 102 cm and weighs 320 grams (Sibley 2000). Its sister species, the Franklin's Gull (*Larus pipixcan*) is smaller: measuring 37 cm in length, with a wingspan of 91 cm, and weighs 280 grams (Sibley 2000). For an in depth comparison separating Franklin's Gull and Laughing Gull, please read Grant (1986) or Olsen and Larsson (2003)

The following gives various descriptions of the various ages of Laughing Gull, and is taken from Olsen and Larsson (2003).

Adult birds hold their breeding plumage from April to August. The head has a dark black hood that extends to the upper nape and down the side of the face to the upper throat. There are two white eye-arcs above and below the dark eyes. The bill is dark red, long and drooped with a dark tip. The mantle is dark blue-gray, almost as dark as that of a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. f. graellsii*). The white trailing edge is narrow, and the folded primaries are long, extending well past the tail tip. They have small white mirrors. In flight, the wings are long and pointed in shape. The upperwing has jet black primaries, and the rest of the wing is dark gray. The secondary edge is thin and white. There are no white feathers in the shafts of the primaries. The underside of the wings has white axillaries, a thin secondary edge and jet black primaries. The legs and feet are dark red. The chest, belly, flanks and undertail coverts are white, as is the tail.

Adult birds hold their winter plumage from September to March and April. These look the same as breeding-plumaged birds, except the black hood is replaced with a black mask that penetrates over the crown and ear-coverts. The tip of the bill is pale.

Second summer birds hold this plumage from April to August. Birds at this age are similar looking to adult birds, but the bill is darker, the hood is duller and there are traces of brown immature feathers on the primary coverts and rectrices. There is a broken black band across the tail tip.

Second winter birds hold this plumage from September to March and April. Birds in this plumage and older show a strong grayish tinge to the hind-neck and breast-sides giving this species a characteristic dull impression which is unique amongst gulls found in the Northern Hemisphere. The black on the head is confined to mostly around the eyes and the crown. There are 2 bold white eye-arcs above and below the dark eyes. The long drooping bill is all black. The mantle is dark blue-gray, and the folded primaries are black with almost no noticeable white mirrors. In flight, the wing pattern is basically the same as on adult birds. The legs and feet are black.

First summer birds hold this plumage between April and August. These birds are similar to first winter birds, but have strongly bleached lesser and greater coverts and a dark half-hood. Primaries are often strongly faded before moult.

First winter birds hold this plumage from October to March and April. The head markings are variable with a dark area on the crown and face. There are 2 white eye-arcs with one above and below the dark eye. The facial area is white. The bill is long, black and has a distinct droop toward the tip. The back, neck and chest are gray which extends down the sides of the breast. The upper mantle is blue-gray with the greater and lesser coverts having brownish-dark feather centers and light brownish-white feather edges. The tertials have dark feather centers with white feather edges. The primaries folded are black and have no white mirrors. In flight, the upperwing shows black primaries with a dark trailing edge bordered with thin white tips on the outer edge. The underwing has black primaries with a dark secondary edge, bordered with thin white tips on the outer edge. The axillaries are smudgy or dirty coloured. The lower belly is white. The legs are black. The rump is white and the tail is black with light inner webs on the inner upper corners.

Juvenile plumage is held from August to September, and at the latest November. These birds are very scaly looking overall. The head, neck, chest, and sides of the breast are brown. The area behind the bill is whitish, and there are two white eye-arcs above and below the dark eye. The bill is long and black with a droop towards the tip. The belly is white down to the undertail coverts. The mantle and lesser coverts are scaled with dark-centered feathers with white edges. The greater coverts are lighter centered with brownish edges. The tertials have dark centers to the feathers with light edges. The folded primaries are black. In flight, the upperwing has black primaries and a dark secondary edge with a white outer edge. The rest of the wing is scaly looking. The underside of the wing has black primaries with a dark secondary edge and a white outer edge. The axillaries are smudgy or dirty looking. The wings are elongated and project well past the tail tip. The rump is white and the tail is all black. The legs and feet are black.

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

The Laughing Gull is an accidental species in British Columbia with 3 provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The first record for the province was a 1st summer-plumaged bird found near the base of the Iona Island South Jetty base in a flock of Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) by French Canadian birders Jacques Lachance, Claude Nadeau, and Rick Toochin on July 28, 1998 (Plath 2000, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The bird was as close as 75m from the observers before getting up and flying southward (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). The second record for British Columbia was an adult in winter plumage found by Mike Shepard as it flew close by the BC Ferry "Queen of Cowichan", off the southwest corner of Bowen Island on August 12, 2004 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The third record for the province was an adult in full breeding plumage found by Rick Toochin and Louis Haviland from the Sheringham Lighthouse in Shirley on Vancouver Island on July 4, 2009 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This bird was found amongst a large flock of 15+ Heermann's Gulls (*Larus heermanni*), and several 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> summer California Gulls (*Larus californicus*) (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). It was viewed through telescopes at a distance of less than 100 m from shore before it flew east towards Sooke (R. Toochin Pers. Obs.). To date, all Laughing Gull records for British Columbia have come from the summer months. The timing of these records fits within an established pattern of post-breeding dispersal in July and August (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The pattern of vagrancy in British Columbia is only just developing, but does somewhat mirror Washington State's 7 records that fall between May 10 – September 1 with two records for July (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2014). In the El Nino year of 1982-83, there were 2 coastal records of Laughing Gull in Washington State that suggested these birds travelled with northbound Heermann's Gulls (Wahl *et al.* 2005). This species is classified as a regular post breeding wanderer in southern California at the Salton Sea, and birds will wander up the coastline to northern parts of the state (Small 1994). Though exceptionally rare north of California, it is possible in El Nino years in the future that the Laughing Gull will be found again in British Columbia. Keen observers should check beach and estuary habitats for this beautiful southern gull.



Figure 1: Laughing Gull adult in breeding plumage taken in central Florida on May 12, 2012.  
Photo © Michael Ashbee <http://www.mikeashbeephotography.com/>.

**Table 1: Records of Laughing Gull for British Columbia:**

- 1.(1) 1st summer plumage July 28, 1998: Jacques Lachance, Claude Nadeau, Rick Toochin: Iona Island South Jetty Base, Richmond (Bowling 1998d, Plath 2000, Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 2.(1) adult winter August 12, 2004: Mike Shepard: on BC Ferry "Queen of Cowichan", off SW corner of Bowen Island (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 3.(1) adult breeding plumage July 4, 2009: Rick Toochin, Louis Haviland: Shirley (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

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