

## The Great Black-backed Gull: a Gulf Coast status review

Robert A. Duncan

**T**HE GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus marinus*) is a large conspicuous gull easily identified in adult plumage. As recently as 1966, W. Earl Godfrey (1966) described it as breeding along the east coast of North America only as far south as New York and wintering south to North Carolina. Since then it has expanded its United States' breeding range south as far as North Carolina, has become a regular winter visitor to the central east coast of Florida and has now extended its range to the Gulf Coast of the United States.

In the early 1970s, the Great Black-backed Gull had begun to extend its breeding range southward along the Middle Atlantic Coast from its traditional colonies in New England. As many as 45 pairs were nesting in the Chesapeake Bay area by the summer of 1978 (Scott 1978), and a small colony had been established as far south as North Carolina (Parnell & Soots 1975). Its winter range underwent a dramatic expansion as well. Thomas D. Burleigh (1958) cited one record for Georgia, a bird collected in 1910. It has since been recorded fairly regularly on coastal Georgia Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) with as many as 14 individuals counted in 1971 (Cruikshank 1972). Arthur H. Howell (1932) considered it a rare straggler to Florida's northeast coast, but it is now a common winter visitor there as evidenced by the 93 counted on the Jacksonville CBC and 115 on the Cocoa CBC in 1979 (Sykes 1979). Its winter range now extends all the way down the Florida east coast to the Keys (Stevenson 1978). Gulf Coast sightings of Great Black-backed Gulls began in the 1950s but increased by the 1970s when it was occurring with regularity. Usually single adult birds were involved. A summary of its status by regions follows.

**Alabama:** First recorded at Cochrane Causeway, Mobile Bay, on Dec. 28, 1956 (Imhof 1976). There have been

seven additional sightings along Alabama's coast, one in 1959, two in 1963 and one each in 1971, 1972, 1973 and 1974.

**Peninsular Florida:** It had not reached Florida's Gulf Coast by the time Sprunt's *Florida Birdlife* (1954) was published. It was considered rare on the St. Petersburg CBC as late as 1970 but has been counted on every CBC since. At least four adults wintered along the Sunshine Skyway of Tampa Bay during 1977-78 (Lyn Atherton, pers. comm.).

**Northern Florida:** No records prior to 1961. On Dec. 28, 1961, a first-year bird was collected near Panacea by Lovett

Williams, Jr. and Ernest Stevenson, establishing the first record for the region (Henry M. Stevenson, pers. comm.). Two more were found in the area in the 1960s: a first-year bird seen in St. George Sound on Oct. 17, 1964 by Frank and Mary Ann Olsen and Henry M. Stevenson, and one of unknown age seen off Shell Point, Wakulla County, on Jan. 2, 1965 by John C. Ogden *et al.* (Henry M. Stevenson, pers. comm.). Its expansion westward along the Florida Gulf Coast continued on Mar. 29, 1973 when a bird was seen at Panama City by Steve Stedman (Kennedy 1973), a single adult at Destin, Okaloosa County on Nov. 19, 1974 (Purrington 1975), and two adults at Pensacola in extreme western Florida on Feb. 15, 1975 (Hamilton 1975). There have been at least 15 occurrences in Northwest Florida in the 1970s including a spring sighting of an adult bird by the author on May 21, 1979 at Pensacola Beach and a summer record of an adult seen by Mike Bagley at Ft. Pickens on Aug. 22, 1979.

**Mississippi:** No records.

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*Louisiana:* No records.

*Texas:* Placed on Texas' hypothetical list (Oberholser 1974) based on sightings of immatures in 1949 and 1953. Subsequently, there have been at least six additional records, including at least one adult, between 1973 and 1979. It had reached extreme South Texas with an individual wintering at Laguna Atascosa in 1979 (Webster 1979).

Most Gulf records involve single adult birds observed between October and March, often at the same location and in consecutive years as evidenced by sightings of a single adult, possibly the same individual, which has arrived at Destin, Florida, between mid-November and mid-December every year from 1974 to the present. But the possibility that less conspicuous immature birds have been overlooked should be considered. Thus, although large numbers of individuals are not occurring, the Great Black-backed Gull is now a regular feature of Gulf Coast birdlife and should be considered a rare but regular visitor.

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### ERRATUM

In a recent note on "Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*) breeding in Massachusetts," *American Birds* 34(6):867, I implied that Jehl (1970) gives the incubation period for that species as 14-17 days. That is incorrect. Jehl reported incubation for *Calidris minutilla* as lasting 20-21 days, with a spread in hatching period (i.e. onset of breeding) for the population as a whole of 14 to 17 days. I thank Dr. Jehl for bringing this to my attention. *Kathleen S. Anderson, Manomet Bird Observatory, Manomet, Massachusetts 02345.*



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