Discovery and Nesting of the Little Gull on North Limestone Island, Georgian Bay, Lake Huron, 1979-1991

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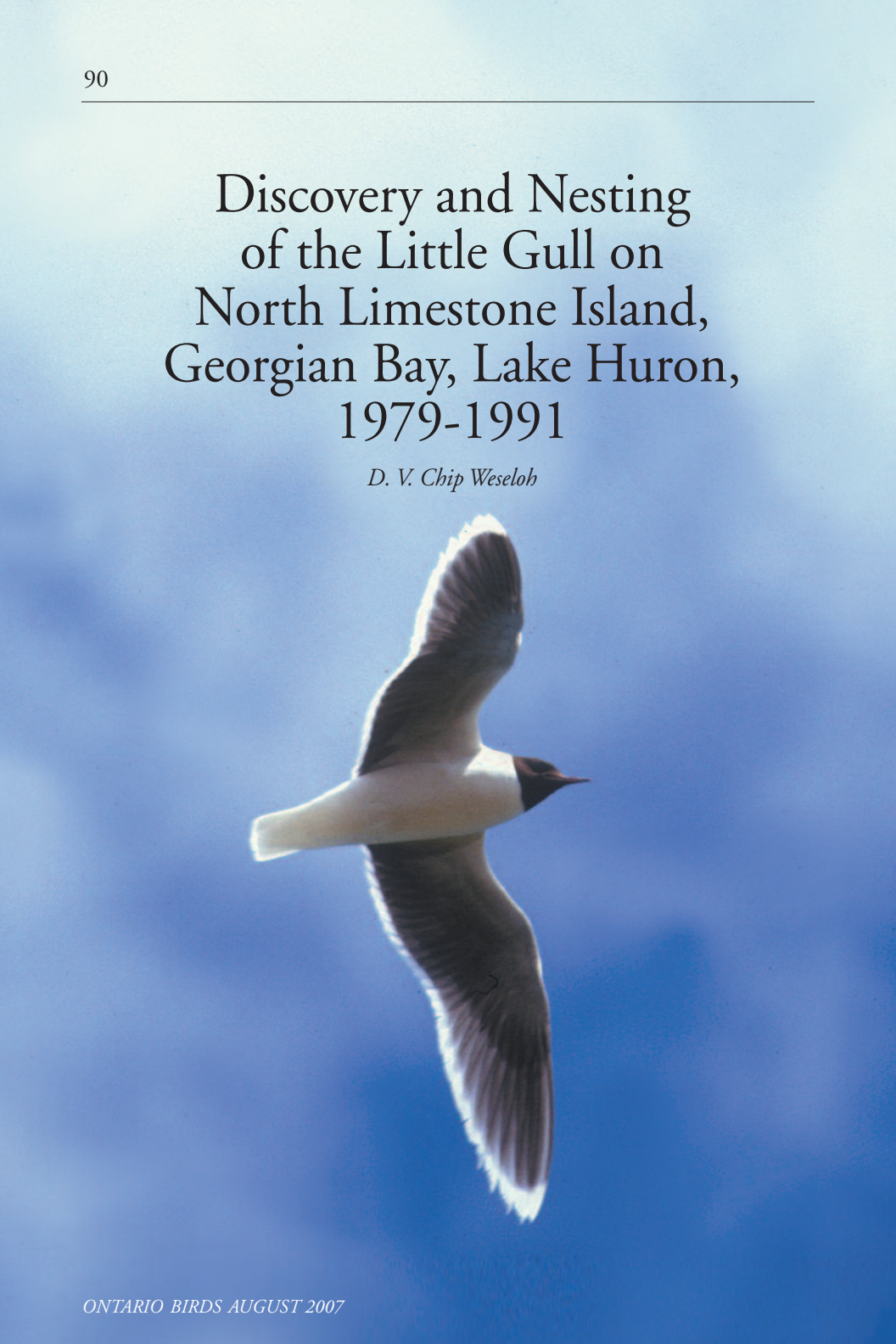


Introduction

The Little Gull (*Larus minutus)* is a rare breeding bird in North America. It has bred "locally…along the Great Lakes in northern Wisconsin (Manitowac and Brown counties), northern Michigan (Upper Peninsula) and southern Ontario (Rondeau, Pickering, Toronto and Parry Sound) and in Manitoba…" (A.O.U. 1983). [The Pickering and Toronto locations cited above should more properly be Whitby and Oshawa, respectively (Tozer and Richards, 1974).] It has also been found nesting in the St. Lawrence River in Quebec (Bannon 1983) and in southern Minnesota (Schladweiler 1986). Most of these sites had confirmed nestings of Little Gull for one to two years only, while the maximum duration was five years. In Ontario during the 1960s and early 1970s, Little Gulls were found nesting at Second Marsh in Oshawa (Scott 1963), at Rondeau Provincial Park near Blenheim and at Cranberry Marsh at Whitby (Richards 1973, Tozer and Richards 1974, Speirs 1985). Since the early 1970s, Little Gulls have also been found nesting at Bassett Island near Wallaceberg (Rider 1979), North Limestone Island near Parry Sound (Goodwin 1981; Weir 1983, 1984, 1989; this paper) and at two sites near the James/Hudson Bay coastline in extreme northern Ontario (Carpentier 1986, Weseloh 1987, 1994). Of these seven known nesting sites in Ontario, that at North Limestone Island appears

Figure 1. *left and inset:*
Adult Little Gulls in flight showing the distinctive black underwing.
Photos: Richard Joos

to be the one which has been used most often and most consistently (Weseloh 1994). The purpose of this note is to document the nesting status of Little Gulls on North Limestone Island since 1979, when they were first discovered there, and to provide details of their discovery and disappearance. An update on current findings of Little Gulls in eastern North America is also given.

Methods

North Limestone Island (NLI) is located in east-central Georgian Bay, approximately 25km WNW of Parry Sound, Ontario; it is 11 km offshore, due west of the nearest point of mainland at Dillon. The island itself measures approximately 1100m x 400m. Since 1985, the island has been designated a Provincial Nature Reserve (J.Gardiner, pers. comm.). Since at least 1979, it has been visited opportunistically by different observers in a variety of capacities, *e.g.* by local cottagers (*e.g.* John and Margaret Catto, Reid and Margaret Wilson), by ornithologists engaged in local research (*e.g.* Quinn 1981), by Canadian Wildlife Service researchers censusing waterbird colonies (*e.g.* Weseloh *et al.* 1986, Blokpoel and Scharf 1991), by birdwatchers during organized outings and by staff of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources — Parry Sound office. Most visits were made during the last two weeks of June but in some years occurred as early as May or as late as August/September. NLI is a fairly remote location: access to it can be difficult and, until recently, it was not visited by ornithologists on a regular basis. Since 1980, the island has been included in the three Great Lakes-wide decadal surveys for nesting colonial waterbirds coordinated jointly by the Canadian Wildlife Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: 1980 (Weseloh *et al.* 1986), 1989 (Blokpoel and Tessier 1997) and 1997 (CWS, unpubl.). Other colonial waterbirds found nesting on NLI since 1980 have included as many as 117 pairs of Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*), 15^{+} pairs of Ring-billed Gulls (*L. delawarensis*) (both in 1980) and 1339 pairs of Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*) (in 1998) (Weseloh *et al.* 1986; Blokpoel and Tessier 1997; CWS unpubl.).

In most years when I visited North Limestone Island (1981-1991), I first searched for the presence of Little Gulls by traversing the small marsh on the north shore of the west end of the island. Adult Little Gulls (Figure 1) were seldom seen to flush from this area but they were noted easily (by their black underwing) flying overhead among the hundreds of Common Terns that nested in the immediate area. Nesting by Little Gulls was then confirmed by withdrawing from the area and noting where they resettled in the vegetation and then finding the nest. Although Little Gulls always nested near the Common Terns, they always nested in a slightly different habitat. Common Terns nested on dry ground in short vegetation near water; Little Gulls nested in very shallow water (2–5cm) in thick short vegetation (sedges).

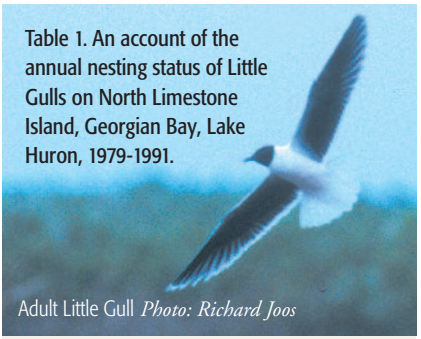
When nests of Little Gulls were confirmed, I recorded contents and their condition. I did not usually make subsequent trips to the island in a given year, so the final outcome of most nesting attempts was not determined. With the apparent abandonment of NLI by Little Gulls by 1991, I no longer visited the island regularly.

Results and Discussion

A detailed listing of the annual nesting status of the Little Gull on North Limestone Island from 1979 to 1991 is given in Table 1. Unconfirmed or probable nestings were not included in an earlier tabulation and one confirmed nesting had been overlooked (cf. Weseloh 1994). There are records of Little Gulls on NLI in nine of the 13 years from 1979 to 1991. In seven of those nine years, three or more adults were seen. Single individuals were reported in 1985 and 1990; five adults were seen in 1984 and seven in 1989. The only years the island was visited and Little Gulls were not seen were 1980 and 1991; in the latter year, Common Terns had already vacated the island (see below).

A total of six confirmed nests was found on NLI in four different years: 1979, 1983, 1984 (two nests) and 1989 (two nests). In addition, based on the presence and behaviour of adults, I am reasonably confident that Little Gulls also nested on NLI in 1981 and 1987 but I did not locate a nest. They may have nested there in 1986. Thus, based on field observations, Little Gulls probably nested at the NLI site in six, perhaps seven, of the years 1979 – 1991.

Table 1. An account of the annual nesting status of Little Gulls on North Limestone Island, Georgian Bay, Lake Huron, 1979-1991.



Adult Little Gull *Photo: Richard Joos*

1979: 8 July: Visited by Margaret and John Catto, and Tom and Jim Quinn; 4 adult Little Gulls display nest defence behaviour. Returned on 10 July when 1 chick was found and adults were photographed (Mills 1981; Speirs 1985). Status: a minimum of 1 nest produced at least 1 young.

1980: 17 May: Observer present – not familiar with Little Gulls, status unknown.

1981: 1 June: Three Little Gulls fly overhead and swoop at me as I walk through the marsh area on the northwest side of the island. I could not locate the nest or confirm nesting although I saw the birds land in the marsh vegetation on several occasions. Status: Probably at least 1 nest.

1982: No known records.

1983: 25 June: One nest found with 2 young and 1 pipped egg; 4 adults present. I could not relocate nests or any young on 14 July. Status: 1 nest hatched 2 and probably 3 young.

1984: 16 June: One nest with 3 eggs; 3 adults present. Status: 1 nest 3 eggs, fate unknown.

1984: 21 July: Five adult Little Gulls seen, 1 nest with 3 eggs (J. Gardiner, pers. comm.). Probably a different nest from the one found on 16 June. Status: a second nest with 3 eggs in 1984, fate unknown.

1985: 25 May: At least 1adult flying over the island (J. Gardiner, pers. comm.).

1986: 27 May: Three adults noted by H. Blokpoel (Blokpoel & Scharf 1991, J. Gardiner, pers. comm.) while censusing Common Terns but no attempts were made to locate nests.

1987: 23 June: Four adults circle overhead during search of traditional nesting area. No nests found in quick search but presumably there is at least 1 nest, possibly 2. Status: 1-2 probable nests.

1988: No known records.

1989: 6 June: Two nests with 3 eggs each; 7 adults present. I could not relocate nests on 25 June. Status: 2 nests, 6 eggs.

1990: 7 June: One adult observed but no sign of nesting (P. Ewins, pers. comm.). Visited by me on 23 June but no Little Gulls seen.

1991: No Little Gulls seen but Common Tern colony deserted North Limestone Island and appeared to move to South Limestone Island where several hundred Commons had begun nesting.

The Nest Site

In the years that nesting was confirmed or suspected, the Little Gulls had built their nest, or focused their activity, on the southern edge of a small, shallow (ephemeral) marshy area on the north side of the west end of the island (Figure 2). The marsh was about 30 by 20m and was set back about 30 – 40m from the north shore of the lake behind a very gradually-sloping, broad limestone beach. It is probably fed or maintained by water from the lake that would reach it during heavy gales. The marsh typically dried out in

Figure 2. North Limestone Island: the marshy area adjacent to which the Little Gulls nested. *Her Majesty The Queen in Right of Canada; Photo: Chip Weseloh*

August. However, I have never noticed any indication that the marsh or the nesting area of the Little Gulls had been awash recently or severely eroded by storm action. There was substantial and well-rooted shrubby vegetation between the marsh and the lake and a good growth of sedges (*Carex* sp.), Poison Ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) and other grassy and herbaceous vegetation around the marsh. On my visits, the water depth in the marsh ranged from approximately 10 to 30cm deep and in some years it was mostly wet, shallow mud. The substrate was solid limestone and there was very little soil. Northern Water Snakes (*Natrix sipedon*) were often seen in the same area and they may have posed a predation threat for the gull/tern eggs or small chicks.

The nest site characteristics of the Little Gulls on NLI were typical for the species throughout its range, *i.e.* in or near to standing freshwater, usually in marshes, river basins, near lakes or along coasts (Bannon 1983, Cramp and Simmons 1983, Ewins and Weseloh 1999). However, the more general location,

i.e. on an offshore island, is unusual, at least for the Great Lakes. The six other recorded breeding locations in Ontario and the six cited in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and Manitoba (see above), were all located on inland or coastal marshes; none were on offshore islands. The Quebec site was in a small patch of vegetation in a river (Bannon 1983).

Phenology and Egg Measurements

From the NLI records, and those given by Tozer and Richards (1974), it is possible to construct a general nesting phenology of Little Gulls in southern Ontario. Nests with eggs have been found during 1-3 and 10-12 June. Single two-egg and three-egg clutches are known from 1 June, indicating that the first egg laying must have occurred at least as early as 30 May. The latest date of egg laying (not including suspected relaying – see below) comes from a pipped egg on 5 July 1971 (Tozer and Richards 1974). Backdating the 21 day incubation period, gives a date of 14 June for egg laying and the onset of incubation, which starts with the first egg. Hence, the egg laying period extends from at least 30 May (or earlier) to 14 June. This is a slight extension of the major egg laying period as identified by Peck and James (1983). Nests with incubated and apparently still-viable eggs have been found as late as 21 July 1984 (Table 1), which represents a laying date at least as late as 30 June; presumably this represents relaying.

The earliest evidence of hatch comes from 25 June 1983 (Table 1) when two young (Figure 3) and one pipped egg

Figure 3. Comparison of young freshly hatched Common Tern chick (left) and Little Gull chick (right). Notice the latter is much darker. *Her Majesty The Queen in Right of Canada; Photo: Chip Weseloh*

were found. Pipped eggs have also been observed on 2, 5 and 6 July. The latest dates for the occurrence of flightless young are 8 July 1971 (Tozer and Richards 1974) and 10 July 1979 (Table 1). The occurrence of viable eggs on 21 July (Table 1) suggests that flightless young could be seen as late as early to mid-August.

Egg measurements were taken or located for 20 Little Gull eggs from eight clutches from southern Ontario. The average egg measurements were 41.1mm x 29.9mm. These compare with the average for Europe of 42mm x 30mm (Cramp and Simmons 1983).

Details of Initial Discovery

The details of the discovery of Little Gulls nesting on North Limestone Island have never been published, though Mills (1981) cites some details without giving the locale. Also, unfortunately, we do not know when Little Gulls first nested on NLI but it may have been in 1979, when the first known nest was located there. John and Margaret Catto, who initially found Little Gulls on the island, have a cottage 20km NE of the Limestone Islands, near Lookout Island, Pointe au Baril. They visited North and South Limestone Islands regularly, as a family outing (with Margaret's mother, K.D. Ketchum, a keen birder), once or twice a year, usually in July. They visited NLI for many years prior to 1979 but never noticed any Little Gulls. On 8 July 1979, they observed four small gulls with black underwings as they walked around the island, but had no idea what they were (J. and M. Catto, pers. comm.). Later that day, they encountered Jim and Tom Quinn on South Limestone Island, where they had been encamped since April, and described their unusual gulls. The Quinns immediately went to NLI with the Cattos and located and confirmed the identity of the gulls. Both parties returned to NLI on 10 July, when a chick was found and photos were taken. J. Catto (in litt. to C. Goodwin) reports,

"The 4 adults [Little Gulls] showed considerable agitation, swooping, circling and diving over the little gap in the shrubbery. This was the *only* area that they were interested in. This area was about 50 feet from the lake, on the very edge of the common tern colony. A rough estimate of the tern colony would be about 500 to 1000 birds. There were no other gulls in evidence around the colony."

"Tom Quinn, who sighted the chick with us, was quite positive that its markings and general colouration were quite different to any of the gull or tern chicks that he had seen… We are quite certain from the gulls' behaviour around the nesting area (they were down as low as 20 to 30 feet over our heads), that they were in fact nesting there. The nest was not identifiable as the chick was running in the bushes and reeds."

The Future of the Little Gull on the Limestone Islands

In the early 1990s, the future of the Little Gull on NLI was anything but bright. Peter Ewins, a co-worker, visited the island on 7 June 1990 and noted one adult, but there was no indication from its behaviour that it was nesting (although it could have failed already). I visited the island on 23 June 1990 and saw no Little Gulls. Furthermore, the Common Terns (ca. 861 nests in 1989, CWS unpubl.) which had nested on NLI since at least 1979, began to abandon the island in 1990 (J. Catto, pers. comm.) and had vacated it completely by 1991. This abandonment was probably a very significant factor as far as the Little Gulls were concerned. The usual nesting associates of Little Gulls in North America include Common, Forster's (*Sterna forsteri*), Arctic (*S. paradisaea*), and/or Black (*Chlidonias niger*) Terns (Tozer and Richards 1974; Rider 1979; Weseloh 1987, R. Joos, pers. comm.). On this continent, Little Gulls almost always nest with one of these marsh or wetland nesting species (but not Quebec — see Bannon 1983).

The Common Terns from NLI appeared to have moved only 3km to South Limestone Island while others may have gone 10km north to the Blackbill Islands and to Doran Rock (pers. obs. and J. Gatto, pers. comm.). Although South Limestone Island is well vegetated, there is not the same marshy, emergent, sedge-dominated vegetation as there was on NLI. The two more northerly sites are mostly bare rock. Hence, although suitable habitat persisted on NLI and nesting associates were present on SLI and nearby islands, the necessary combination of these two components did not then occur at any one location. This probably spelled the demise of that small but persistent nesting colony of Little Gulls. Burke Korol (in litt.) reports that Parry Sound MNR staff, members of the Parry Sound Naturalists Club and other keen birders have visited the islands from one – three times per year during May-July every year since 1991 (except 1998 and 2004) (N=22). So, even though Common Terns have at least sporadically returned to nest on NLI *(e.g.* 1339 nests in 1998, CWS unpubl.) there have been no further sightings of Little Gulls on the island. It would appear that they have vacated the island completely.

A Great Lakes Perspective and Current Canadian Status

The known history and status of the Little Gull in the Ontario-Great Lakes Region and in Canada and North America has been documented periodically (Tozer and Richards 1974, Weseloh 1994, Ewins and Weseloh 1999). The current paper provides new and detailed information on confirmed and probable nestings at North Limestone Island, which now appears to have been the most frequently used known nesting site in Ontario during the 1962-1989

period. It also makes available sufficient data which, when combined with previous records (Tozer and Richards 1974), permit the calculation of a more detailed nesting phenology of the Little Gull in the Great Lakes Region than was previously possible. In this manner, a more complete history and ecology of this species in Ontario and North America is accumulating. Unfortunately, the Little Gull has not been known to nest in the Great Lakes Region since 1989. This situation has not changed in more than nearly two decades and, as of 2006, Little Gulls appear to have abandoned completely the NLI site (B. Korol, pers. comm.) as well as the entire Great Lakes region as a nesting bird.

This brings us to the present day and the question of what is the current status of the Little Gull in Ontario, given there were no confirmed breeding records during the recent Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, and it might be concluded that it no longer breeds here (Joos and Weseloh, in press). However, the Hudson Bay Lowlands are a very large area and they could still be nesting there.

There are at least four areas of current interest in Little Gulls in Ontario. First, in the early 2000s, as a result of making extended morning observations (from sunrise to 1000 hrs) at Oshawa Second Marsh, 50km east of Toronto, during April and early May, Tyler Hoar and Richard Joos recognized that large numbers of Little Gulls gathered at this site daily with the hundreds of Bonaparte's Gulls (*Larus philadelphia*). On 25 April 2002 and 1 May 2003, 114 and 116 Little Gulls, respectively, were counted flying into Oshawa Second Marsh over the morning hours (Joos and Weseloh 2004). The appearance there of that many Little Gulls followed almost immediately the seasonal decline in numbers at the Niagara River (Bellerby *et al* 1999). It seemed logical that in their spring migration, Little Gulls moved to a more northerly stop over site from the Niagara River (where they roosted at the mouth of the River) to Oshawa Second Marsh as the spring season progressed. The precise location of the local roosting site(s), which facilitated the use of the Oshawa Marsh, is not known. The Oshawa site is used for feeding, loafing and aerial courtship (Joos *et al.* 2004). The consistency of the gull's appearance at this site prompted the establishment of an annual Little Gull Viewing Week-end in late April 2004; substantial numbers of Little Gulls were recorded there in 2004 and 2005 (Weseloh *et al.* 2004; unpubl. data). However, changes to the water levels in the marsh following the spring of 2005, and the resultant flooding and elimination of specific loafing locations, have coincided with the approximate 70% decline in the number of Little Gulls which now use the site at that time (R. Joos and C. Weseloh, unpubl. data).

Secondly, the late winter-early spring appearance of Little Gulls on the Niagara River has been known for many years,

as has their late spring appearance at Churchill, Manitoba (Bellerby *et al.* 1999, Jehl 2004). They are also known to gather and stage at the mouth of the Moose River, near Moosonee, Ontario in mid-late May and early June (D. McRae, G. Coady, pers. comm.). However, nothing was known of a staging or migrational loafing area between Lake Ontario and these arctic/subarctic locations. This data gap may have been partially filled when, in early May 2001, Brian Dorr reported 20 Little Gulls in a flock of Bonaparte's Gull near St. Martin's Shoal in the Les Chenaux area of northwest Lake Huron (B. Dorr, pers. comm.). Subsequently, this area was searched for Little Gulls in May 2005 and 2006. On 17 and 18 May 2005, among the thousands of Bonaparte's Gulls that were present, at least 16 Little Gulls were noted (R. Joos and C. Pekarik, unpubl. data). Unfortunately, one year later, during 16-18 May 2006, there were no large flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls in evidence and no Little Gulls were observed (R. Joos, unpubl. data). However, continued searching of that area and all of the North Channel, in spring, is certainly warranted.

Thirdly, it has been stated that there were no known/published nestings of Little Gulls in North America in the 1990s (Ewins and Weseloh 1999, Joos and Weseloh 2001). Happily, this must be qualified somewhat in that Jehl (2004) recently published evidence of one to three pairs of Little Gulls nesting annually at Churchill, Manitoba, in the mid-late 1990s. The situation in the 2000s is even more encouraging. During at least five of seven years from 2001-2006, four to eight active Little Gull nests were located in the Churchill area (R. Joos, unpubl. data). The traditional North American breeding grounds of the Little Gull, if such grounds exist, are proving very elusive to discover. Nesting records from the Hudson Bay lowlands of Manitoba (McRae 1984) and Ontario (Carpentier 1986) led McRae (1989) to speculate that Little Gulls may regularly inhabit the low arctic and boreal regions of Canada, a vast, under-explored area of many small ponds of the type which Little Gulls may find ideal for nesting. However, no nesting in the Ontario portion of this area was found during the 2nd Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, 2001-2005 (Joos and Weseloh, in press). The new nesting sites in the Churchill area may or may not prove to be the long-sought traditional breeding areas.

Lastly, a fourth area of interest concerns the status of the Little Gull in Lake Erie, especially near Port Rowan during November storms. On two dates, 7 November 1989 and 25 November 2002, very large numbers of Little Gulls were counted flying westward past the pier at Port Rowan, 266 and 250, respectively (D. Sutherland, pers. comm., Ewins and Weseloh 1999, R. Joos, unpubl. data). For such a rarely-encountered bird, the numbers of Little Gulls occasionally observed at singular locations at singular times are

impressive: 78 per day in spring on the Niagara River (Bellerby *et al.* 1999), 91 in February off the outer banks of North Carolina (Davis 1995) and the records of 200-300 individuals cited above. These numbers lead one to ponder, what might be the size of the North American population of Little Gulls? It is a species that has been reported in ones and twos in nearly all the states and provinces of North America (Ewins and Weseloh 1999) and the largest single numbers at one time are 250-266 (see above). Based on these numbers, it has been suggested that there may be as many as 400 individuals continent-wide in North America (Joos and Weseloh 2004). Other researchers may deem this number speculative, but it was made based on the best available knowledge at the time, and was the first attempt at estimating a population figure for North America. Only more investigation would tell if it is was a reasonable estimate.

As final note in this regard, perhaps one should be prepared to distinguish between the breeding and non-breeding populations of Little Gulls in North America. For example, the Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) which is not known to breed in North America, appears at various east coast landfill sites in numbers up to more than 200 individuals at once (Driver 2004, Post and Lewis, 1995). Perhaps there is only a small breeding population of Little Gulls in North America and during late summer those birds are joined by or supplemented with birds from Asia and/or Europe, as has been discussed before (Baillie 1963, McRae 1989, Ewins and Weseloh 1999).

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