

An Unprecedented Incursion of Lesser Black-backed Gulls

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One of the fascinations over a lifetime of birding is witnessing changes in local avian populations. All too often these changes result in the loss of once familiar species. On the other hand, species once uncommon or even unknown can become an anticipated part of a day afield. Equally intriguing and much more dramatic are the sudden appearances of large numbers of a species, due to some confluence of weather, food supply, or other variable(s), that result in unexpected and occasionally unprecedented concentrations. The Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*), an easily overlooked and underappreciated species (it is *only* a gull, after all!), has undergone a population expansion both locally and nationally over the past century, and, attracted by a bountiful food supply, appeared in unprecedented numbers on Cape Cod during the summer of 2000.

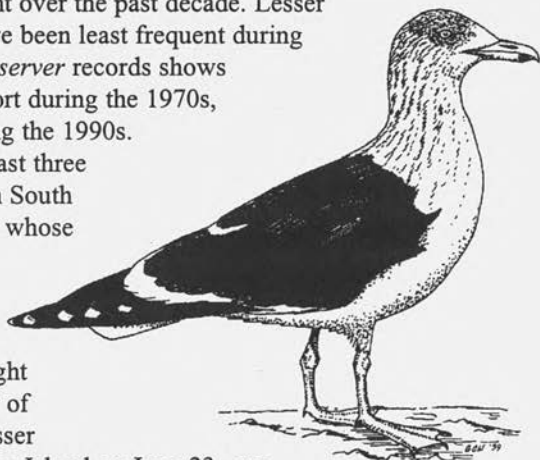
The first North American record of Lesser Black-backed Gull (outside of Greenland) came from Beach Haven, New Jersey, in 1934. Following this discovery, the species was detected with increasing frequency on the East Coast, and by the 1970s had proved to be a regular, although still rather rare, transient and winter resident as far south as Florida. The increase of Lesser Black-backed Gulls in North America has continued unabated, with records now spanning the farthest reaches of the continent, from Alaska south along the Pacific Coast to Costa Rica and Panama, and through the Caribbean to the northeast coast of South America (Post and Lewis 1995a). Although still scarce on the West Coast and in interior North America, double-digit counts of Lesser Black-backed Gulls are now routinely reported from a number of favored sites on the Atlantic Coast, particularly in the mid-Atlantic states and Florida. Recently, hundreds have been estimated wintering along the Delaware River on the Pennsylvania–New Jersey border, with as many as 152 counted at one site, the Churchville Reservoir in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, on November 21, 1999 (Paxton et al. 2000).

The species was first found nesting in Iceland during the 1920s, and populations there have continued to increase since, with upwards of 30,000 pairs estimated recently (Reid 2000). In the early 1990s nesting was first confirmed in Greenland, although only a few pairs were involved. To date, this is the closest known breeding site, although the species' increasing frequency here has long led to speculation that nesting was occurring somewhere in northeastern Canada. Yet the origin of the hundreds of Lesser Black-backed Gulls occurring annually in North America remains an unresolved avian mystery.

The first Massachusetts record was not until September 14, 1971, when renowned artist Robert Clem noticed a strange, dark-mantled gull among the Herring Gulls at the area known as the Powder Hole on South Monomoy Island and recognized it as a Lesser Black-backed. Since then, the highest counts in the state have come from

Nantucket, where as many as a dozen were found over the winter of 1980–1981 (Veit and Petersen 1993). Smaller numbers occur routinely on Cape Cod and elsewhere along the southeast coast. The species is also found regularly on the North Shore and among concentrations of gulls inland (particularly in the Connecticut River valley), although rarely are more than single individuals found in these areas. Highest counts typically occur during the fall and early winter when gulls are moving south. A modest influx, presumably involving northbound birds, occurs in the spring, although numbers at this season typically are half or less of fall counts. Wintering birds have become increasingly frequent over the past decade. Lesser Black-backed, until recently, have been least frequent during the summer. A review of *Bird Observer* records shows only one summer (June/July) report during the 1970s, 12 during the 1980s, and 11 during the 1990s. During the summer of 1999, at least three different individuals were seen on South Beach in Chatham. Most of those whose ages were reported during the summer were immatures.

The first indication that something out of the ordinary might be developing during the summer of 2000 was the presence of two Lesser Black-backed on North Monomoy Island on June 23, one of which I thought at the time was an adult. About this time, I also noticed that the number of nonbreeding gulls in the area seemed much higher than typical. On July 5, I found three Lesser Black-backed on North Monomoy (no adults) and on the following day saw three more on South Beach. On July 15, with only limited coverage of South Beach, Jackie Sones and I found at least eight (perhaps as many as a dozen) individuals, all first- through third-summer birds. Later that day, we saw what appeared to be a fully adult bird on the north end of South Monomoy island (although photographs subsequently revealed it to be a third-summer bird). Intrigued by this latest count, Rick Heil traveled to South Beach on July 19 and, joined later in the day by me, made a concerted effort to census the Lesser Black-backed Gulls in the area. Between South Beach and North Monomoy we found a total of 41 birds! On July 23, Rick and Jan Smith, again joined by me later in the day, counted at least 55 birds. The following weekend, Jeremiah and Peter Trimble and I tallied at least 60 Lesser Black-backed on South Beach and the flats between North and South Monomoy. Finally, on August 5, Rick Heil, Jeremiah Trimble, and I (joined later by Jackie Sones) found 80 or more birds in the same area! These increasing totals through the summer are more likely a reflection of increased efforts to census the birds, rather than a real increase in their numbers. By late August the number of gulls in the area had declined considerably, although Lesser Black-backed remained easy to find well into the fall.



Previously, the largest reported summer concentration of Lesser Black-backed Gulls in North America was as many as 19 birds at Hart-Miller Island in Maryland during the period July 20-31, 1992 (Armistead 1992). The South Beach aggregation is thus the largest, by far, during the summer, as well as one of the largest reported at any season in North America.

The unprecedented number of Lesser Black-backed Gulls on and around South Beach was part of an exceptional concentration of large gulls present in the area during July and August. Estimates of the total number of Herring and Great Black-backed gulls ranged as high as 15,000 birds, the majority of which were immature (and thus probably not directly associated with the large breeding population on Monomoy). Laughing Gulls were also present in exceptional numbers, although to some extent this may reflect an increasing breeding population on South Monomoy, comprising over 375 pairs in 2000 (S. Fish, pers. comm.). No less than 30 Bonaparte's Gulls summered in the area, also an unusually high number, and Common and Roseate terns numbered in the thousands. Attracting these gulls and terns apparently was an abundance of bait fish (based upon reports from local fishermen), most likely sand lance (*Ammodytes* sp.), close to shore. In addition to gulls, large numbers of shearwaters were also present close to shore at times during this period, and they were occasionally seen feeding in mixed-species flocks with the gulls. These feeding concentrations attracted small numbers of jaegers. On many days, hundreds of Wilson's Storm-petrels were also present close to shore. However, they do not feed on bait fish, so reasons for their presence are unclear, although it seems likely there was at least an indirect relationship.

This impressive concentration of gulls was apparently confined to the Chatham eastern shore, more specifically the South Beach area from Chatham Light south to the southern tip of the beach — about four-and-a-half miles of shoreline, bounded on the north by the Pleasant Bay inlet and on the south by the South Beach/Monomoy inlet. Rick Heil and Jan Smith checked the Nauset area in Eastham on July 23 and found only typical numbers of gulls (and a single Lesser Black-backed Gull). There also was no evidence of unusual concentrations in Provincetown, despite large numbers of seabirds on Stellwagen Bank throughout the summer. Even a boat trip down the east side of South Monomoy Island on August 5 was strikingly devoid of gulls or other seabirds — the masses of gulls ended abruptly at the southern tip of South Beach. However, on August 3 I found three Lesser Black-backed among a small flock of gulls at the Chatham Airport, a distance of three to four miles inland from South Beach. The Monomoy gulls are known to frequent some of the freshwater ponds near the airport to bathe and drink, and it seems likely that at least some of the Lesser Black-backed followed their lead.

Virtually all of the Lesser Black-backed Gulls in Chatham were immature birds. Although some were initially identified as adults, based upon their gray mantles, pure white heads, bright yellow legs, and lack of black in the bill, closer examination of most of these individuals revealed characteristics (especially a brownish cast in at least some of the wing coverts, most evident when the wing was spread) that indicated they were in fact third-summer birds. Aging these birds with any certainty proved to

be a challenge, at least in part because many apparently had already begun their fall molt. However, after many hours of studying them and researching the subject in the literature and online, we eventually felt confident in aging most of them. Rick Heil was characteristically diligent in recording ages, and based upon his figures, approximately one-third of the birds were in first summer plumage, with most of the remainder either in second- or third-summer plumages. At least one or two birds appeared to be fully adult.

Three races of Lesser Black-backed Gull are recognized: *L. f. fuscus*, the darkest mantled of the three, breeds from northern Norway to northwestern Russia and south to southeastern



Lesser Black-backed Gull on South Beach — photograph by the author

Denmark; *L. f. intermedius* breeds from southern Norway and Sweden to Denmark and the Netherlands; and *L. f. graellsii*, the palest mantled of the three, breeds in the British Isles, the Faeroes, and Iceland (Post and Lewis 1995a). *L. f. graellsii* also has the westernmost wintering range (Iberia south to Senegal on the Atlantic coast of Africa). The vast majority of North American records are of the race *L. f. graellsii*, although there are a few photographically documented reports of apparent *L. f. intermedius* (Post and Lewis 1995b). Although the mantle color of the older Chatham birds appeared quite variable, this was generally attributable to variations in lighting and angle of viewing; we saw no individuals we could confidently ascribe to any subspecies other than the expected *L. f. graellsii*.

The presence of such a large number of Lesser Black-backed Gulls, including a few apparent adults, in the vicinity of one of North America's largest gull colonies during the breeding season, certainly raises suspicions about the possibility of local nesting. While there is yet no evidence of nesting, it seems plausible that at least a handful of these birds might return to Monomoy to breed. Confirmation of a nesting pair in such a large gull colony will require considerable effort and luck, but careful watching in the future seems warranted. A first North American breeding record for Lesser Black-backed Gull would add another chapter to Massachusetts' rich ornithological history! 🐦

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Blair Nikula has been pursuing birds on his native Cape Cod since childhood. In between birds, he turns his attention to dragonflies and coedits a newsletter, Ode News, and has coauthored a beginner's guide (due out this spring) on these fascinating aerial masters. He would like to thank Rick Heil for his assiduous record-keeping and for offering helpful comments on a draft of this article.

Editor's Note: Flashback — September/October 1973. Wayne R. Petersen reported the sighting of a sub-adult Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus graellsii*) at Nauset (Eastham) on August 17, 1973. "I believe this is only the second published record for Massachusetts, despite the recent increase in sightings throughout the Northeast. The other Massachusetts record was for September 14, 1971, when an adult (also of the race *L. f. graellsii*) was seen at Monomoy Point by Robert Clem and Wallace Bailey."

