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NESTING OF THE LAUGHING GULL IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA¹

WITH ONE ILLUSTRATION

By LOYE MILLER and A. J. VAN ROSSEM

On June 9, 1928, the writers, accompanied by Mr. R. B. Cowles, visited the Gull-billed Tern colony discovered on Salton Sea by Mr. J. R. Pemberton in 1927. On approaching the tern colony on the largest of the occupied sand islands, a black-headed, dark-backed gull was seen to rise from the center of the colony. It circled about high overhead and finally came directly over us when it was shot at and missed, after which it flew out to sea. Supposing the stranger to have been pilfering terns' eggs, we walked over to the spot from which the bird had arisen to see how much damage had been done, and were amazed to see, on a little knob of concreted sand, a nest constructed of a few small sticks and twigs and containing three gull's eggs.

We waited nearly an hour in the vicinity of the nest without further sight of the bird which had flown seaward after being fired at, and then rowed over to the next island on which was another colony of Gull-billed Terns, as well as some twenty pairs of Caspians. From the center of this second colony, a single gull flew up; it was immediately killed and the identity of these nesting birds was established as *Larus atricilla*, a species not previously reported at any season from the Pacific coast north of the tropics. The nest of this second bird was of identical situation and construction with that of the first and, like it, contained three eggs (see fig. 53). After a wait of nearly an hour at this second nest, the male of the pair appeared, but it kept well out of range, circling us at a hundred yards or more and sometimes flying out of sight. Finally it settled on the nest and by keeping behind sand lumps we were able to come within range.

Returning now to the first island, it was found that one of the pair was on the nest. By this time we were pretty well done in with the heat and the glare from the sand and water, so decided to forego making a census of the Laughing Gulls on the several other islands of the group.

A few days later, on June 22, van Rossem, accompanied by Donald Dickey, again visited the islands, but because of rough water, only the island nearest the shore could be inspected. There were no gulls on this island, but at least two were seen flying about two islands lying farther out to sea, so it is fair to assume

¹Contribution from the California Institute of Technology.

they were breeding there. Possibly more were present, but the many Caspian Terns flying about made detection of the similar sized gulls a difficult matter, especially as the islands were almost directly in the sun.

Two of the specimens collected on June 9 are now in Mr. Dickey's collection, being nos. 22947 and 22948. The third is in the collection of Dr. Miller. The two sets of three eggs taken are also in the Dickey and Miller collections, respectively.

These Laughing Gulls are undoubtedly members of the great flocks which winter along the Pacific coast of Central America where they were seen by van Rossem in assemblages of many hundreds at various Guatemalan and Salvadorean ports in the winter and spring of 1927. Many species of eastern water birds winter in numbers along the Pacific coast south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec



Fig. 53. NEST AND EGGS OF THE LAUGHING GULL ON SALTON SEA, IMPERIAL COUNTY, CALIFORNIA, JUNE 9, 1928.

Photograph taken by R. B. Cowles.

and it is not surprising, after all, that now and then birds continue north along the shore line instead of crossing over to the Atlantic side with the great majority of their kind.

We follow Dwight, Ridgway and Wetmore in being unable to recognize a North American form as distinct from the Antillean. The wing of the male of the Salton Sea pair measures 335 mm., which measurement is typical for "*megalopterus*". The female, however, measures but 295 mm., which is about the minimum recorded by Noble (Bull. Mus. Comp. Zool., 60, no. 10, 1916, p. 368) for *atricilla*.

Pasadena, California, May 17, 1929.