FIRST NESTING RECORD OF GRAY-HOODED GULL FROM ECUADOR

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The Gray-hooded Gull (Larus cirrocephalus) has previously been found breeding in only one area on the west coast of South America: at two sites in the vicinity of the Faracas Peninsula, Department of Ica, Peru (Tovar and Ashmole 1970, Duffy and Atkins 1979). We report here the discovery of a nesting colony on the coast of southwestern Ecuador near the tip of the Santa Elena Peninsula, almost 1,500 km north of the Faracas region.

Although first definitely recorded in Ecuador only in 1938 (Quibickeirer 1939), L. cirrocephalus has since become fairly common in the Gulf of Guayaquil area, particularly in the estuary of the Guayas River (Leveque 1964, Mills 1967, pers. observ.). Even though the species is resident in this area and birds in breeding plumage have been seen frequently, to date no nesting colony has been found.

In contrast with its relative abundance around the basin of the Faracas Peninsula, Department of Ica, Peru (Tovar and Ashmole 1970, Duffy and Atkins 1979). We report here the discovery of a nesting colony on the coast of southwestern Ecuador near the tip of the Santa Elena Peninsula, almost 1,500 km north of the Faracas region.

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In contrast with its relative abundance around the
Gulf of Guayaquil, this gull is uncommon on the Santa Elena Peninsula, roughly 100 km to the west. Marchant (1958), who lived here for over three years, considered it "only an unusual visitor... since my specimens are the only two definite records." It appears to have increased since then, for in July 1978 we found small numbers at several sites in the region. We further noted, as did Hughes (1968), that the species avoided the open ocean and barren outer beaches in favor of the area's few existing lagoons and apparently artificial impoundments. In the largest impoundment, at a partly abandoned saltworks, we found a small nesting colony of Gray-hooded Gulls on 13 July 1978.

The site is located in the Department of Guayaquil, about 10 km WNW of Anconito on the south coast of the Santa Elena Peninsula, west of the road between that town and La Libertad where the road curves away from the coast. Small numbers of L. cirrocephalus, many of them in breeding plumage, were scattered over the somewhat higher parts of the island. Nests were represented: most pairs were still incubating, but several downy chicks were running about, and six feathered but flightless juveniles were present.

The Gray-hooded Gull has become numerous on the west coast of South America only during the last 50 years (Tovar and Ashmole 1970). Its present northern range limit seems to be at or near the Santa Elena Peninsula. The species perhaps is still consolidating its position here, which could account for the low density of nests in what appears to be a suitable area; in Argentina, a colony was described as being so densely packed with nests as to almost preclude walking between them (Narosky and Izurieta 1973). It is also possible that this gull is now colonizing a habitat—artificial coastal impoundments and saltworks—that has only recently become available.

The virtual absence of suitable habitat for this species on the tropical coast north of the Santa Elena Peninsula seems likely to slow or halt its further northward expansion. We found only one potential site for this species north of the Peninsula, a group of recently constructed impoundments about 30 km north of the town of Santa Elena. However, no gulls were present here during either of our two visits in July 1978 and we know of no reports of this gull north of the Santa Elena Peninsula in Ecuador. No reports are known from Colombia (Meyer de Schauensee 1970), and there is only one unconfirmed sighting from Panama (Ridgely 1976).

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LITERATURE CITED


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