

First nesting of the Little Gull (*Larus minutus*) in Quebec

*A pioneering species makes a 260-mile leap
eastward in its invasion of Canada*

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THUS FAR, THE OBSERVATION of the nesting of the Little Gull is an extremely rare event. This note describes the nesting of a pair of Little Gulls at Lasalle, Quebec, in 1982, the first for the province.

The pair was first observed on May 26 flying over and resting on several rocky islets at the foot of the Lachine rapids in the St. Lawrence River (Fig. 1). Most of the observations were made from the shoreline at an estimated distance of 300 m. The two individuals were readily separable by the relative extent of the black in their underwings. The first, which was presumably a second-summer bird, had a black hood but rather pale underwings while the second was a full adult with completely black underwings. The latter bird was later identified as the male when copulation was observed on July 6 and 9.

In early June, both birds, but predominantly the male, were seen carrying nesting material to a specific spot on one of the islets, but it was impossible for us to examine the area from the shore. The birds also displayed aggressive behavior toward a first-year Little Gull and toward larger gulls and Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*) whenever these species fished nearby or approached the nest site. On the other hand, no courtship display and no copulation was observed at this time. But earlier, in May, the same two birds were seen displaying and giving muted calls while fishing together at the Beauharnois Dam, located approximately 30 km southwest of Lasalle.

On June 12, the author, accompanied by Gaétan Duquette, reached the rocky islet by boat and located a nest containing two eggs. The nest had been placed on floating vegetation in one to two feet of water; it was constructed largely of dead leaves from the Common Cattail (*Typha*

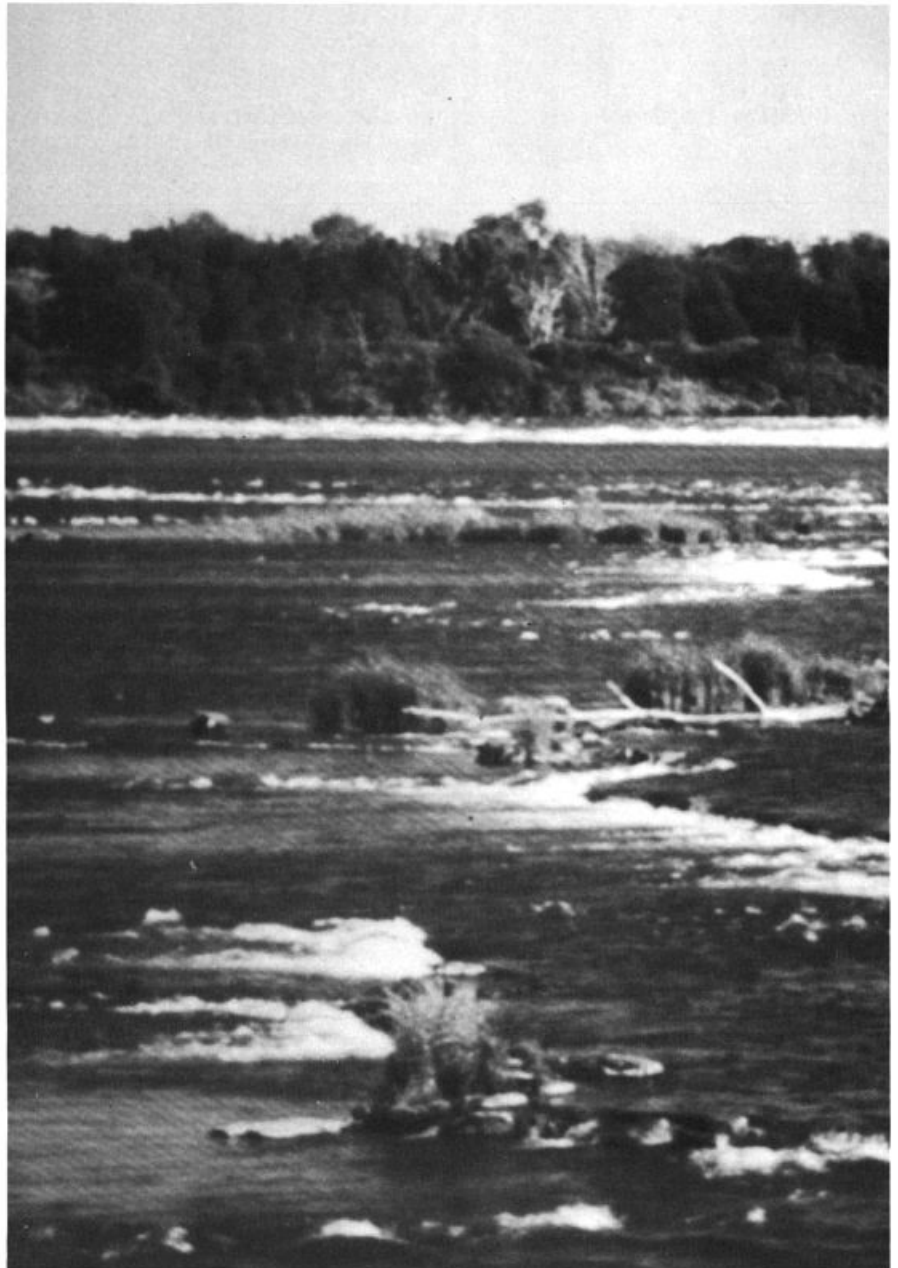


Figure 1. Habitat of nesting Little Gull, Lasalle, Quebec. In the background, Heron Island.



Figure 2. Nest of Little Gull with eggs, Lasalle, Quebec. Photos Pierre Bannon.

latifolia) which were loosely bound to surrounding stems of the same plant (Fig. 2). Subsequent observations showed that, rather surprisingly, the male, and not the female, assumed most of the incubation duties; the male was also seen to carry additional nesting material to the nest site during the incubation.

On June 30, the author observed a dark brown colored chick which was being brooded and fed by both parents; it was perched on a small rock about 50 m downstream from the nest site. Interestingly, the adults were again seen carrying nesting material and apparently attempting to feed it to the chick. The chick was then estimated to be 3 to 4 days old. It was still present on July 1 when it was seen by several observers. Unfortunately it was not sighted thereafter and all indications are that it did not survive. During the next two weeks, both parents lingered near the nesting site; they were then seen engaged in courtship flights (Witherby *et al.*, 1941) almost daily and copulating twice. They were not seen after July 13.

ALTHOUGH THE BREEDING habitat was atypical for a species usually associ-

ated with marshes and swampy margins of rivers and lakes (Dement'ev and Gladkov, 1951), the cluster of rocks and associated vegetation in the rapids seemed to exert a great attraction for this species as well as for other gulls and terns. Up to six different Little Gulls (three adults and three first-summer birds) were seen there during the nesting season; sub-adult birds were also sighted there in 1979 and 1981. These islets have hosted a colony of Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*) for several years. Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*) and Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*) are potential nesters in this area; both were seen displaying and copulating on occasion but direct evidence of nesting is still lacking.

In Quebec, the first sighting of the Little Gull occurred in 1949 in the Magdalen Islands (Gaboriault, 1961) but the second sighting did not occur until 1969 at the Beauharnois Dam. The species was seen annually thereafter but always in small numbers. The Little Gull has been suspected of breeding somewhere in southern Quebec for nearly a decade. In June 1972, a pair was seen displaying on the beach of an island near Sorel, Quebec,

and juveniles were seen at the Beauharnois Dam in September of 1973, 1975, 1976 and 1977.

This first Quebec nesting record comes exactly 20 years after the first North American nesting record for this species which occurred near Oshawa, Ontario (Godfrey, 1966), 400 km southwest of Lasalle. Although subsequent nesting has been reported from various localities in southern Ontario and also from Wisconsin (Tessen, 1975) and Michigan (Tessen, 1976), until this record there was no breeding record east of the Oshawa region, 260 ± miles (420 km) w.s.w. of Lasalle. Furthermore, the only other nesting record away from the lower Great Lakes is from Churchill, Manitoba (Gollop, 1981).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I AM PARTICULARLY grateful to N. David Land and R.J. Barnhurst who contributed helpful suggestions in reviewing this article. M. Gosselin and S. Holohan also provided valuable information for the preparation of the manuscript.

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