

First nests of the Common Black-headed Gull in North America

This new addition to the breeding bird population of the continent deserves close attention

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ON JUNE 27, 1982, four pairs of Common Black-headed Gulls (*Larus ridibundus*) with two flightless chicks were observed on the Madeleine Islands, Gulf of St. Lawrence, Québec. On July 1, there were seven adults, one newly flying young, a brood of two downy young and another brood of three (P. Fradette, *pers. comm.*). On July 14, I observed ten adults, three newly fledged young and two chicks. Adults showed territorial and aggressive behavior. Investigation of the

area occupied by the gulls revealed the presence of five empty nests.

The nests, built on an islet less than 100 m², consisted of grassy materials assembled in platform-like structures. The islet was located on the margin of a colony containing 200 adult Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*). Silver-weed (*Potentilla anserina*) was the predominant plant. The last hint of occupation of the area was an observation of three adults and three flying young on July 20.

On July 27 of the previous year, P. Fradette (*pers. comm.*) reported from the same site ten adults, five of which were apparently incubating. The observer was harried by the adults when trying to approach the nests and no further information could be obtained on their possible outcome.

The remarkable lagoon of Hâvre aux Basques (25 km²) sheltering the colony of Common Black-headed Gulls (47°21'N, 60°56'W) is located between Cap-aux-Meules and Hâvre-Aubert Islands. The lagoon is limited westward and eastward by two sand dunes connecting the two islands. The southern section of the lagoon consists of a body of brackish water bordered by salt marsh. The northern section occupied by the gulls is a vast salt marsh (Grandtner 1966) with a branching network of channels and pools (Mousseau *et al.* 1976).

The colony was most likely formed between 1976 and 1981; researchers from the Université de Montréal investigated most of the potential nest sites on the Madeleine Islands between 1969 and 1975 (N. David, *pers. comm.*) and in 1976 an exhaustive archipelago-wide survey of tern colonies was made (Mousseau *et al.* 1976), but no breeding Common Black-headed Gulls were noted. Between 1976 and 1981 nesting could have escaped detection by bird-watchers who usually visit the islands after mid-July, a date by which the nests would have been deserted.

Godfrey (1966) regards the species as a rare visitor to Québec, and David (1980) defines it as an accidental visitor in summer. The first provincial record, from Hâvre Saint-Pierre, goes back to 1951, and that for the Madeleine Islands to August 1972 (McNeill *et al.* 1973).



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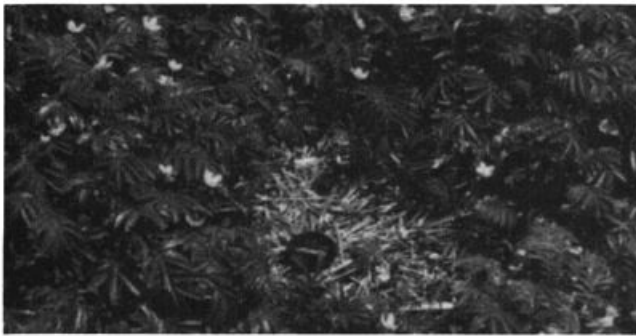


Figure 1. Abandoned nest of Common Black-headed Gull, Hâvre aux Basques, Madeleine Is., Quebec, Canada, July 14, 1982. The lens cap is 5 cm wide. Photo/Y. Aubry.

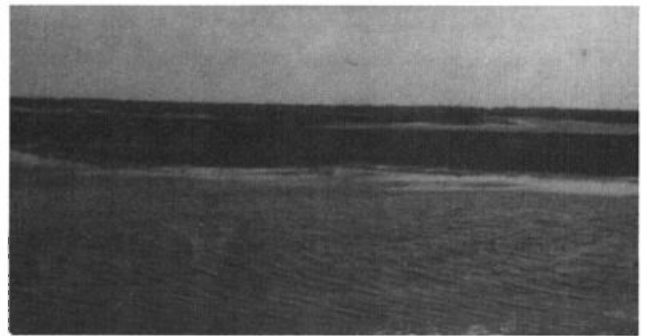


Figure 2. Salt marsh used by breeding Common Black-headed Gulls, Madeleine Is., Quebec, viewed from road 199. The gull colony was located in the center background. Photo/L.-G. Repentigny.

Sightings have become frequent, even regular, since then, in particular on the Madeleine Islands, where the species was recorded from June to December, inclusive (Aubry 1981).

The first breeding record in North America was reported by Finch (1978) who, on August 12, 1977, observed five adults accompanied by one newly-fledged young at Stephenville Crossing, Newfoundland.

Salomonsen (1979) discussed the expansion of the Common Black-headed Gull in the North Atlantic since 1850; the increase has been attributed to a gradual warming of the Atlantic climate. The breeding range began to expand about 1850, extending through Scandinavia and into Iceland by 1911 and to Greenland in 1969. Likewise it has also spread to the Mediterranean region of Europe.

The observations made on the Madeleine Islands are significant in that they led to the discovery of the first nests of this species in North America. The progress of this new addition to the breeding bird population of our continent deserves close attention.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I WISH TO EXPRESS sincere thanks to Pierre Fradette of Fisheries and Oceans Canada who made his notes and observations available to me. My thanks also go to Michel Gosselin for the useful information and comments he provided, to Pierre Lambelin for his field assistance and to Austin Reed who reviewed the manuscript. Finally, I am grateful to Claude Simard who generously accepted to translate the manuscript for this article.

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