

First nesting of the Little Gull in Manitoba

A new breeding record from the Hudson Bay lowlands

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THE FIRST NORTH American nesting of the Little Gull (*Larus minutus*) occurred at Oshawa, Ontario, in 1962 (Scott 1963) and since then it has been found breeding in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Quebec (Tessen 1976, Chipman 1972, Gosselin and David 1982). During the summer of 1981 I recorded observations on a nest of this species in the Akudlik marsh, 5km east of Churchill, Manitoba. This represents the first known breeding of the Little Gull in Manitoba and the Hudson Bay–James Bay lowlands, a region suspected of housing most of North America's breeding Little Gulls

(McRae and Richards, *in prep.*).

The nest was located within a loose colony of Arctic Terns (*Sterna paradisaea*). The marsh habitat and other species found there have been described by Charrier and Cooke (1980).

The pair arrived at the marsh on June 14, spending most of their time feeding along the edge of the ice in the half-frozen marsh. Within a few days, one bird could often be seen standing on a small (*ca.* .4m in diam.) mud island—the future nest site. The first strong evidence of breeding came on June 19, when a bird circled the island with a sedge stalk in its

bill; however, the stalk was dropped after a few minutes and no further behavior of this sort was noted. The next day the birds were seen copulating on the island, and within a few hours they began bringing sedge stalks to the site. The bulk of nest material had been collected by June 22, although some was added up to June 26. One bird constantly sat on the nest from June 22 on, indicating a probable first egg date.

During incubation, the nest was rarely left unattended and then only for very brief periods. Usually one bird incubated while the other either rested nearby or was away from the marsh. Both birds, if present, took part in defending the nest against potential predators, the most frequent of which were Parasitic Jaegers (*Stercorarius parasiticus*), Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*), Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*), and Red Foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*).

As there were several pairs of Ross' Gulls (*Rhodostethia rosea*) nesting in the marsh, nest checks were kept to a minimum since visits into the area tended to disturb all species present. The first nest check was conducted on July 4, when three eggs were found (Fig. 1). Although accurate measurements were not taken, the nest appeared to be about 25 cm in outside diameter with a cup diameter of about 12 cm. It was a bulky structure, made of sedge (*Carex aquatilis*) stalks built on a moist mud island. Water surrounded the nest, and the bottom of the nest cup was damp.

The incubation period is reported to be between 20 and 21 days (Harrison 1978), so I planned the next check for July 14, when the chicks would be two or three days old. This check revealed three eggs with no evidence of pipping. On the morning of July 16, frequent trips to the nest by both adults indicated that hatching had occurred. Assuming that the first



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Figure 1. Nest and eggs of the Little Gull, Churchill, Manitoba, July 14, 1981. Photo/R. D. McRae.

egg was laid on June 22, the incubation period for this nest was about 25 days. The final nest check was conducted on July 22. The nest was empty but both parents dive-bombed constantly, suggesting that the young were nearby, probably hiding in the extensive areas of sedge.

From this time until I left Churchill on August 4, the adults were seen feeding young in two locations approximately 20 meters apart. The young at this time were about 20 days old but since the area was not checked after my departure, I do not know whether the young reached independence.

During the summers of 1982 and 1983, Little Gulls returned to Akudlik, but despite territorial behavior and copulations, they did not nest there. This may be a result of water levels being higher than in 1981, as it has been noted that changes in water level have been the most detrimental factor in Little Gull nesting success around the Great Lakes (Tozer and Richards 1974).

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