

# The status of the Common Black-headed Gull in Newfoundland and Labrador

W. A. Montevecchi, D. K. Cairns, A. E. Burger,  
R. D. Elliot, and J. Wells

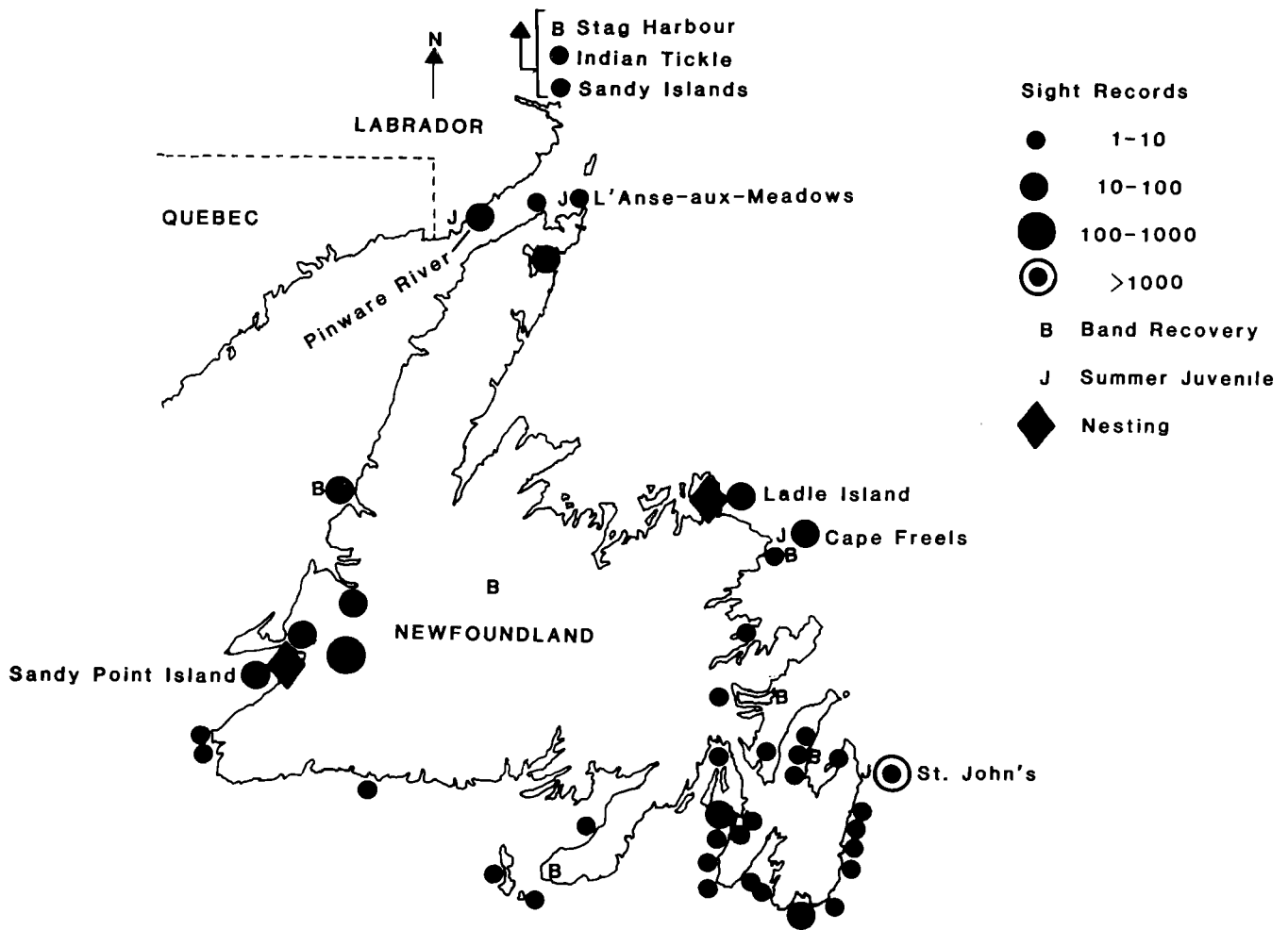
COMMON BLACK-HEADED GULLS (*Larus ridibundus*) have recently established a small but geographically widespread reproductive base in northeastern North America. This New World range expansion was anticipated more than 20 years ago by Erskine (1963) in a review of the occurrence of this gull in North America. Breeding in North America was first documented in 1977 at Stephenville Crossing (48°30'N, 58°20'W) in western Newfoundland (Finch 1978). The species has more recently nested or attempted nesting at three other North American locations: Havre aux Basques (47°21'N, 60°56'W), Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence (Aubry 1984), Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge (41°38'N, 69°58'W), Cape Cod, Massachusetts (Holt *et al.* 1986), and Petit Manan Island National Wildlife Refuge, Washington County, Maine (Drennan *et al.* 1987). Here we document two breeding sites for insular Newfoundland and indicate several possible sites in New-

foundland and Labrador. We also review North American band recoveries, provincial sighting records, and trends in

winter occurrences in an effort to better understand the historical and current status of the species in North America

Table 1. Band recoveries of Common Black-headed Gulls in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Recovery		Banding	
Date	Location	Location	Date
September 1933	Stag Harbour, Labrador	Groote Meer, The Netherlands	June 21, 1932
October 26, 1943	Badger, Newfoundland	Lake Myvatn, Iceland	June 16, 1943
March 10, 1948	Random Island, Newfoundland	Lake Myvatn, Iceland	June 23, 1947
December 10, 1956	York Harbour, Newfoundland	Skipalon, Iceland	July 1, 1956
January 15, 1959	Lamaline, Newfoundland	Skipalon, Iceland	July 10, 1958
October 26, 1970	Newtown, Bonavista Bay, Newfoundland	Olvisvath, Iceland	July 25, 1970
August 1971	Bay Roberts, Newfoundland	Skipalon, Iceland	June 24, 1967



**Figure 1.** Locations in Newfoundland and Labrador where (i) banded Common Black-headed Gulls have been recovered, (ii) nests, newly fledged young, and unbanded juveniles have been recorded in summer, and (iii) sightings of the species have been made (total number 1933-1986)

### Band recoveries in North America

Apart from two early occurrences (1911-1912) of Common Black-headed Gulls that were banded in Germany and recovered the following winter in Vera Cruz, Mexico, and Barbados (Erskine 1963), all band recoveries in North America have been in Labrador and Newfoundland.

A gull that had been banded as a chick in The Netherlands on June 21, 1932, was recovered at Stag Harbour (54°50'N, 58°45'W), Labrador, in September 1933 (Gross 1935). Six banded birds have been recovered in Newfoundland; all were from Iceland (Table 1, Tuck 1971). Five were less than one year old and hence had never bred; the sixth was three plus years old and may have bred elsewhere. Banded but unrecovered birds have been periodically

observed at St. John's, as well as in New York and Rhode Island (Erskine 1963).

### Observations and winter occurrences in Newfoundland and Labrador

Tuck (Montevecchi and Tuck 1987) recorded many *L. ridibundus* in Newfoundland during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. He observed five immature birds in Chapel Arm, Trinity Bay, on May 2, 1953, and ten birds at the same place February 26, 1954. On April 26, 1955, Tuck saw about 25 gulls at Stephenville Crossing, and on December 19, 1965, he observed 20 near St. John's Harbour, where they have been regular winter residents since. Sightings of this species have been made around the Newfoundland coast and in southern Labrador (Fig. 1). The largest concentra-

tions occur in November-December at St. John's Harbour and vicinity (Table 2, Fig. 2). Numbers in St. John's increase during autumn, then decrease through winter and spring (Fig. 2) Large proportions (often more than 50%) of these birds have been immatures.

These records show that the wintering population of Black-headed Gulls in Newfoundland greatly exceeded the known North American breeding population described below and suggest that: (a) Newfoundland may be an overwintering area for birds from Iceland and perhaps Greenland, and (b) there may be undiscovered breeding colonies of substantial size in eastern Canada. Periodic sightings of banded gulls in winter indicate that Black-headed Gulls from outside North America migrate into the area in winter

**Table 2. Numbers of Common Black-headed Gulls recorded on Christmas Bird Counts in St. John's (December 26) and highest annual counts in Newfoundland, 1965–1985.**

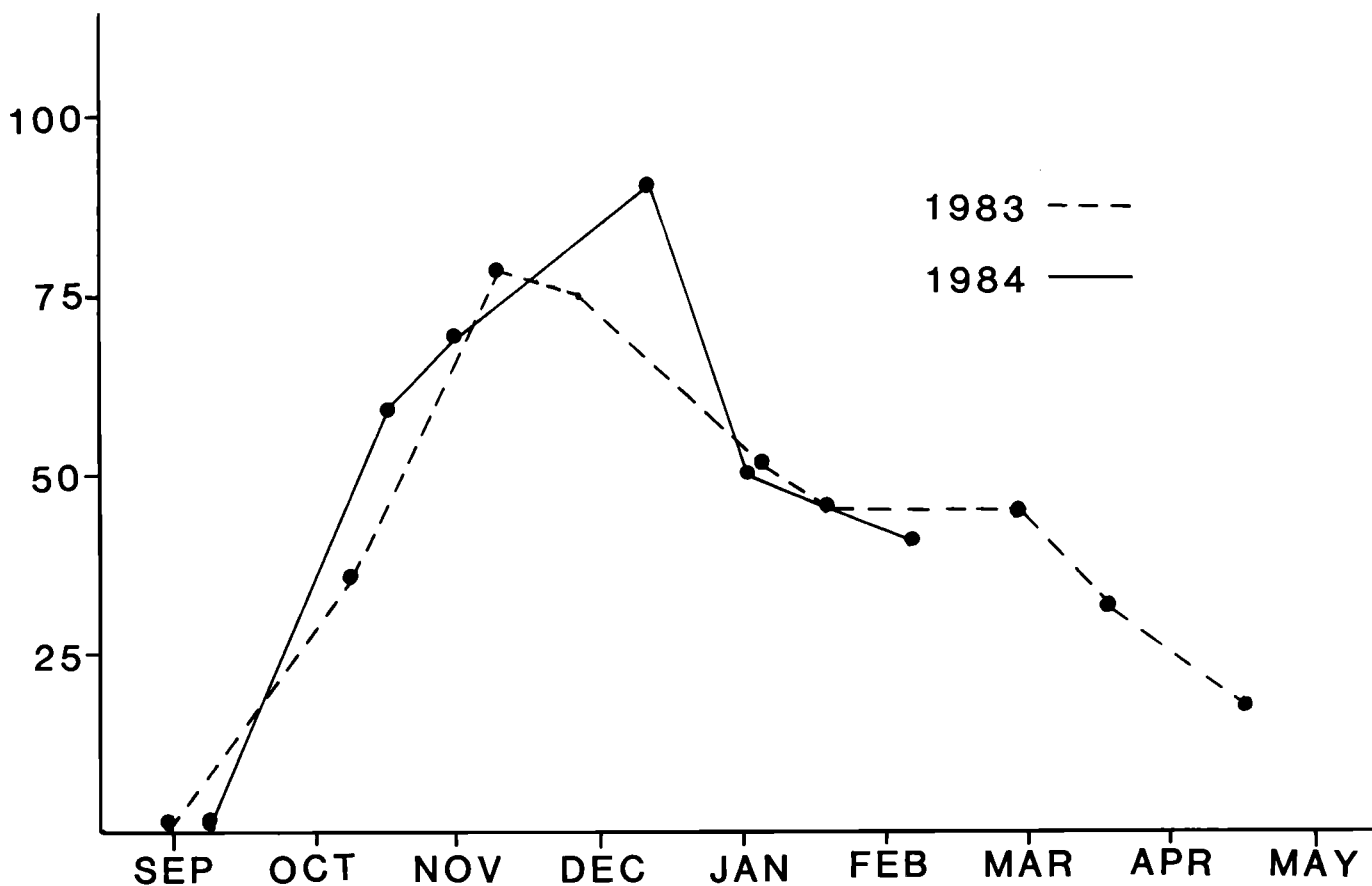
Year	Number St. John's CBC	Highest Annual Count (date, location if different from St. John's)
1965	0	20 (Dec. 19)
1966	44	44 (Dec. 26)
1967	48	48 (Dec. 26)
1968	54	54 (Dec. 26)
1969	103	103 (Dec. 26)
1970	27	83 (Jan. 12)
1971	27	32 (Nov. 24)
1972	9	40 (Dec. 1)
1973	26	28 (Dec. 2)
1974	11	12 (Feb. 3)
1975	4	30 (late January)
1976	3	8 (July 28, Stephenville)
1977	34	34 (Dec. 26)
1978	5	7 (Oct. 29)
1979	13	17 (Mar. 4, Trepassey)
1980	62	62 (Dec. 26)
1981	46	59 (Mar. 14)
1982	25	55 (Nov. 7)
1983	50	78 (Nov. 25)
1984	81	90+ (December)
1985	42	71 (Nov. 15)

**Known breeding sites in Newfoundland and Labrador**

Following the first breeding record of *L. ridibundus* in North America (Finch 1978), nesting has been confirmed at two sites in Newfoundland 1984–1986 (Fig. 3). Juveniles accompanied by adults have been observed in summer at Stephenville and at three other locations in Newfoundland (1979, 1980, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1986) and in southern Labrador (1985, 1986; Fig. 1, Table 3).

*Ladle Island (49°29.5'N, 54°03'W)*

In 1982, we were informed by a local resident (D. Tulk *pers. comm.*) that Black-headed Gulls nested on Ladle Island (Fig. 1), a small (approx. 320 × 160 m) low-lying (estimated 7 m height above sea level), grassy island with a rocky periphery (Cairns *et al.* 1986). Local residents reported that a single pair of gulls first nested on the island between 1975 and 1979.



**Figure 2. Frequency distribution of the highest monthly counts of Common Black-headed Gulls in St. John's during 1983 and 1984. These data are representative of those in other recent years.**

**Table 3. Locations in Newfoundland and Labrador where Common Black-headed Gulls have nested and where juveniles have been sighted in summer/early fall (see Figure 1).**

Location	Date	Record	Source/ Observer
Stephenville Crossing	Aug. 12, 1977	just-fledged juvenile, 5 adults	Finch (1978)
	Aug. 26, 1977	3 juveniles, 5 adults	
	Oct. 25, 1979	1 juvenile, 16 adults	S. I. Tingley
	Aug. 31, 1980	1 juvenile, 7 adults	
	Oct. 5, 1980	2 juveniles, 14 adults	
	Aug. 17, 1984	5 juveniles, 1 adult	
Ladle Island	July 29, 1984	18 fledglings, 12 adults	present study
	July 4, 1985	13 nests with a total of 3 eggs, 12 chicks ca. 1-8 days, 15 adults	
	June 19, 1986	4-6 nests with a total of 8 eggs, 3 chicks ca. 3 days, 6 adults	
Sandy Point Island	July 9, 1985	nest with 3 eggs and nest with 7-10 day chick	present study
	July 23, 1985	nest with 2 eggs, 5 fledglings	
L'Anse-aux-Meadows	Sept. 18-20, 1982	1 juvenile, 2 adults	B. Mactavish
Cape Freels	Aug. 17, 1984	5 juveniles, 1 adult	S. I. Tingley
	Aug. 15, 1986	3 juveniles, 4 adults, 4 immatures	R. Burrows
	Aug. 25, 1986	1 juvenile, 2 adults	B. Mactavish
Mouth Pinware River, Labrador	Aug. 26, 1985	5 juveniles, ≥6 adults	C. Brown & J. Selno
	Aug. 6-7, 1986	1 juvenile with down on head and back food begging, 3 adults, 2 immatures	R. Burrows
St John's	late August 1986	2 juveniles, 1 adult	M. Parmenter

On July 29, 1984, 18 fledglings and 12 adults were recorded on Ladle Island, and on July 4, 1985, 13 nests (5 empty, 8 with eggs and chicks; Table 3) were found with about 15 adults flying above. A cold egg found outside a nest was deposited in the National Museum of Canada and furnishes the first Canadian specimen (H. Ouellet *pers. comm.*). The two largest chicks were banded with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service metal bands (left leg) and orange color bands (right leg). On June 19, 1986, four Common Black-headed Gull nests containing eggs and newly hatched chicks (Table 3, Figs. 4 and 5) were recorded on Ladle Island (two empty nests that may have belonged to this species were also found) and up to six adults were counted overhead.

*Sandy Point Island*  
(48°26'N, 58°34'W)

On July 9, 1985, a nest with three eggs and another with a chick nearby (estimated to be 7-10 days old) were found on Sandy Point Island (Flat Island) near Stephenville Crossing. On July 23, 1985, there were at least three breeding pairs on Sandy Point Island (Table 3). Juveniles in the presence of adults have been recorded in summer during 1979, 1980, and 1984 at Stephenville Crossing, about 8 km away

**Table 4. Nesting habitat and seabird associations at nesting sites of Common Black-headed Gulls in North America.**

Location	Nesting Site	Nesting Habitat	Other Seabird Species Nesting in Vicinity
Havre-aux-Basques, Quebec	small island	salt marsh	Common Tern
Monomoy, Massachusetts	large island	sand dunes	Laughing Gull, Common Tern
Petit Manan Island, Maine	small island	grasses and rock outcrops	Common, Arctic and Roseate terns, Laughing Gulls
Ladle Island, Newfoundland	small island	rocky outcrop	Common and Arctic terns, Ring-billed, Herring and Great Black-backed gulls, Leach's Storm-Petrel
Sandy Point Island, Newfoundland	large island	grassy sand	Ring-billed, Herring and Great Black-backed gulls, Arctic and Common terns

#### Other possible breeding sites

The small colony on Ladle Island decreased from 1984 through 1986. Reasons for this are unclear. Some birds that nested on Ladle Island in 1984 and 1985 may have moved to nearby sites in 1986, and sightings of juveniles at nearby Cape Freels (49°16'N, 53°30'W) in 1984 and 1986 suggest that the entire area needs to be surveyed thoroughly in future. Single pairs of *L. ridibundus* were also reported nesting in 1985 on Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula in a marsh at Noddy Bay (51°33'N, 55°28'W, W. Hedderson *pers. comm.*) and among a colony of several hundred terns on Entrance Island (51°04'N, 56°54'W, T. Samson



**Figure 3.** Common Black-headed Gull in winter plumage in St. John's, Newfoundland, where large numbers of these gulls overwinter feeding at sewage outflows. Photo/L.M. Tuck.

*pers. comm.*). A flock of 50 sub-adult Black-headed Gulls was also observed at the northern end of the Northern Peninsula in early August 1986 (R. I. Goudie and J. Zickefoose *pers. comm.*). Summer sightings of juveniles and adults have also been made at L'Anse aux Meadows (51°36'N, 55°32'W) in 1982, at the mouth of the Pinware River (51°37'N, 56°41'W) in southern Labrador in 1985 and 1986, and at St. John's (47°34'N, 52°42'W) in 1986 (Table 3, Fig. 1). The distribution of juveniles in late summer/early fall suggests that family units range widely soon after fledging and/or that this species nests in a number of yet unknown sites in Newfoundland and Labrador.

#### North American nesting habitat

All confirmed Common Black-headed Gull nesting sites in North

America are on islands and in association with colonies of other seabirds (Table 4). These patterns are consistent with the species' nesting habits in Iceland (Fjeldså 1975). Nesting substrates vary considerably among North American breeding locations, as elsewhere (*cf.* Ytreberg 1956, Patterson 1965).

#### Origin of North American birds

Banding recoveries indicate that Iceland has been the likely source of most of Newfoundland's and therefore of North America's gulls. The species began breeding in Iceland about 1910, with Great Britain the likely origin of these birds. Both recoveries of foreign-ringed gulls in Iceland were from British colonies, and most recoveries of birds banded in Iceland have been in Britain

(A. Petersen, Icelandic Museum of Natural History, *pers. comm.*). The breeding population of *L. ridibundus* in Iceland has increased and spread steadily over the island (A. Petersen, *pers. comm.*, *e.g.* Fjeldså 1975). In 1969, the species began nesting in Greenland and Salomonsen (1979) suggested that the species' recent range expansions across the North Atlantic may have been related to a gradual climatic warming trend. Common Black-headed Gull populations are also growing in northern Norway (Barrett and Vader 1984), a trend that may also be due to climatic amelioration (R. T. Barrett, Tromsø Museum, *pers. comm.*). This larid, along with other gulls, seems to benefit from increased availability of human waste in North America and frequently feeds at sewage outflows (Erskine 1963).

Within the past decade, two other European seabirds, Northern Fulmar



Figure 4. Common Black-headed Gull chick July 4, 1985. Photo/R.D. Elliot.

(*Fulmarus glacialis*) (Montevocchi *et al.* 1978) and Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus gravis*) (Storey and Lien 1984), have also begun to breed in Newfoundland. The only other recent addition to marine bird breeding community in Newfoundland, the Ring-billed Gull (*L. delawarensis*), is of North American origin. This species was first recorded nesting in 1945 (Peters and Burleigh 1951), and its breeding population has been increasing rapidly in the past few decades (Montevocchi and Tuck 1987). With the expansion of the Common Black-headed Gull's breeding range to at least four sites in northeastern North America, new colonizations are expected, as are discoveries of unknown existing sites. To this optimistic picture we add a final cautionary note: Common Black-headed Gulls, like all colonial birds, are vulnerable to disturbance on the breeding ground, and we hope that visits to their nesting sites will be con-

ducted with such circumspection that the reproductive process will proceed without human hindrance.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank G. Brinson, C. Brown, R. Burrows, R. Etcheberry, R. I. Goudie, W. Hedderson, B. Mactavish, M. Parmenter, A. Petersen, T. Samson, J. Selno, D. Tulk, S. Tingley and J. Zickefoose for information. Research was supported by NSERC General Operating Funds from a Memorial University President's Grant, by NSERC Grants A0306 and E6828 and by the Canadian Wildlife Service. This paper benefits from A. J. Erskine's comments on an earlier draft. Contribution number 132 from the Newfoundland Institute of Cold Ocean Science of Memorial University.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- AUBRY, Y. 1984. First nests of the Common Black-headed Gull in North America. *Am. Birds* 38:336-337.
- BARRETT, R. T. and W. VADER. 1984. The status and conservation of breeding seabirds in Norway. Pages 323-333 in: Croxall, J. P., P. G. H. Evans and R. W. Schreiber (Eds.), *Status and Conservation of the World's Seabirds*. Cambridge, England: International Council for Bird Preservation.
- CAIRNS, D. K., R. D. ELLIOT, W. THRELFALL and W. A. MONTEVECCHI. 1986. A researcher's guide to the seabird colonies of Newfoundland and Labrador. *Occas. Pap. Biol. Memorial U. Nfld.* 10: 50 pp.
- DRENNAN, M. P., D. C. FOLGER and C. TREYBALL. 1987. Common Black-headed Gulls on Petit Manan Island, Maine. *Am. Birds* 41:000-000.
- ERSKINE, A. J. 1963. The Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) in eastern North America. *Aud. Field Notes* 17:334-338.



Figure 5. Three-egg clutch photographed on Ladle Island June 19, 1986. Photo/W.A. Montevecchi.

- FINCH, D. W. 1978. Black-headed Gulls nesting in Newfoundland. *Am. Birds* 32: 312.
- FJELDSÅ, J. 1975. Entaksring of Haette-mage *Larus ridibundus* og Havterne *Sterna paradisaea* i Myratn-området, N.O. Island. *Dansk Orn. Foren. Tidsskr.* 69:65-72.
- GROSS, A. O. 1935. Two Labrador banding-records. *Bird-Banding* 6:23-25.
- HOLT, D. W., J. P. LORTIS, B. J. NIKULA and R. C. HUMPHREY. 1986. First record of Common Black-headed Gulls breeding in the United States. *Am. Birds* 40:204-206.
- MONTEVECCHI, W. A., E. BLUNDON, G. COOMBES, J. PORTER and P. RICE. 1978. Northern Fulmar breeding range extended to Baccalieu Island, Newfoundland. *Can. Field-Nat.* 92:80-82.
- and L. M. TUCK. 1987. Newfoundland Birds: Exploitation, Study, Conservation. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Nuttall Ornithological Club, *in press*.
- PATTERSON, I. J. 1965. Timing and spacing of broods in the black-headed gull. *Ibis* 107:433-459.
- PETERS, H. S. and T. D. BURLEIGH. 1951. The Birds of Newfoundland. St. John's: Dept. Natural Resources.
- SALOMONSEN, F. 1979. Ornithological and ecological studies in s.w. Greenland (59°46'-62°27'N. Lat.). *Medd. Gronland* 204:1-214.
- STOREY, A. and J. LIEN. 1985. Establishment of a breeding colony of Manx Shearwaters in Newfoundland. *Auk* 102: 395-401.
- TUCK, L. M. 1971. The occurrence of Greenland and European birds in Newfoundland. *Bird-Banding* 42:184-209.
- YTREBERG, N. J. 1956. Contribution to the breeding biology of the black-headed gull (*Larus ridibundus*) in Norway. *Nytt. Mag. Zool.* 4:5-106.

— Psychology Department and Newfoundland Institute for Cold Ocean Science, Memorial University, St. John's, Newfoundland A1B 3X9 Canada (Montevecchi, Cairns, Wells); Bamfield Marine Station, Bamfield, British Columbia V0R 1B0 Canada (Burger); Canadian Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 9158, Stn. B, St. John's, Newfoundland A1A 2X9 Canada (Elliot)