

# FIRST RECORD OF LAUGHING GULL IN CHILE

by W. (Ted) Hoogendoorn

ON THE AFTERNOON OF NOVEMBER 30, 1991, while watching mixed flocks of Franklin's Gulls (*Larus pipixcan*) and Gray Gulls (*L. modestus*)—as well as a few Band-tailed Gulls (*L. belcheri*)—on a stretch of tide-washed coastal rocks 5 kilometers south of the "Morro" of Arica, northern Chile, I was surprised to note that one Franklin's Gull—erroneously assuming for the first 20 seconds that it was that species—had retained its summer hood. A better look revealed the decidedly long bill, legs, and wings of a Laughing Gull (*L. atricilla*). Realizing that this might constitute the first record of Laughing Gull for Chile, I suspected that it would be virtually impossible to get a single-observer record accepted by the ornithological community with a written description, especially owing to the perplexing coincidence that the bird was in nuptial

plumage at this date! Photographing the bird was an absolute necessity, but distance, the presence of many other gulls, and unfavorable light conditions precluded that action, and several attempts to capture the bird's presence on film failed.

December 1, 1991, brought an all-day search among huge masses of other gulls. Eventually, at 6:15 P.M., the Laughing Gull was relocated on rocks close to the original location. Here it could be photographed (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Laughing Gull in worn adult nuptial plumage, among Gray Gulls and Franklin's Gulls, Arica, Chile, December 1, 1991. Photograph/Ted Hoogendoorn.

Though Laughing Gull is a species familiar to most North American birders, a full description is presented here because of the out-of-season plumage of the bird. Additionally, comparison of size, structure, and plumage details, compiled from field notes and color slides, is made with adult Franklin's and Gray gulls.

At rest, the bird was clearly larger than a Franklin's Gull, with a proportionally longer and heavier bill and longer legs. It looked longer than a Gray Gull, but sleeker and not as full-chested, with a more attenuated rear end, making it a less heavy-looking bird. The bill was about as long as those in most Gray Gulls, but comparatively heavier, with a straighter culmen and a more pronounced gonydeal angle. The legs were a trifle longer than in most Gray Gulls, but less thick. There was considerable overlap, however, with the largest Gray Gulls having a slightly longer bill and legs. In flight the wings looked roughly as long as in a Gray Gull, but clearly narrower and much more pointed. The head was slaty-black, bordered with darker black at the lower nape and around the sides of the upper neck. White crescents above and below the eye were slightly narrower than in Franklin's Gull in non-breeding plumage. The neck was white. The back and the scapulars were dark gray, in some lights (and from the same angle) a bit darker than in Franklin's Gulls and lacking the brownish tinge of Gray Gulls. There was a very narrow white tip on one rear scapular. The underparts were white. The outer primaries were black, with a tiny white tip on primary 7 only (primaries numbered descendantly). The inner primaries, the secondaries, the tertiaries, and the upper-

wing coverts were the same shade of gray as the back. The flight feathers were old and worn, to the extent that only traces of the white trailing edge to the secondaries and the inner primaries were retained, the tertials showing a narrow and irregular white rear crescent at rest. The tail was white. The bill was dark red, paler red at the tip. The iris was dark brown. The legs were dark red.

Apart from some preening, the bird was not particularly active, though it called once (Fig. 2). Several times it was displaced by intimidating Gray Gulls, many of which were involved in courtship behavior and copulation (cf. Moynihan 1962, Howell *et al.* 1974, Guerra *et al.* 1988).

This sighting constitutes the first record of Laughing Gull for Chile (cf. McFarlane 1974, A.O.U. 1983, Araya Mödinger *et al.* 1986, Carlos Guerra pers.comm.). The species is a non-breeding visitor along the northern half of the Pacific coast of South America, where it is common in Colombia (Hilty and Brown 1986), the most abundant species between December and March in Ecuador (Ben Haase in litt.), fairly common to common in northwestern Peru and uncommon near Lima, west-central Peru (Koepcke 1970, Parker *et al.* 1982, Schulenberg 1987, Ben Haase in litt., Ed Mackrill pers.comm.). It is a scarce visitor to the coast of southwestern Peru, which is the southern limit of its non-breeding range, with one or two individuals recorded almost every year in the Mollendo-Mejía district (Hughes 1979, 1988). It is a reputed wanderer, with records in ten European countries up to 1988, in North and West Africa, on several Pacific Ocean islands, and even in northeastern Australia (Hoogen-



**Figure 2. Laughing Gull in worn adult nuptial plumage, among Gray Gulls and Franklin's Gulls, calling, Arica, Chile, December 1, 1991. Photograph/Ted Hoogendoorn.**

doorn and Steinhaus 1990). Since Arica is 1500–2000 kilometers south of northern Peru and only 250 kilometers from Mollendo, this record seems overdue, and Laughing Gulls may occur in Chile more regularly, particularly in the warm austral summer months.

It is a matter of speculation as to why the bird was still in nuptial plumage, without any signs of molt. The wings were rather heavily worn, though not abraded, as often occurs in one-year-old gulls just before the molt to second-winter plumage. It is possible that the bird had been in the area for a long time and that it had adjusted to the local summer season circumstances. Out-of-season nuptial plumage has been recorded in a few cases in northern hemisphere gulls occurring in the southern hemisphere in the austral summer away from their normal range. Examples include Common Black-headed Gulls (*L. ridibundus*) at Beira, Mozambique (Brooke *et al.* 1981), and in a Gray-headed Gull (*L. cirrocephalus*)

colony near Johannesburg, South Africa (Sinclair *et al.* 1986), and a Franklin's Gull near Johannesburg as well (Hockey *et al.* 1988, Sinclair 1989). It is likely that the latter two birds had been present locally for some time before entering a colony of congeners. Judging from a photograph in Sinclair (1989), this Franklin's Gull's plumage was about as worn as that of the Arica Laughing Gull. Franklin's Gulls in nuptial plumage have been recorded lingering in the interior United States in early winter (Kaufman 1989, Powell 1989, Grzybowski 1989, Lasley and Sexton 1989, LeBaron 1989).

Identical North American Laughing Gull records could not be traced, but Blom (1990) observed an

adult with an almost full hood near Baltimore, Maryland, November 7, 1986. In South America, Dujardin and Tostain (1990) found four pairs in full nuptial plumage on the island of Grand Connétable off the coast of French Guiana, December 3, 1988. This is the southernmost (and also the easternmost) known breeding site of the species. Whereas the breeding season of Laughing Gull on Grand Connétable extends from April to September, the behavior of these December birds indicated reproductive activities (Dujardin and Tostain 1990). It seems unlikely that there is a relation between the Arica Laughing Gull and extreme eastern Guianese off-season breeders, but it cannot be excluded that the bird was a displaced late breeder from more westerly regions.

Gull watching at Arica in the early austral summer is rewarding. The harbor, fish-meal plants, sandy and rocky beaches, and nearby ocean south of the town act as powerful magnets to gulls. The number of

species is not large, but the number of individuals is impressive. A conservative estimate during November 30–December 2, 1991, yielded 50,000+ Franklin's Gulls and 10,000+ Gray Gulls. Less common were Bantailed Gulls with 150, Kelp Gulls (*L. dominicanus*) with two first-year birds, and Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*) with one first-year bird November 30. The first Sabine's Gulls for Chile were found at sea off Arica in 1968 (Post 1971). It seems likely that the area has a tremendous potential for finding vagrant northern gulls, and visiting birders are urged to check all gull flocks thoroughly.

#### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Ben Haase, Ruud van Halewyn, Paul Lehman, Robert S. Ridgely, Peter van Scheepen, and Claudia P. Wilds for their constructive comments on a draft of this paper. Carlos Guerra, Ed Mackrill, and Robert W. McFarlane provided information on the occurrence of northern hemisphere gulls along the Pacific coast of South America. Arnoud B. van den Berg provided part of the literature.

#### Literature Cited

- AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1983. Check-list of North American Birds, 6th ed. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.
- ARAYA MÖDINGER, B., G. MILLIE HOLMAN, and M. BERNAL MORALES. 1986. Guia de campo de las aves de Chile. Editorial Universitaria, Santiago, Chile.
- BLOM, E. A. T. 1990. Possible delayed molt in an adult Laughing Gull. *Maryland Birdlife* 46: 28–29.
- BROOKE, R. K., J. COOPER, and J. C. SINCLAIR. 1981. Additional records of seabirds on the coast of southern Mozambique. *Cormorant* 9: 30–40.
- DUJARDIN, J.-L., and O. TOSTAIN. 1990. Les oiseaux de mer nicheurs de Guyane française. *Alauda* 58: 107–134.
- GRZYBOWSKI, J. A. 1989. The Winter Season: Southern Great Plains Region. *Am. Birds* 43: 330–332.
- GUERRA, C. G., L. C. FITZPATRICK, R. AGUILAR, and B. J. VENABLES. 1988. Reproductive consequences of El Nino-Southern Oscillation in Gray Gulls (*Larus modestus*). *Colonial Waterbirds* 11: 170–175.
- HILTY, S. L., and W. L. BROWN. 1986. A Guide to the Birds of Colombia. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.

- HOCKEY, P. A. R., and THE RARITIES COMMITTEE. 1988. Rare birds in Southern Africa, 1986–87: fifth report of the SAOS Rarities Committee. *Bokmakierie* 40: 111–114.
- HOOGENDOORN, W., and G. H. STEINHAUS. 1990. Nearctic gulls in the Western Palearctic. *Dutch Birding* 12: 109–164.
- HOWELL, T. R., B. ARAYA, and W. R. MILLIE. 1974. Breeding biology of the Gray Gull, *Larus modestus*. Univ. Calif. Pub. Zool. 104: 1–57.
- HUGHES, R. A. 1979. Notes on Charadriiformes of the south coast of Peru. *Stud. Avian Biol.* 2: 49–53.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1988. Nearctic migrants in south-west Peru. *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 108: 29–43.
- KAUFMAN, K. 1989. The Changing Seasons. *Am. Birds* 43: 271–275.
- KOEPCKE, M. 1970. The birds of the department of Lima, Peru. Livingston, Wynnewood, PA.
- LASLEY, G. W., and C. SEXTON. 1989. The Winter Season: Texas Region. *Am. Birds* 43: 333–340.
- LEBARON, G. S. 1989. The 89th Christmas Bird Count. *Am. Birds* 43: 551–559.
- MCFARLANE, R. W. 1974. Unusual avian migrants in Tarapacá. *Depto. Agric. Univ. Norte Arica, Idesia* 3: 181–184.

- MOYNIHAN, M. 1962. Hostile and sexual behavior patterns of South American and Pacific Laridae. *Behaviour*, Suppl. 8:1–365.
- PARKER, T. A., S. A. PARKER, and M. A. PLENGE. 1982. An annotated checklist of Peruvian birds. Buteo Books, Vermillion, S.D.
- POST, P. W. 1971. Additional observations of Sabine's Gull from coastal Peru and Chile. *Ibis* 113: 517.
- POWELL, D. J. 1989. The Winter Season Western Great Lakes Region. *Am. Birds* 43: 315–318.
- SCHULENBERG, T. S. 1987. New records of birds from western Peru. *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 107: 184–189.
- SINCLAIR, J. C. 1989. Franklin's Gull. In: *The Complete Book of Southern African Birds*, P. J. Ginn, W. G. McIlleron and P. leS. Milstein, eds.: 277. Struik Winchester, Cape Town, South Africa.
- \_\_\_\_\_, and THE RARITIES COMMITTEE. 1986. SAOS Rarities Committee's annual report. *Bokmakierie* 38: 20–25.
- Notengard 32, 3941 LW Doorn, Netherlands.

## King Bird Tours

P.O. BOX 196  
PLANETARIUM STATION  
NEW YORK, NY  
10024 U.S.A.  
(212) 866-7923

"the greatest  
operator of  
ornithological  
tours on  
earth"  
Arthur  
Frommer

The  
Asia  
Specialists  
Write for  
itineraries



## 1993 BIRDING TOURS

- TORISHIMA**  
30 March-5 April
- TAIWAN/HONG KONG**  
4-21 April
- TIBET/WEST CHINA**  
7-31 May
- MANCHURIA/  
INNER MONGOLIA**  
30 May-24 June
- MALAYSIA**  
22 July-14 August
- INDONESIA #1  
Halmahera/Sulawesi**  
23 July-15 August
- INDONESIA #2  
Lesser Sundas**  
13-31 August
- SOUTH CHINA  
Pheasant & Cranes**  
10 December-4 January

## 1994 BIRDING TOURS

- NW INDIA:** 7-31 January
- THAILAND:** 8-30 January
- VIETNAM:** 3 February-5 March
- PHILIPPINES:** 4 March-4 April