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.
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 Módinger 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 (Koopce 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-Meja 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 (Hoogendoorn 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 Band-tailed 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 71). 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.

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Literature Cited


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