

# FIRST RECORD OF THE KELP GULL AND SIGNIFICANT RECORDS OF THE GLAUCOUS-WINGED AND LAUGHING GULLS FOR THE CENTRAL PACIFIC

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**ABSTRACT:** We report three species of gulls on islands in the mid-Pacific Ocean from 1999 to 2004, including the first Pacific Ocean record of the Kelp Gull (*Larus dominicanus*) north of the equator, a new southernmost record for the Glaucous-winged Gull (*L. glaucescens*) on Christmas Island, and Laughing Gulls (*L. atricilla*) from Wake Atoll, with additional recent sightings and historical records from other atolls.

Gulls generally do not thrive in tropical pelagic ocean environments. They typically forage along the continental shelf from subpolar to subtropical waters. Several species, however, such as the Lava Gull (*Larus fuliginosus*) of the Galapagos, are adapted to specific tropical feeding niches, and gulls have been noted in the fossil record from the Society Islands (Steadman 2002) and the Hawaiian Islands (Burney et al. 2001). Some gulls do occur regularly as vagrants on the islands of the central and south Pacific; for example, the Ring-billed (*L. delawarensis*) and Franklin's (*L. pipixcan*) are recorded annually in the Hawaiian Archipelago and less frequently elsewhere in the Pacific. We report here on significant range extensions for two more commonly recorded vagrant gulls and a species expanding its worldwide range.

## KELP GULL (*Larus dominicanus*)

On 9 September 1999 Jones observed an adult Kelp Gull standing in shallow water in the lagoon at the main village, London, Christmas Island (now called Kiritimati), Republic of Kiribati, at 1° 52' N, 157° 20' W (Figure 1). Although no size comparison with other gulls was possible, the bird was about the size of a Herring (*L. argentatus*) or Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*) and appeared very similar to the black-backed nominate subspecies of the latter. The Lesser Black-backed Gull was eliminated by bill shape (relatively thick and stout), leg color (dull greenish brown), and the broader white trailing edge of the secondaries and tertials. Like the Lesser Black-backed Gull, it had a single white spot near the wingtip in the outermost primary. On the basis of time of year, freshness of plumage (no evidence of molt), and brightness of bill colors, the bird appeared to be in breeding condition. When approached, and shortly after it was photographed, it flushed, circled the lagoon, and disappeared in the distance. It was not seen again.

The Kelp Gull is the most abundant and widespread gull in much of the Southern Hemisphere, where it is found in Antarctica, Australia, New Zealand, South America, and Africa. In Australia, where uncommon, it is found north to around 28° S in southern Queensland, in South America to around 2° S in southern Ecuador (Ridgely and Greenfield 2001), and in



Figure 1. Adult Kelp Gull, Christmas Island, 9 September 1999.

Photo by H. Lee Jones

Africa to around 10° S in Angola, with isolated nesting records to 12° N in Senegal (Urban et al. 1986, Barlow and Wacher 1997). Its full latitudinal range extends over 60° and includes several subspecies (Jiguet 2002).

The Kelp Gull is increasing in both population size and range following increasing human development of Southern Hemisphere seacoasts (del Hoyo et al. 1996). Vagrancy to the United States has been increasing, as noted in Louisiana, where the species has bred since 1989 on the Chandeleur Islands and hybridized with the Herring Gull (ABA Checklist Committee 2001, Dittmann and Cardiff 2005). The Kelp Gull has been recorded from Texas (Gottschling 1996, Lockwood and Freeman 2004) and from Indiana in 1996 (Hess 2004), in Maryland from late 1998 or early 1999 through at least November 2004 (Kostenko 1999, Day 2005), and possibly in Colorado in 2003 (Hess 2004). Elsewhere in North America it has been found in Mexico on the Yucatán Peninsula in 1987 and 1991 (Howell et al. 1993), in the West Indies in Barbados in 2000, and in Trinidad in 2000–01 (Hayes et al. 2002). There are no records from Europe or Asia, nor were there any previous pelagic Pacific Ocean records north of Norfolk Island (29° S, 168° E), where Higgins and Davies (1996) recorded it as a vagrant.

#### GLAUCCOUS-WINGED GULL (*Larus glaucescens*)

A bird in first-winter plumage was first observed by Jones and photographed by Rauzon on the beach at London, Kiritimati, on 16 January 2002 (Figures 2 and 3). Identification was based on the all-black stout bill, the paler



Figure 2. Glaucous-winged Gull, first cycle, in flight harassed by Sooty Terns, Christmas Island, 16 January 2002.

*Photo by Mark Rauzon*



Figure 3. Glaucous-winged Gull, first cycle, Christmas Island, 16 January 2002.

*Photo by Mark Rauzon*

outer webs of the outer primaries, lack of a secondary bar, and weak tail band—all combining to give an appearance more uniform than the smaller and slimmer-billed but otherwise similar Thayer's Gull (*L. thayeri*).

In North America the Glaucous-winged Gull breeds from the Aleutian Islands south to Oregon and ranges in winter south to Baja California, rarely to the Revillagigedo Islands in Mexico (American Ornithologists Union 1998). There is a recent record from El Salvador at 13° N (Jones 2003). In Asia, the Glaucous-winged Gull breeds on the Kamchatka Peninsula and winters south to northern (rarely southern) Japan. It is a casual vagrant in eastern and southern mainland China (Shandong, Fujian, and Guangdong provinces), and in Hong Kong at 22° N (Carey et al. 2001). In the Pacific, it is a fairly frequent winter visitor to the Hawaiian Islands (especially in the leeward islands) and on Johnston Atoll (Pratt et al. 1987). Single gulls are seen episodically in the central Pacific. For example, P. Unitt (pers. comm.) photographed one Glaucous-winged Gull in first-winter plumage at 4° 43' N, 146° 54' W on 10 March 1977.

In 2001–02 this species appeared to invade the subtropics, especially Hawaii, where eight individuals were reported on the Hawaii Christmas Bird Count in December 2001; cumulatively, only eight individuals had been found on the previous 29 annual counts (<http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/>). Relatively high numbers in the central Pacific may explain the appearance of the one at Christmas Island. Another possible sighting was at Wake Atoll, also in winter 2001–02, by island personnel, who described a large “café-au-lait” colored bird sitting in the harbor. A similar invasion may have occurred in the late 1960s, as suggested by previous unpublished reports. Hawaii Christmas bird counts include four Glaucous-winged Gulls seen during the winters of 1968–69 and 1969–70 (<http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/>). Additionally, two immatures were collected in spring 1968 and 1969 by Smithsonian personnel at Johnston Atoll (Sibley and McFarlane 1968), and a gull tentatively identified as an immature Glaucous-winged was seen in winter 1967 at Wake Atoll (Smithsonian Institution Pacific Ocean Biological Survey Project unpubl. notes).

#### LAUGHING GULL (*Larus atricilla*)

In the lagoon of Wake Atoll (19° 18' N, 166° 38' E) Rauzon saw two Laughing Gulls, one a molting one-year-old (Figure 4), the other an adult in basic plumage, during July 2003. They were gone by November.

In the Line Islands Jones observed a first-winter bird in Christmas Island's main village on 1 February 2001, and Jones and Rauzon observed a second-year bird, possibly the same individual, foraging at the seaward entrance to the lagoon around the main village beaches on 15 January 2002. Between April and August 2004, A. Wegmann (pers. comm.) saw about 14 individual Laughing Gulls in both basic and alternate plumages at Palmyra Atoll (5° 52' N, 162° 05' W).

Laughing Gulls are common in North America on the Atlantic coast, where they breed from New England to Belize, the West Indies, and French Guiana; in winter they range to northern Brazil. On the Pacific coast, they breed from northeastern Baja California to Colima in western Mexico, oc-



Figure 4. Laughing Gull, first cycle molting to second cycle, Wake Atoll, 4 July 2003.

*Photo by Mark Rauzon*

curring irregularly north to California; in winter they occur south to Peru (Burger 1996). This species is a somewhat regular visitor throughout the Atlantic and Pacific, with annual occurrences also in Europe (Cramp 1983). It is casual in Africa being recorded in Morocco and Senegal (Urban et al. 1986), and Australia (Burger 1996).

In the central Pacific, most records are from the Hawaiian Islands (Pratt et al. 1987). Elsewhere, the Laughing Gull has occurred in the Phoenix Islands and Line Islands (King 1967, VanderWerf et al. 2004). It is accidental in the Marshall Islands on Bikini Atoll (Garrett 1987), in the northern Marianas Islands on Saipan (Stinson et al. 1991), in the Samoan Islands (Muse et al. 1980, Hake et al. 1998), and in the Gambier Islands of French Polynesia (VanderWerf et al. 2004).

Pelagic vagrancy is a characteristic of the gull family, as these observations from remote oceanic islands demonstrate. The Laughing Gull is the most regular and widespread vagrant gull in the central and south Pacific. The Glaucous-winged Gull is less prone to long-distant vagrancy than Laughing Gull, but the records we summarize suggest periodic pulses of increased dispersal. The Kelp Gull has now been recorded for the first time in the central Pacific as the species continues its worldwide expansion.

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