

WAYS OF THE "SEA GULLS"

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PART I

The following deals principally with the Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*), the Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) coming in for comparative data and minor discussion. All my life, around Long Island, I have heard the term "sea gulls" applied by the inexperienced, principally to these two common species (although the Ring-billed Gull would probably come into this category), hence the above title. Inasmuch as this is written from material gathered about these two species here on Long Island near the sea, the term seems further appropriate.

Acknowledgments

This paper is composed largely of an accumulation of original material, long held in the note books of this writer and others. Some had planned to use them as short field notes, but kindly forwarded their material for this cumulative effort.

Twenty years of the increase of breeding Herring Gulls on Gardiners and Cartwright Island was the principal subject in a paper read by this writer at the convention of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs at Schenectady in 1957. LeRoy Wilcox of Speonk, provided this material to me in correspondence giving the results of his numerous field trips to both islands and portions of the Shinnecock Bay area. Also, this writer is principally indebted to Neil Smith of the Brooklyn Bird Club for sending in Kings county population counts to be used in part 2 of this paper.

John Mayer of South Ozone Park sent me Jamaica Bay breeding records; Irwin Alperin of Babylon described feeding behavior and status. Roy Latham, of Orient, has had many experiences in the field which has enabled him to write interestingly on feeding behavior of the Herring Gull on the north fluke of Long Island near Orient. For the deliterious effects of the Herring Gull on other nesting species, the writer again refers to Wilcox.

History

The Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) on Long Island has steadily increased for the past 40 years or more since the federal plumage laws went into effect, ending the feather craze and the decorating of women's hats with our native birds. The feather industry on the South Shore of Long Island was highly commercialized and the numerous gunners killed thousands of gulls, terns, shore and water birds and brought them to South Shore skinning and packing sheds from which they were later shipped to the millinery trade in New York city. According to the late Nelson Verity of Seaford, L. I., who feather-hunted on the western bays extensively in the 1880s and 1890s, dark and immature Herring Gulls brought 20 cents each and the light adults 40 cents each (Elliott, 1945).

With protection, this species increased enormously and extended its breeding range southward until the Fish and Wildlife Service, recognizing its overwhelming population, set up control measures by spraying the eggs. This was for the purpose of retaining the gulls on the un-hatching eggs until nesting season was well progressed or over. Egg-spraying apparently did not produce the desired results and the project was abandoned.

After plumage collecting ended and for about two decades afterward, the gull increase was gradual and any breeding taking place was to the north of Long Island and the coast of New York State. Frank M. Chapman (1934) categorized it as an abundant winter visitant decreasing markedly in summer. A. D. Cruickshank, (1942), mentioning the beginning of breeding on Long Island, predicted a far greater abundance, but, nevertheless stated that "in April the Herring Gulls rapidly thin out . . . after May relatively few birds, the majority immatures, remained to pass the summer."

During recent years, in areas at Short Beach and around our inlets and favored feeding areas even where not breeding, up to 1,000 immatures may summer cluttering the shell-banks, beaches and tidal areas. These fly up in flocks and drift ahead of the observer and seem to be increasing in numbers each year. Coincidental with the Herring Gull's nesting increase are the far fewer numbers but obvious increase in breeding Great Black-backed Gulls.

Breeding

The first record that I can find for nesting Herring Gulls on Long Island came in a letter from Roy Latham of Orient which tells of three pairs breeding at Orient in 1931 in what is now the Orient State Park and that three to five pairs nested there the following five seasons, but none since. A pair of Great Black-backed Gulls also nested in Orient in 1958. Latham's 1931 records advance by two years the published statements of several writers on Long Island's ornithology that the first breeding record for our region was the finding of a small colony on Fisher's Island, L. I., in 1933.

The next nesting found was on Cartwright Island near the eastern end of Long Island; later large colonies of Herring Gulls invaded Gardiners Island. Cartwright Island is a low sandy tract one-half mile south of Gardiners Island whose sandy north and south sides provide excellent seabird nesting terrain. John Helmuth found a set of eggs and about a dozen pairs of adult Herring Gulls there for the first time in the summer of 1936. The year 1937 produced an estimated 30-40 pairs according to Roy Wilcox of Speonk. In a general census on July 11, 1938, Wilcox found, on Cartwright Island, 92 adult Herring Gulls, 18 Osprey nests, 200 Roseate and 1,000 Common Terns. On July 13, 1939, he counted 250 adult Herring Gulls, 24 Osprey nests, 100 Roseate Terns and 1,000 Common Terns. On July 10, 1942, only six years after its first nesting, the preponderance of 500 Herring Gulls on Cartwright Island apparently unbalanced the proportion of other species and Wilcox found a total of only 14 Osprey nests and 200 terns breeding. On that day he also reported the southernmost breeding record of the Great Black-backed gull with the capture and banding of a juvenile. This species has been regularly reported as breeding since, but the increase has been very small compared to that of the Herring Gull. A span of nine years from 1942 to 1951 reveals a jump from 500 to 1,500 nesting Herring Gulls on Cartwright Island.

In 1951, greatly reduced terns numbered only 100 and there were only three Black Skimmers and one pair of Ospreys noted that year. With this we find a decline from 20 Osprey nests to one in 10 years on Carewright Island.

Meanwhile, on Gardiners Island Wilcox found 750 adult Herring Gulls on the north side in 1951 and an estimated 3,000 on the south side. In the

whole large area there were only 200 Common Terns and six Black Skimmers. On Cartwright Island, July 18, 1953 there were 2,000 Herring Gulls, an increase to three Ospreys nests and no terns or skimmers. On the same date, with 4,000 Herring Gulls on the northern end of Gardiners Island, no Ospreys, terns or skimmers remained, but a lesser number of Herring Gulls on the south end, permitted a population of 100 Common Terns and two Black Skimmers to be found. In 1954, Cartwright had an estimated population of 3,000 Herring Gulls, and 15 young of the Great Black-backed Gull were noted. Wilcox visited the islands on July 22, 1955 and estimated roughly 10,000 Herring Gulls on both islands; this against only a dozen pairs just 19 years previously!

In 1955 no terns were found on either Cartwright or Gardiners Island for the first time, and only two Osprey's nests on the southern three miles of Gardiners Island were located where up to 25 had been counted before the Herring Gull invasion.

Increases in the number of Herring Gulls in 1956 and 1957 were noticed on Gardiners Island. Numbers on Cartwright Island (probably around saturation point) were about the same as in 1955 and 20 Great Black-backed Gulls were seen. A maximum of 70 Great Black-backed Gulls on Gardiners Island was reported by Wilcox in 1957. In 1958 Cartwright Island showed a falling off to about 1,000 Herring Gulls and had 10 Great Black-backed Gulls, but an increase of several thousand Herring Gulls on Gardiners gave 1958 a maximum total for both islands up to that time. Also the 10 Great Black-backed Gulls on Cartwright and 95 others on Gardiners in 1958 made this species' total for the two islands over 100 for the first time.

Meanwhile breeding Herring Gulls had spread to the south shore of Eastern Long Island by about 1952 and in 1955 Wilcox reported 300 and one pair of Great Black-backed Gulls on one island in Shinnecock Bay, and 300 Herring Gulls, one pair of Great Black-backed Gulls and 40 Black Skimmers on another island. No terns were nesting on the two islands although they did up to three years previously, when the gulls took over.

Westward, 11 Herring Gull nests were found by Wilcox on Fire Island near Fire Island Inlet in 1940, but this colony was deserted later. In the middle 1950s nesting occurred at Captree (eastern extremity of Jones Beach) where a colony of some 200 adults were present and about 100 young banded in 1955. This built up to an estimated 600-700 adults in 1958 and according to Alan Penberthy of Babylon, he, with several others including Emanuel Levine, banded 399 young in 1958. At the time of this writing (May, 1959) an estimated 1,500 adults are heavily sprinkled over the nesting terrain. Three young Great Black-backed Gulls were also banded in 1958 at Captree, for the first record of this species nesting away from the Eastern Long Island colonies mentioned above and presumably the most southerly breeding record of this species on the Atlantic seaboard.

Further westward on Jamaica Bay a rapid growth, then diminishment, was reflected by the following figures sent in by John H. Mayer of South Ozone Park about 10 years ago. In 1950 six pairs of Herring Gulls were suspected of breeding, and 10 pairs as nesting in 1951. In 1952 some 60 pairs were reported by Mayer who, with Herman Goebels of Brooklyn, landed from a small boat on an island and found many abandoned nests but

no young. In 1953 some 300 pairs successfully bred and 93 young were banded; also 10 pairs were suspected of breeding that year on a sandy fill at the head of Jamaica Bay. This whole area is subjected to many changes, however, and the Herring Gull breeding areas have been disturbed by fill operations so that extremely few records have come in during the past few years.

Feeding Behavior on Farm Lands

Roy Latham contributes the following observations principally from his farm at Orient: "Food and feeding habits of Herring Gulls stem back 65 years, in my observations, to about 1890, when local fishermen set the big pound-nets for bunkers, which were spread on the land for fertilizer. These drew huge flocks of gulls to the farm lands after the fish. Fertilizing the farms of Eastern Long Island with menhaden (bunkers) originated long prior to that date. Back in the 1870s and 1880s the farmers formed purse-seine companies and drew millions of bunkers to the beaches to be carted and spread on the farms. The gulls came in great numbers and the farmers made every effort to plow the fish under before the gulls took too large a share. The farmers considered each fish worth a penny in fishscrap fertilizer. Various methods failed to deter the gulls more than temporarily from their natural scavenging habit. Their actions then, with fish deposited on the field, could be compared to flocks of gulls associated with dumping places today.

"Spreading fish on the land for fertilizer continued decreasingly by later trap-fishers until around 1917, when it was discontinued by law for sanitary reasons. As a boy I plowed all day and sometimes well into moonlight evenings to conserve scrap fish from gulls. When the plowman was on one end of a field the gulls swooped in on the opposite end. A flock of 100 to 200 gulls in a few minutes took that many fish. Often a man was kept on each end of the field to scare the birds off. Among the Herring Gulls came occasionally an Iceland, Ring-bill and Great Black-backed Gull. The last kept on the outer fringe of the flock and when perched on the ground stood and stared and did not carry away fish like its smaller associates.

"When a sharpie loaded with fish was beached, Herring Gulls came hovering and screaming close at hand and would even venture down and grab a fish from the boat. A man had to remain in the boat on guard while a wagon-load of fish by team was carted up the Sound bluff driveway to be sorted for market or spread on the land.

"Fertilizing crops with fish, of course, originated with the Indians before the early settlers employed that cheap and plentiful supply of "manure". But the Indians deposited the fish around the hills of corn and covered them with soil and there was no problem with gulls around plantings of the aborigines.

"The gulls still come to the plowed land in flocks numbering several hundred birds, the largest flock in spring of 1959 being about 600 individuals, the usual number being 300 to 400 birds, but several flocks of this size are scattered over various farms. Today they come to the farms not for fish, but angleworms and follow a tractor-pulled plow hour after hour. Their capacity for earthworms seems endless. A certain Herring Gull kept

under surveillance for two hours indicated that one gull will devour 800 to 1,000 earth worms per day freshly plowed out and in addition consume all wireworms, which are the larvae of ground and snap beetles, seen. The gulls are very sociable while the tractor is in motion and move just enough to prevent getting run over by the wheels or from being plowed under. The gulls of late years also come to the planted plowed land all summer to search for worms and other worthwhile insects that might be washed out. At such times they resort to rain water puddles and drink fresh water."

To be continued.

FEDERATION MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE

Since publication of the 1959 membership list twenty-three individuals and one club have joined the Federation.

As chairman of the Membership Committee, it is my pleasure to express our cordial welcome to these new members. It is the hope of the Federation that their association with us will be mutually enjoyable and beneficial in every respect.

The new members are:

Allen, Dr. Arthur A., Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell U., Ithaca, N. Y.
Axtell, Mrs. Harold H., 405 Elmwood Ave., Buffalo 22, N. Y.
Bejian, Mrs. Henry L., 932 Meadow Lane, Schenectady 9, N. Y.
Below, Mrs. T. H., 59 Coles Ave., Amityville, N. Y.
Blake, Joseph A., Jr., 140 Ten Eyck St., Watertown, N. Y.
Blake, Mrs. Joseph A., Jr., 140 Ten Eyck St., Watertown, N. Y.
Bottleman, Mrs. John, R. D. 2, Northwood, Iowa.
Brundage, Edward F., Etna, N. Y.
Dye, Mrs. John, 7 Carol Terrace, Cornwall-on-Hudson, N. Y.
Eddy, Mrs. Gilbert M., 2201 Stone Ridge Road, Schenectady 9, N. Y.
Felle, Mrs. Henry, 650 Fitch St., R. D. 1, Oneida, N. Y.
Frick, Mrs. George, Eight Note Road, R. D. 3, Fulton, N. Y.
Gifford, F P., Aurora-on-Cayuga, N. Y.
Houghton, Gertrude H., 605 Washington St., Watertown, N. Y.
Hutchinson, Mrs. George, 618 Union Street, Clayton, N. Y.
Isleib, Peter M., R. D. 2, Marlborough, Conn.
Kingsbury, Dr. Marguerite, P. O. Box 226, Sunmount, N. Y.
Lobdell, Miss Audrey, 753 James St., Apt. 426, Syracuse 3, N. Y.
McFadden, Alice, 245 Stone Street, Watertown, N. Y.
Pearsall, Miss Linda Jane, Baker Hill Road, R. D. 2, Freeville, N. Y.
Perron, Mrs. Bernadette, P. O. Box 127, Sunmount, N. Y.
Sharp, Mrs. Elmer, 135 Fishers Road, Fishers, N. Y.
Shoumatoff, Nicholas, Old Post Road, Bedford, N. Y.
Dutchess County Bird Club, P. O. Box 1414, Arlington Branch, Poughkeepsie, N. Y.

It is with deep regret that we announce the withdrawal from our membership of the Bedford Audubon Society. We sincerely hope that this fine organization reaffiliate with us sometime in the near future.

ALBERT W. FUDGE,
Chairman Membership Committee.