

RECENT CHANGES IN THE STATUS OF THE GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL

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In this paper the changes in the status of the Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) in New York State and in lesser detail the rest of the Great Lakes basin are considered. There have been considerable changes since the review by Gross in 1945. The *Auk*, *Wilson Bulletin*, and *Zoological Record* since this date have been examined as well as complete sets of this journal and *Audubon Field Notes*.

Breeding Status

A. Coastal

Briefly, the breeding range of the Great Black-backed Gull is the coastal areas of the North Atlantic: more specifically from North Devon Island (north-east corner of Hudson Bay) and western Greenland south along both coasts of Labrador, Nova Scotia, Maine, Massachusetts and Long Island. In 1921 Bent gave Nova Scotia as the southern limit of the breeding range. It was first found breeding in Maine in 1931 (Norton and Allen, 1931) although the species appears to have been well established at that time since 13 breeding individuals were found in ten breeding stations. In 1930 it was recorded as breeding on the Isle of Shoals off the New Hampshire coast although nesting may well have occurred two years earlier (Jackson and Allen, 1932). The first breeding record for Massachusetts was established in 1931 (Eaton, 1931). The total New England nesting population was no less than 3500 individuals in 1944 (Gross, 1945), a remarkable increase from the early 1930's.

In New York the first breeding record was for Cartwright Island in 1942 (Wilcox, 1944) and the species has now been recorded from seven sites (Bull, 1964). The most southerly site in the United States is Canarsie Pol, Jamaica Bay where the species bred in 1960 and 1961 (Post and Restivo, 1961). The species may have been breeding here earlier since no visits had been made to this island for some years prior to 1960. The build-up of the numbers of this species breeding on Long Island was slow; from a single pair in 1942 the total passed the fifty mark in 1958 (Elliott, 1959) but by 1966 there were 320-480 pairs on Gardiner Island. The count of ten pairs on Cartwright Island showed no increase over the 1957 figure (Davis and Heath, 1966).

B. Inland breeding records

In general the Great Black-backed Gull ranges but little from the coast, either inland or over the ocean, and thus its recent penetration of the Great Lakes basin is of interest.

The first breeding record away from the coast was on Little Haystack Island, of the Fishing Islands in Lake Huron (Bruce County, Ontario) in

1954 when two young were banded (Krug, 1956). The second Great Lakes nesting record was from Presqu'ile Park in 1962 (Woodford, 1962) and a pair nested at Moffat Island, Quebec in 1963 (Carleton, 1963).

Thus, although this species has increased enormously as a winter visitor to the Great Lakes it has not yet become established as a breeder, and there are no breeding records for New York away from the coast. However in view of the not uncommon summering of this species, nesting should be watched for, especially at localities such as Mohawk Island in the Niagara River and Piermont in the Hudson where the species summers regularly.

Non-breeding Status

A general idea of the winter distribution can be obtained from Figure 1 which plots the Audubon Christmas counts for the winter of 1965/66. The vast majority (95%) of the individuals are coastal. Of the remainder 75% are found along the shores of Lake Ontario; the Hudson valley accounts for just over 1% of the state total and the remainder of the state outside these areas only 0.5%. The main areas are now considered in turn.

A. Long Island and New York City

The species has always occurred regularly on Long Island. However, there has been a considerable increase over the last two to three decades, as shown in Table 1.

The Christmas counts are given uncorrected for numbers of observers or observer hours. While some increase in the number recorded is to be expected with increasing coverage, the Great Black-backed Gull is so conspicuous and so limited in its habitat that it is unlikely to be overlooked even by a small census group.

Table 1

Audubon Christmas Counts of the Great Black-backed Gull for New York City and Long Island, 1930-1966.

			Average over five years*						
	66	65	60-64	55-59	50-54	45-49	40-44	35-39	30-34
Bronx-Westchester	240	864	530	196	74	36	21	20	5
Brooklyn	1120	4484**	1718	902	571	116	91	80	1
Manhattan	1541	315	180	92	58	14	n.c.	n.c.	n.c.
Montauk	155	947	337	165	78	89	88	13	10
Smithtown	148	317	91	48	57	14	25	n.c.	n.c.
Southern Nassau	1171	1038	885	560	462	230	115	85	27
Staten Island	571	1231	393	522	29	13	11	1	6
Total	4946	9196	4134	2485	1329	512	—	—	—

* in some cases averages are based on less than five counts especially in the earlier years.

** national record

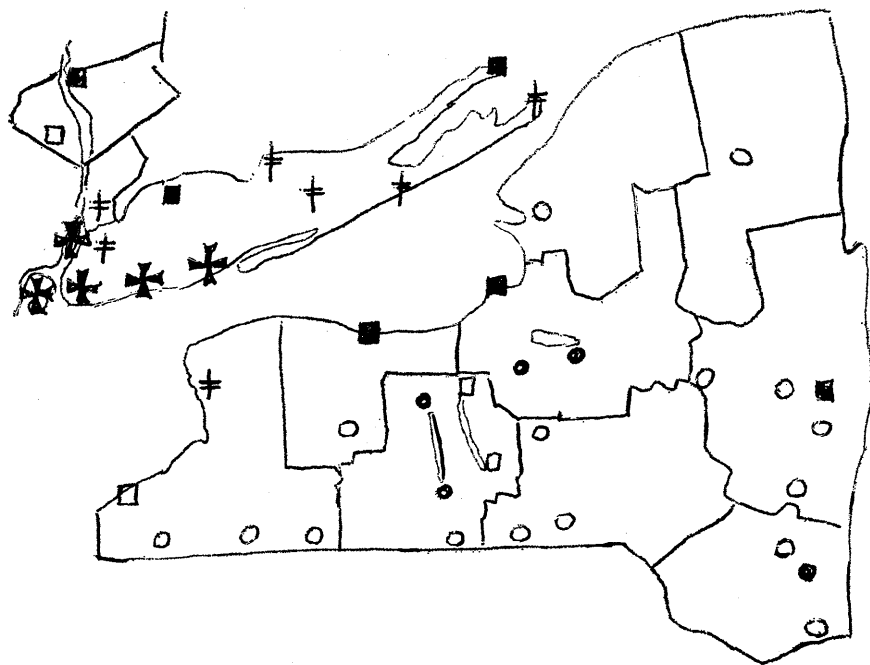


Figure 1. Audubon Christmas counts of the Great Black-backed Gull in New York State.



B. Great Lakes

Eaton (1910) refers to the Great Black-backed Gull as "a regular but uncommon winter visitant on the Great Lakes...occasionally taken in the interior." Meade (private communication) shows clearly the rarity of this species in the period 1920-21; he states "my first record was on March 3, 1920. It was certainly one of, if not the first, record for Monroe county.* No other record for that year - and I was in the field on 184 days that year! 1921, no record - I was in the field 158 days." Meade gives a few other records for the late 1930's and states that in his experience 1940 was the year in which the species began to be regular. This date is in agreement with the data from Christmas counts for the Rochester area which are given in Table 2.

* Eaton (1910) records the species for Monroe county.

Table 2.

Audubon Christmas Counts of the Great Black-backed Gull for Lake Ontario and the Finger Lakes, 1920-1966

	66	65	Average over five years.							
			60-64	55-59	50-54	45-49	40-44	35-39	30-34	25-29 20-24
Buffalo	147	237	147	51	40	36	31	11	0	2 0
Rochester	95	87	50	50	44	10	8	2	0	0 0
Geneva	1	1	7	7	4	2	3	2	0	0 0
Total	243	325	204	108	88	48	42	15	0	2 0

The situation in the Niagara Frontier area is essentially similar to Rochester although groups of Great Black-backed Gulls were first seen a few years earlier. Beardslee and Mitchell (1965) state "It was still rather uncommon in the early thirties, but by 1935 it began to appear in greater numbers, since 27 were reported on January 27." The Christmas counts for the Buffalo area are given in Table 2.

It is interesting that the species first began to be recorded on the Geneva counts at the same period (i.e. the mid-1930's) as it appeared on the Buffalo and Rochester counts but it has never increased to any extent.

At the western end of Lake Erie, Mayfield (1943) notes that the Great Black-backed Gull was first recorded on March 3, 1928. There were 13 records of single birds in the next dozen years, followed by a notable increase in the winter of 1940/41 when five were noted in a day and further increases were noted on subsequent winters.

In the Great Lakes the Great Black-backed Gull is a winter visitor, no appreciable spring or fall passage has been noted. Arrival dates at Sandy Pond (southeast corner of Lake Ontario) over the last seven years range from August 9 to September 9 with most dates August 15-19. These dates are appreciably earlier than those given by Beardslee and Mitchell (1965)-viz (Sept 3, 18) October 9—for the Niagara Frontier suggesting a slow east-west movement. Adults are rare before mid-October and the main build-up does not occur until early December. Peak counts are usually late December—January (considerably affected by storms and ice conditions) and the species is scarce after March. These seasonal changes are well documented by Tanghe (1955) in his excellent chart of seasonal abundance of birds in the Rochester area. In southwestern Michigan Bernard (1966) summarizes the status as "present in small numbers during early November increasing to a peak in mid-Dec."

C. Hudson Valley

Deed (1959) comments that "this handsome gull, once an uncommon winter resident, has increased in numbers and can be found in any month, though most abundantly in winter." Treacy (1965) refers to

further increases. The migratory status of the species in the upper Hudson valley is shown by Wickham (1965) "few remained all winter, large influx in early March."

Summary

The Great Black-backed Gull has increased greatly upstate as a winter visitor in the last 2-3 decades. While there are no breeding records for the state away from the coast this should be watched for, especially on the islands of the Hudson and Niagara Rivers where summering is regular. On Long Island the rapid increase of the breeding population may well start to affect the numbers of other species of colonial seabirds.

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