

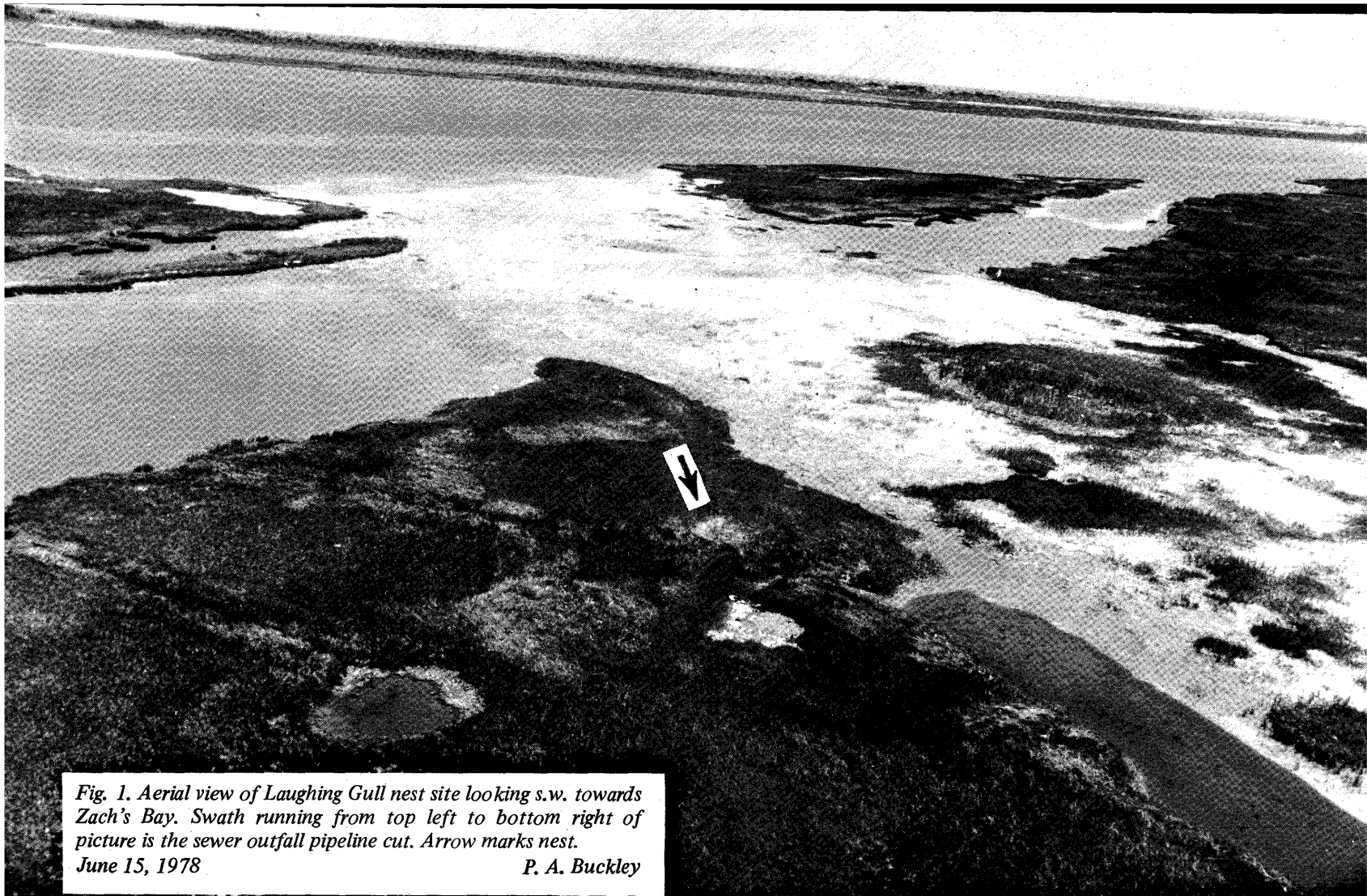


Fig. 1. Aerial view of Laughing Gull nest site looking s.w. towards Zach's Bay. Swath running from top left to bottom right of picture is the sewer outfall pipeline cut. Arrow marks nest.

June 15, 1978

P. A. Buckley

BREEDING LAUGHING GULLS RETURN TO LONG ISLAND

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After an absence of almost 80 years, Laughing Gulls (*Larus atricilla*) have been found nesting again on Long Island. Formerly a common breeding summer resident (Giraud 1844; Griscom 1923), the Laughing Gull was extirpated as a regularly breeding species in the late 1800s, when depredations by the millinery trade and commercial eggers drastically reduced the numbers of virtually all colonial waterbirds along the entire Atlantic coast. Presently breeding in scattered colonies from Nova Scotia southward to Massachusetts, and in larger numbers from New Jersey to the Caribbean and off both coasts of Mexico, the species did not recolonize New York as it did New Jersey in numbers during the 1930s (Buckley 1977), although it retained its New England foothold (Nisbet 1971).

Few breeding records exist for New York after 1888 when Dutcher recorded them as still nesting on Long Island (Griscom 1923). Although Bull (1964) cites a three-egg clutch in the American Museum of Natural History taken in June 1890 on Cedar Island, in Great South Bay north of Jones Beach, as the last Long Island nesting, Latham belatedly (1975) reported two pairs still nesting in May 1900 "on a gravelly section of the beach [at present-day Orient Pt. State Park] between two strips of salt marshes," and Braislin (1907) mentions a "recent" suspected nesting at Amityville, also in Great South Bay, on June 15 but did not give a year.

Laughing Gulls began returning to Long Island and environs as spring, summer and fall transients sometime in the 1910s, and after a major autumn influx in 1921 and 1922, Griscom (1923) confidently expected it to return as a nester to Great South Bay in the 1920s. It did not, but by 1942, Cruickshank recorded it "common" in spring and summer and "abundant" in fall, with "large colonies" in New Jersey. This generally upward trend continued, and recently (1973-1978) there seems to have been a sharp increase in the number of summering adult and almost-adult plumaged individuals, especially on the north shore of Long Island. During a 1977 helicopter census of nesting colonial waterbirds on Long Island (Buckley and Buckley, in prep.), we found two to four Laughing Gulls in breeding plumage frequenting one area of the Line Island complex of salt marsh islands in Great South Bay, north of Jones Beach and south of Wantagh, in eastern Nassau Co., but were unable to locate any nests.

Other observers also commented on the large numbers of summering "adult" Laughing Gulls on the south shore of Long Island in 1977 (Buckley, Paxton and Cutler 1977).



Fig. 2. Adult Laughing Gull leaving nest as
June 15, 1978 helicopter is drifted slowly towards it. P. A. Buckley

In 1978, while again censusing Long Island's colonial waterbirds, we paid particular attention to the Line Island complex, where in 1975 we had found New York State's first nesting Gull-billed Terns (Buckley, Buckley and Gochfeld 1975). Early in the morning on June 15, we saw two breeding-plumaged Laughing Gulls flying among the nesting Common and Gull-billed Terns. While we could not find any nest at that time, later in the day we returned to the site to find one gull repeatedly returning to a particular area of dead *Spartina alterniflora* stems on the salt marsh adjacent to the pipeline cut and overburden created when the Wantagh sewage treatment plant was connected to its ocean outfall. After we circled at some distance, the gull finally settled on what appeared to be a nest. We landed immedi-



June 15, 1978 *Fig. 3. Close-up of Laughing Gull nest and egg.* P. A. Buckley
ately, and found Long Island's first Laughing Gull nest in probably 78 years (see Figs. 1-3). It contained a single warm egg, 60.2 x 35.2 mm. The gull nest was within 100m of the 1975 and 1978 Gull-billed Tern nests. As we departed we noticed a third adult gull in the same area, but no sign of another nest. Later that same day, two more breeding-plumaged Laughing Gulls were seen in a Common Tern colony in Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge seated on *Spartina patens* flats adjacent to J.F.K. International Airport, but we were unable to locate a nest at that time. We were unable to return to the Line Islands nest after June 15, and so we have no information on the ultimate clutch size or fledging success. A visit by A. J. Lauro in late July found a pair of adults behaving as if young were nearby, but none was located.

Why Laughing Gulls were unable to recolonize Long Island sooner than 1978, despite extensive salt marshes that appear suitable, populations that were increasing dramatically in the early and mid-1900s in the mid-Atlantic states, and the continued presence through the period of colonies north of Long Island, is somewhat puzzling (Buckley 1977; Howe, Clapp and Weske, in press; Nisbet 1971, 1976).

Whatever the answer, it would seem to apply equally well to coastal Connecticut and Rhode Island, still without nesting Laughing Gulls.

While there is little doubt their extirpation towards the end of the 19th century was due to depredations of the millinery trade combined with unregulated eggging and hunting, the continued "Long Island gap" has eluded explanation. One possibility is the extensive ditching of Long Island salt marshes (Buckley 1977; Howe, Clapp and Weske, in press), a notion supported by the nature of the present site at the edge of a natural-appearing marsh which is growing on a spoil overburden and thus is devoid of ditch contours. Refuting this explanation are the extensively ditched salt marshes in southern New Jersey, harboring, in 1977, more than 35,000 pairs of Laughing Gulls (Buckley 1977), and the fact that generally speaking, ditching did not peak on Long Island until the 1930s, while it was already extensive in southern New Jersey by the late 1890s. Destruction of habitat by marsh filling is also not a likely explanation on Long Island, where some 21,400 acres still existed in Nassau and Suffolk Counties as of 1972 and it is likely that this acreage has decreased by only 5-6% subsequent to 1972. More recent Laughing Gull decreases in New England (Nisbet 1971, 1976) and in New Jersey (Buckley 1977; Burger 1977) have been attributed to egg and chick predation by Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls, as well as the larger gulls' earlier annual arrival and occupation of higher, less flood-susceptible nest sites (Berger pers. com.). However, Herring Gulls did not begin nesting on Long Island until 1931 (Bull 1964), although Cruickshank (1942) estimated over 1,000 nesting pairs when writing his book.

Recent Laughing Gull population trends on the coast from Maine to Virginia are downward (Erwin 1978). If the species is able to colonize Long Island successfully, the almost exclusive breeding of Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls on high, dredge spoil or natural islands (Buckley and Buckley, in prep) may offer Laughing Gulls competition-free marshes where their breeding numbers might recover unimpeded. Their fate on Long Island over the next 10 to 20 years should be monitored closely.

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