

FIRST REPORT OF NESTING RING-BILLED GULLS IN NEVADA

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The Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) is a common winter resident throughout Nevada but is not known to breed in the state (Conover 1983, Ryser 1985). According to the A.O.U. Check-list (1983) the breeding range of the Ring-billed Gull in western North America extends from the northwestern United States and prairie regions of Canada south to northeastern California (Honey Lake), south-central Idaho, south-central Colorado, southeastern Wyoming, and northeastern South Dakota (Waubay Lake). In this note we report the discovery of the first known breeding colony of Ring-billed Gulls in Nevada, at Lake Lahontan in the northwestern part of the state.

Lahontan Dam and Reservoir (commonly called Lake Lahontan) are located about 11 km west of Fallon in Lyon and Churchill counties. At an elevation of 1268 m, the lake is surrounded by Big Sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) habitat and covers about 4000 hectares when full.

For many years California Gulls (*Larus californicus*) have nested at Lake Lahontan on Gull Island (39° 26' N, 119° 04' W), at the northwestern end of the lake, 2.4 km south of the dam, Churchill County. Information is lacking on the colony's date of establishment; Conover (1983) did not list it as active before 1930. Gull Island is small (0.52 ha) and rocky, sloping gently on all sides to a height of about 2.4 m above the water. Fremont Cottonwoods (*Populus fremonti*) and tamarisks (*Tamarix* sp.) line the northern and eastern shores. Greasewood (*Sarcobatus vermiculatus*), Shadscale (*Atriplex confertifolia*), and Poverty Weed (*Jua axillaris*) occur at scattered locations across the rest of the island.

In May 1983 Judd found an estimated 200 pairs of Ring-billed Gulls nesting on Gull Island, at the northeastern periphery of the California Gull colony, under and near the edges of the tamarisks. The nests were on bare ground. Similar numbers were seen in 1984 and 1985, again at the edge of the California Gull colony. The California Gulls numbered about 4000 pairs each year. In 1986 and 1987 we visited Gull Island and found only California Gulls nesting there. The Ring-billed Gulls had established their own colony on nearby Walleye Island, 0.4 km to the northeast, Churchill County, and nested there both years.

Walleye Island is small (0.94 ha) and rocky, with a maximum height of 2.4 m above the water's surface. Fremont Cottonwoods and tamarisks border the entire island at the shorelines. Dominant vegetation includes Shadscale and Halogeton (*Halogeton glomeratus*) with some scattered rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus viscidiflorus*) and milkweed (*Asclepias fascicularis*).

Approximately 1000 pairs of Ring-billed Gulls nested on Walleye Island in 1986. In 1987 the number had increased to an estimated 1500 to 2000 nesting pairs. In both years the center of the colony was occupied by about 100 nesting pairs of California Gulls.

In 1987 we visited both colonies 10 times between 6 April and 11 July. We did not determine nesting success but noted general features of the nesting cycle. Throughout the 1987 season Ring-billed Gulls were about 1 week behind the California Gulls in all stages of nesting.

On 6 April large numbers of gulls were present on both islands, but no nests or eggs were seen. On 19 April California Gulls were laying eggs on Gull Island, but Ring-billed Gull eggs were not seen on Walleye Island until our next visit on 25 April. Most Ring-billed Gulls seemed to have completed their clutches by 9 May; average clutch

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size (mean \pm one standard deviation) that day was 2.91 ± 0.35 (range = 1 to 4 eggs; $n = 102$ nests).

Ring-billed Gull chicks were present when we visited on 30 May. By 13 June many of the Ring-billed Gull chicks were old enough to run into the water upon our approach. On our last visit on 11 July parents and young of both species were still present on both islands. All young were in juvenal plumage, and most were capable of flight.

Ring-billed Gulls have increased their breeding populations in recent years in the Great Lakes region (Lugwig 1974) and in several western states (Conover et al. 1979, Conover and Conover 1981, Conover 1983). The Nevada colony seems to be part of that trend, and the colony itself seems to be in a state of expansion. It increased from 200 pairs on Gull Island in 1983 to almost 2000 pairs on Walleye Island in 1987. It is not known whether Ring-billed Gulls nested on Gull Island prior to 1983, and no gulls were ever known to nest on Walleye Island until 1986. Whether the colony will continue to increase in numbers remains to be seen. The entire northeastern half of Walleye Island is available for expansion, but human disturbances are a constant threat. Lake Lahontan is designated a Nevada State Recreation Area and is heavily used by the public; indiscriminate shooting by humans and nest destruction by domestic dogs have been known to occur.

The nearest known nesting colony of Ring-billed Gulls is at Honey Lake (Harston Reservoir), Lassen County, California (Moffitt 1942, Conover 1983, Ryser 1985), about 160 km to the northwest. Other nearby colonies are in northern California near the Oregon border (Clear Lake and Goose Lake, Modoc County, and Lower Klamath Lake, Siskiyou County; Conover 1983). The closest known nesting colonies of California Gulls are both in Nevada: Anahoe Island in Pyramid Lake, Washoe County, 72 km to the northwest, and Virginia Lake, Reno, Washoe County, 70 km to the west (Conover 1983). However, to date no Ring-billed Gulls have been reported breeding among these colonies.

The Nevada Ring-billed Gull colony is apparently the southernmost one known today. The A.O.U. Check-list (1983) mentions a breeding locality in south-central Colorado, but that colony is no longer active. Ring-billed Gulls bred in Colorado at San Luis Lakes in 1898 (Cooke 1915), but Ryder (1978) found no recent nestings of the species in that state. Similarly, Findholt (1986) reported that the Ring-billed Gull nests in Idaho, Montana, and South Dakota but not in any of the other states that adjoin Wyoming. Thus, we know of no other Ring-billed Gull colony farther south than the Lake Lahontan colony.

We thank M. Conover and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on the manuscript.

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Accepted 16 July 1988



Ring-billed Gull

Sketch by Eric Lichtwardt