

NEW INFORMATION ON GULLS IN SOUTHEASTERN ALASKA

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The community of Ketchikan is located on Revillagigedo Island near the southern terminus of the Alexander Archipelago, just north of Dixon Entrance and the adjacent open ocean, in southeastern Alaska (Figure 1). This portion of Alaska is characterized by steep, densely forested islands and high annual rainfall, with small communities isolated by water and limited road systems. Historically, the southern portion of the Alexander Archipelago has been visited by few ornithologists (Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959) and currently has few resident observers. Little information concerning the avifauna of this part of Alaska has been published since Kessel and Gibson (1978).

I documented the movements of gulls through the Ketchikan area from 1990 to 1996. From late June through September, commercial fish processors pump substantial amounts of fish waste into the bay at Ketchikan, luring hordes of migrating gulls. Gulls also gather at this time to feed on spawned-out salmon at several creeks and fish hatcheries in the Ketchikan area (the Ketchikan dump also attracted large numbers of gulls throughout the fall and winter months until its closure in 1995). Up to 20,000 gulls take

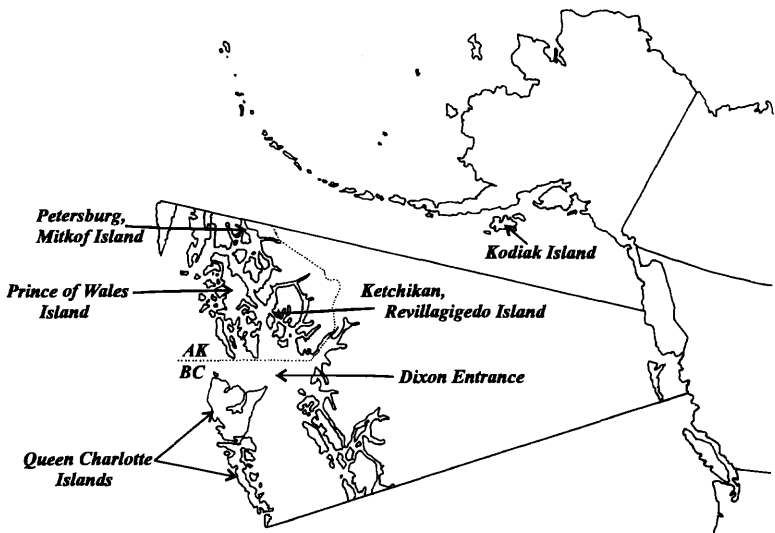


Figure 1. The southern portion of the Alexander Archipelago of southeastern Alaska, showing the location of Ketchikan, Revillagigedo Island, and its proximity to other locations mentioned in the text.

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advantage of these food sources during the peak of fall migration. Conversely, commercial fish-processing is greatly reduced in the spring, limiting the food available to gulls. Migrating gulls then concentrate at the spring spawning areas of the Pacific Herring (*Clupea harengus*) and Eulachon (*Thaleichthys pacificus*), which are remote from the Ketchikan waterfront. As a result, fall is the best time for studying gulls in the Ketchikan area, and nearly all of the following data are from that season.

It is well known that the breeding populations and ranges of gulls in the Pacific Northwest have expanded steadily since the 1960s as these highly adaptable birds take advantage of increased food sources and available habitat brought about by human activity (Campbell and Foottitt 1972, Conover et al. 1979, Cannings et al. 1987, Binford and Johnson 1995, etc.). Since 1990 I have found Franklin's (*Larus pipixcan*), Ring-billed (*L. delawarensis*), California (*L. californicus*), Western (*L. occidentalis*) and hybrid Western × Glaucous-winged (*L. glaucescens*) gulls to be annual fall visitors to the Ketchikan area and in greater numbers than was previously reported. The seasonal distribution of these species at Ketchikan corresponds directly with their fall occurrence in much larger numbers on the southern British Columbia coast (Campbell 1990), suggesting that numbers of these species have also been increasing in southeastern Alaska during the past several decades and that these changes have gone unnoticed largely because of the historic lack of year-round coverage of the Ketchikan area or the adjacent British Columbia coast.

Here I present new information both for those species of gulls previously unknown or considered rare in southeastern Alaska and for those species whose status in southeastern Alaska has not been treated fully in previous literature. The seasonal status presented for each species follows Kessel and Gibson (1978) and are generally defined as follows: common—the region regularly hosts large numbers of the species; fairly common—the region regularly hosts substantial numbers of the species; uncommon—the region regularly hosts relatively small numbers of the species; rare—the species occurs nearly annually but in very small numbers; casual—a species beyond its normal range that may occur irregularly over a period of years and in very small numbers.

Specimens, photos, and written documentation pertaining to the records discussed below are on deposit at the University of Alaska Museum, Fairbanks (UAM).

SPECIES ACCOUNTS

FRANKLIN'S GULL *Larus pipixcan*. Rare fall migrant and casual summer visitant. Prior to 1990 there were nine Alaska records of the Franklin's Gull (Gibson et al. 1987). Only two of these were from the fall season, including one at Ketchikan 10–20 September 1986 (T. G. Tobish, R. L. Scher, and M. E. Isleib). Since 1990, I have recorded at least 17 Franklin's Gulls in the Ketchikan area. One to four occur annually during fall migration (6 August–2 October; UAM 6147, 31 August 1992, M. E. Isleib, and UAM 6957, 28 August 1996), with the majority found in late August and early September (maximum three birds on 10 September 1994; Figure 2). All fall records are of birds molting from juvenal to first-winter plumage, with the exception of a second-summer bird on 30 August 1992. I have found the Franklin's Gull twice in the

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Figure 2. First-winter Franklin's Gull at Ketchikan, one of three birds present on 10 September 1994.

Photo by Steven C. Heinl

summer at Ketchikan (first-summer bird 24 June 1991; second-summer bird 17 July 1994). Elsewhere on the south coast of Alaska the Franklin's Gull is a casual spring, summer, and fall visitant (Kessel and Gibson 1978; UAM unpublished records). Though this species is a common fall migrant on the southern British Columbia coast, one fall record for the Queen Charlotte Islands appears to be the only coastal British Columbia record north of Vancouver Island (Campbell et al. 1990).

BONAPARTE'S GULL *Larus philadelphia*. Common migrant and uncommon summer visitant (Gabrielson and Lincoln 1959); casual winter visitant. This species generally departs by December, but it has lingered into the winter twice at Ketchikan (three birds 21 January–27 February 1992; numbers through mid-January 1994, with a maximum of 110 on 13 January). A Bonaparte's Gull at Petersburg, Mitkof Island, 4 January 1987 (P. J. Walsh in litt.) provided the first Alaska winter record, and 13 birds were also recorded there on 15 January 1994 (P. J. Walsh in litt.). These are the only mid-winter Alaska records.

HEERMANN'S GULL *Larus heermanni*. Casual fall visitant. Single first-year Heermann's Gulls photographed at Ketchikan 22 August 1991 (Gibson and Kessel 1992) and 16 August–23 September 1994 provided the first Alaska records. Post-breeding dispersal brings this species north annually to southern coastal British Columbia, where it is an abundant summer and fall visitant, but there are apparently few records in British Columbia north of Vancouver Island (Campbell et al. 1990).

BLACK-TAILED GULL *Larus crassirostris*. The Black-tailed Gull has been recorded twice at Ketchikan. I observed a second-summer bird on five different days during the period 21 August–8 October 1992 (Figure 3). On the last date the bird had nearly completed the molt to adult basic plumage (a color photo was published in *Am. Birds* 47:166, 1993). The second record for Ketchikan was of an adult observed on 5 July 1993. Possibly this same adult Black-tailed Gull was subsequently observed at

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Figure 3. Second-summer Black-tailed Gull, with Mew Gulls, at Ketchikan, 30 August 1992. This bird was present from 22 August to 8 October 1992. Note that the bird is only slightly larger than the accompanying Mew Gulls and has a bill proportionately long and heavy for its size. The mantle is dark slate-gray, noticeably darker than the adjacent Mew Gulls'. The eyes are small and distinctively whitish. This bird also had black rectrices that were broadly tipped white, and the outermost rectrices were edged white. The short legs were pale green, similar to those of a nonbreeding California Gull.

Photo by Steven C. Heint

Petersburg, Mitkof Island, 160 km north of Ketchikan, on 1 August 1993 (P. J. Walsh in litt., photo on file at UAM). Prior to 1992 this species had been recorded only four times in Alaska, and all records were from the western Aleutian Islands and St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea region (Gibson and Kessel 1992). In addition, there is a sight record from the nearby Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia, on 22 November 1991 (Siddle 1992).

RING-BILLED GULL *Larus delawarensis*. Uncommon to fairly common fall migrant, very rare spring migrant and summer visitant. The Ring-billed Gull occurs annually in the fall (25 July–19 October; two UAM specimens), with numbers peaking from late August to early September. High counts are typically of fewer than 10 birds, though the species occurs in larger numbers in some years (maxima 30 on 2 September 1992, 24 on 21 August 1994, and 31 on 31 August 1996). Numbers decrease sharply after the first week of September. The fall movement consists almost entirely of birds molting from juvenal to first-winter plumage (e.g., 27 of 30 birds on 2 September 1992, and 23 of 24 birds on 21 August 1994). There are no winter records, and I believe that a bird at Ketchikan on 2 December 1974 (M. E. Isleib; Kessel and Gibson 1978) was a late fall migrant. The Ring-billed Gull is a very rare visitant during the spring and summer in the Ketchikan area. There are only three spring records, of one 24–30 April 1990, one 8 May 1993, and two 15 May 1979 (J. C. and R. C. Tweit; Gibson 1979). Two to four subadults, June–July 1993, represent the only summer records. Away from the Ketchikan area the Ring-billed

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Gull occurs on the Alaska coast only in ones and twos as a rare migrant and summer visitant and a casual winter visitant, from Petersburg, Mitkof Island, north and west to Kodiak Island; it is casual in summer farther west to the Alaska Peninsula (Isleib and Kessel 1973, Kessel and Gibson 1978; UAM unpublished records).

CALIFORNIA GULL *Larus californicus californicus*. Common fall migrant, casual winter visitant, and uncommon spring migrant and summer visitant. The California Gull was first reported in Alaska by Willett (1923b), who salvaged a dead specimen at Craig, Prince of Wales Island, on 21 September 1921, and Bailey (1927), who collected four specimens at Klawock, Prince of Wales Island, on 10 March 1921. Kessel and Gibson (1978) considered the California Gull to be a rare and local summer visitant in extreme southeastern Alaska (maximum 70 birds at Wrangell 27 July 1974, D. D. Gibson and S. O. MacDonald), but its full status remained unclear because of insufficient year-round coverage. The California Gull has since proven to be common in the fall at Ketchikan (19 July–25 November), with numbers peaking in late August and early September. Maximum counts typically reach 200–400 birds. This species occurred in exceptional numbers in 1992 and 1996, however, peaking at 2000+ on 2 September 1992, and 2100 on 31 August 1996. The California Gull has also been recorded in numbers elsewhere in extreme southeastern Alaska during the fall: 300 birds at Traitors' Cove, Revillagigedo Island, 4 September 1996; 300 birds at Forrester Island 14 September 1992 (M. E. Isleib in litt.); 120 birds at Hyder 23 September 1992; and 300 at McDonald Lake, Cleveland Peninsula, 30 September 1996. As in the case of the Ring-billed Gull, first-year birds make up the vast majority of the fall migrants.

I have found this species twice in the winter at Ketchikan (third-winter bird, 14 December 1991–11 January 1992; first-winter bird, 14 December 1991–24 January 1992). One at Sitka in late January 1987 constitutes the only other mid-winter Alaska record (M. W. Schwan; Gibson et al. 1987). Small numbers are found annually during spring migration in extreme southeastern Alaska at Prince of Wales Island (10 March–25 May; maximum 75 on 1 May 1994 near Thorne Bay, M. A. Archie pers. comm.; Bailey 1927) and around Ketchikan (13 March–20 May; maximum 10 on 2 May 1995). The majority of spring migrants are adults in breeding plumage. As expected, subadult birds constitute the majority of the summer visitants (maximum 10 at Ketchikan, 26 June 1993).

The California Gull is a casual to locally rare spring, summer, and fall visitant elsewhere on the southern Alaska coast from Petersburg, Mitkof Island, north and west as far as Kodiak Island (Kessel and Gibson 1978; UAM unpublished records). Clearly, the waters of extreme southeastern Alaska represent the northern end of this species' range of annual post-breeding dispersal in numbers on the Pacific coast. On 25 October 1993, I found a banded third-winter California Gull at Ketchikan and read the band number through a spotting scope. The bird had been banded as a nestling near Silver Springs, Nevada, on 15 June 1991. Such northwesterly post-breeding dispersal is well documented at Vancouver, British Columbia, where banded California Gulls arrived from 12 breeding colonies in eight western states (Oldaker 1960, 1963). Banded California Gulls from the Canadian Great Plains have also been recovered during fall and spring migration at Vancouver, British Columbia (Oldaker 1961, 1963). These birds are of the recently described subspecies *L. c. albertaensis*, which breeds in the Northwest Territories, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and North Dakota (Jehl 1987). All but one of the sixteen California Gull specimens at UAM have been identified as nominate *californicus* by D. D. Gibson (including twelve recent August–September specimens from the Ketchikan area). The one UAM specimen of *albertaensis* was taken at Wrangell 27 July 1974 (Kessel and Gibson 1978). While it appears that *californicus* predominates in the Ketchikan area during the fall, it is likely that small numbers of *albertaensis* also occur—more field work is needed to determine the relative abundance and seasonal distribution of each form.

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HERRING GULL *Larus argentatus smithsonianus*. Gabrielson and Lincoln (1959) reported this species to be a common migrant, uncommon winter visitant, and rare summer visitant in southeastern Alaska. While this is still generally true today, it should be noted that nearly all Herring Gulls found during the winter at Ketchikan exhibit signs of hybridization with the Glaucous-winged Gull (*Larus glaucescens*). Herring Gulls hybridize extensively with Glaucous-winged Gulls on the southern Alaska coast in Cook Inlet and at Glacier Bay (Williamson and Peyton 1963, Patten and Weisbrod 1974), producing a continuum of phenotypes between the parent species. The characteristics I use to identify adult birds as hybrids rather than pure Herring Gulls include combinations of brown irides, pink-red orbital rings, reduced black in the outer primaries, slight darkening of the gray mantle color, and slightly heavier build. Hybrids begin appearing in the Ketchikan area in early October and outnumber pure Herring Gulls by early November. Few pure Herring Gulls are to be found through the winter (e.g., all of the 50 dark-primaries birds recorded on 30 November 1992 and 29 December 1994 were hybrid Glaucous-winged × Herring gulls). Hybrids depart the area by the end of March, at which time northbound pure Herring Gulls are again common in southeastern Alaska.

THAYER'S GULL *Larus thayeri*. Common fall migrant, fairly common winter visitant and spring migrant. The status of the Thayer's Gull in southeastern Alaska has not been fully treated since Willett (1923a), who found it wintering in numbers at Craig, Prince of Wales Island (24 September–24 March). Fall migrants arrive annually at Ketchikan by the third week of August (earliest 16 August 1994), and numbers peak in mid to late September (maximum 1500, on 18 September 1991 and 16 September 1993). During that time this species often represents fully two-thirds of the large gulls in the Ketchikan area. The fall movement is composed almost entirely of adults, still largely in breeding plumage when they arrive (this species remains white-headed into mid-September, long after most Herring Gulls have developed streaks on the head and neck). Only one to three first-year birds are seen daily through fall migration and the winter months (earliest 9 September 1991). Up to 100 birds are found through the winter on the Ketchikan waterfront in some years; most of these depart by the end of March. As noted above, migrating gulls are attracted to remote food sources in the spring. While the Thayer's Gull is a common spring migrant through southeastern Alaska, only a few are found daily at that season at Ketchikan (latest 17 May 1991).

SLATY-BACKED GULL *Larus schistisagus*. Rare fall migrant and very rare winter visitant. I have recorded 18 Slaty-backed Gulls at Ketchikan, finding the species annually in fall since 1990 (14 birds, 19 August–17 December; one specimen, adult female UAM 6888, 29 October 1994; Figures 4 and 5), with the majority occurring from late October to early December (maximum three, 4 November 1993). Presumably most of these birds dispersed to winter elsewhere. There are six winter records (two of which involve birds lingering from the fall season): a first-winter bird 3–20 February 1992 (UAM 5970, D. Bowers, S. C. Heinl); an adult 27 October 1993–19 March 1994; an adult 27–29 January 1994; an adult 27 January–16 February 1994; a second-winter bird 25 October 1994–24 January 1995; and an adult 10 January 1995.

There are only three other southeastern Alaska records, of two at Juneau in mid-August of 1990 (including adult male UAM 5701, M. E. Isleib) and one at Haines 12–13 November 1993 (C. D. Eckert; Tobish 1994). This Beringian species is a rare to locally uncommon visitant at any season in western Alaska (Kessel and Gibson 1978, Kessel 1989), a rare summer and fall visitant on the arctic coast east to Prudhoe Bay (Johnson and Herter 1989, Hohenberger et al. 1994), and a casual summer and winter visitant and very rare fall visitant to southcoastal Alaska east to Prince William Sound (Isleib and Kessel 1973; UAM unpublished records). The recent pattern of fall Slaty-backed Gull records at Ketchikan clearly indicates a dispersal of very small numbers to

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Figure 4. Adult-winter Slaty-backed Gull at Ketchikan, 28 October 1993. This bird was present from 27 October 1993 to 19 March 1994. Note the slate gray back color and the heavy, straight bill, which lacks the pronounced gonydeal swelling of the Western and Glaucous-winged gulls. Winter adults typically have a two-toned bill, with a dull yellowish tip and a pinkish cast to the basal two-thirds of the bill (usually entirely yellow in an adult winter Western Gull). Also characteristic of this species is the blackish patch around the eye, causing the yellow eye to stand out on the face from some distance. The streaking on the head and neck is brown (reddish-brown in some birds).

Photo by Steven C. Heinl

the northeast Pacific coast 2600 km east of the Bering Sea, and annually places the species much closer to the increasing number of winter records to the south and east elsewhere in North America (Goetz et al. 1986, Campbell et al. 1990, Gilligan et al. 1994, Gustafson and Peterjohn 1994) than has been previously reported.

WESTERN GULL *Larus occidentalis occidentalis*. Very uncommon fall migrant, rare winter visitant, and casual spring migrant. All "Western Gulls" recorded to date in the Ketchikan area are of the northern subspecies *occidentalis*, and nearly all have exhibited some degree of hybridization with the Glaucous-winged Gull. Characteristics of adult birds indicating hybridization with the Glaucous-winged Gull include combinations of paler gray mantle color, pink orbital rings, brown irides, reduced extent of black in the outer primaries (particularly on the inner webs of the feathers), and often extensive gray streaking on the head and neck in basic plumage (Figure 6). The two species hybridize extensively along the coast of Washington and northwest Oregon (Hoffman et al. 1978), producing a continuum of phenotypes (see also Weber 1981). Given the rarity of the Western Gull in Alaska (only one record prior to 1990; Kessel and Gibson 1978) and the difficulty in identifying birds as either Western Gulls or hybrids, I have conservatively identified birds as Western Gulls only when they are at the dark extreme for *L. o. occidentalis*. In the Ketchikan area seemingly pure Western Gulls are very rare and are far outnumbered by Glaucous-winged × Western

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Figure 5. Third-winter Slaty-backed Gull at Ketchikan, 6 November 1993. This bird was present in the Ketchikan area from 29 October to 6 November 1993. It features many of the same field marks as the adult in Figure 4, including the slate-gray mantle color, the yellow eye surrounded by a black patch, and the heavy, straight bill. Although this bird was in sub-adult plumage, it still exhibited the white subterminal crescents on the sixth to eighth primaries characteristic of this species (see Goetz et al. 1986).

Photo by Steven C. Heini

hybrids (see below). The fact that “Western-type” gulls (Western Gulls and hybrids) occur regularly in southeastern Alaska is significant in itself, perhaps more important than the often impossible task of attempting to determine in the field which birds are pure and which are not.

“Western-type” gulls occur annually in the fall (19 August–late November), with most found from mid-October to mid-November (maxima five 23 October 1992, six 27–29 October 1993). The falls of 1992, 1993, and 1994 saw the greatest numbers, with all age classes recorded: at least 18 birds 26 August–6 November 1992; 15 birds 21 August–16 November 1993; and up to 12 birds 15 September–26 November 1994 (including adult female hybrids UAM 6889 and 6906, both 29 October 1994). Of the 45+ birds recorded during those three years, I considered only six to be pure Western Gulls. Two to four birds are recorded nearly annually during the winter months (one specimen, first-winter male Western Gull, UAM 6907, 19 January 1995). “Western-type” gulls usually depart by the end of March, and there are few spring records beyond that time (latest three 15–17 May 1990 and one 6 May 1995 at nearby Annette I.). Two birds have been identified returning to southeastern Alaska during consecutive years. One adult hybrid, missing half of one leg, has returned to Ketchikan and Petersburg, Mitkof Island, for four consecutive falls since 1992 (26 July–6 November, pers. obs. and P. J. Walsh pers. comm.), and another adult hybrid wintered on the same dock in Ketchikan, 1990–1993.

The Western Gull is very rare along the British Columbia coast north of Vancouver

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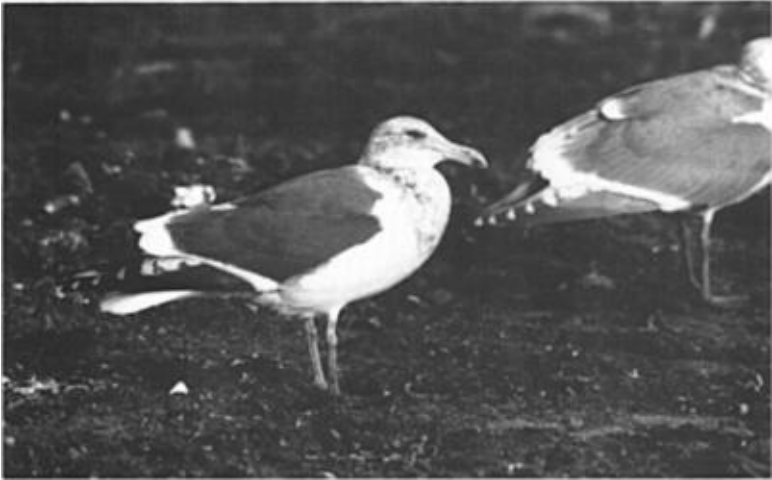


Figure 6. Adult-winter Glaucous-winged \times Western Gull at Ketchikan 29 December 1994. The head and neck of this bird are heavily streaked and barred gray, indicating a hybrid. This bird had pink orbital rings (should be yellow in Western Gull), and in flight the outer primaries showed much less black on the inner webs than does a pure Western Gull—from below the bird's outer primaries looked dark gray instead of black.

Photo by Steven C. Heinl

Island (Campbell et al. 1990) and has been recorded only five times in southeastern Alaska away from Ketchikan—all since 1990 between 17 July and 22 September (UAM unpublished records, including adult male Western Gull UAM 6256, 22 September 1992, Forrester I., M. E. Isleib). This species has also been reported recently on the southern coast of Alaska at Kodiak Island and the Kenai Peninsula (UAM unpublished records). While Glaucous-winged \times Western gulls have not been reported elsewhere in Alaska, observers should keep in mind that the probability of finding hybrids is *much* greater than that of finding pure Western Gulls.

GLAUCOUS GULL *Larus hyperboreus barrovianus*. Very uncommon migrant and winter visitant. Gabrielson and Lincoln (1959) did not report this species in southeastern Alaska, and Kessel and Gibson (1978) did not cover it. Glaucous Gulls typically appear in Ketchikan by the first week of October, occasionally earlier (adult on 28 August 1992; second-winter on 30 August 1996; one on 13 September 1994 was still molting out of juvenal plumage and surprisingly early for that age class). Small numbers winter in the Ketchikan area through late March (maxima eight on 9 December 1990 and 10 on 24 January 1992; latest, first-summer bird, 14–17 May 1991). Analysis of 53 records shows that first-winter birds outnumber all other age classes combined 3:1. A specimen salvaged at Ketchikan on 3 March 1995 (unsexed second-winter, UAM 6890) is an example of *barrovianus*—the expected wintering race on the Pacific coast of North America (Banks 1986).

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