

California Gull *Larus californicus*

Though the California Gull, like the Ring-billed, arrives in southern California from the interior of North America, in San Diego County the California Gull is much more concentrated along the coast. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, can be seen on the ocean within a few miles of the coast. On beaches loafing California Gulls commonly flock with other species of gulls. A few nonbreeding California Gulls—far fewer than Ring-billed Gulls—remain in San Diego County through the summer.

Winter: The large numbers of California Gulls seen foraging at sea are likely the same birds seen resting on beaches: up to 700 at Oceanside (H5) 26 December 1998, 1430 at Torrey Pines State Reserve (N7) 23 December 2001 (S. Walens), and an exceptional 3600 in the San Diego River flood-control channel (R8) 2 February 2001 (J. C. Worley). The species' abundance drops off rapidly with distance inland. From 1997 to 2001, the only place more than 5 miles from the coast where we found more than 50 was Sweetwater Reservoir (S12), where large numbers are regular, with up to 200 on 16 December 2000 (P. Famolaro). But the species is fairly common on lakes throughout the coastal lowland. Above an elevation of 1500 feet, we found wintering California Gulls at just two lakes. At Henshaw (G17), our highest count during the atlas period was 40 on 12 December 2000 (J. R. Barth), but Lake Henshaw Christmas bird counts have found up to 161 (23 December 1996), noting the species on 16 of 22 counts 1981–2002. At Morena (S21), S. E. Smith found a single individual in January of three successive years. In the Anza–Borrego Desert, the only records from December to February are of one at Club Circle, Borrego Springs (G24) 21 February 1999 (P. D.



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Ache) and three at Ram's Hill (H25) 16 December 1998 (R. Halford).

Migration: No study has addressed variation in California Gull numbers in San Diego County by the birds' ages, and without such study, knowledge of the species' migration schedule will remain inadequate. At the Salton Sea, Patten et al. (2003) reported juveniles returning as early as 3 July and the numbers of the California Gull in general increasing steadily from July through October. On the basis of weekly counts at the south San Diego Bay salt works 1993–94, however, Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) found California Gull numbers remaining at their low summer level until November. They found another peak in April and a maximum of 500 on 21 April 1993. At Lake Hodges (K10/K11) a peak count of 200 on 24 April 1982 (K. L. Weaver) probably reflects spring migration. Numbers decrease through May, with migrants remaining possibly as late as 21 May (2001; 15 at the Santa Margarita River mouth, G4, P. A. Ginsburg). The few records for the Anza–Borrego Desert range from 10 October (1990, five at the Borrego sewage ponds, H25) to 27 March (1990, two at the same site, A. G. Morley).

In San Diego County, summering California Gulls are uncommon to rare. From 1997 to 2001, all our records between 21 May and 10 July were of seven or fewer individuals, except for 20 at Lake Henshaw 18 June 2000 (P. Unitt). All summer records were coastal except for this and one at El Capitan Reservoir (O16) 18 June 1998 (S. Kingswood).

Conservation: With colonization of the San Francisco Bay area and the Salton Sea, the California Gull's breeding range has been expanding to the west and south (Molina 2000, Shuford

and Ryan 2000). The total population increased considerably through at least the second half of the 20th century (Conover 1983, Shuford and Ryan 2000). No trend in numbers wintering in San Diego County is obvious; the shifting of flocks makes monitoring in winter difficult. California Gulls formerly concentrated in huge numbers at garbage dumps (6500 at the Otay dump, U12, 16 December 1978, G. McCaskie). But since the early 1990s they have been excluded from the county's landfills.

Taxonomy: Of the California Gull's two subspecies, the predominant one in San Diego County is nominate *L. c. californicus* Lawrence, 1854, which nests in the southwestern part of the species' breeding range. Of eight San

Diego County specimens of adults or three-year-old birds, seven are *californicus*, with a value for darkness of the back, as measured by a Minolta CR300 electronic colorimeter, of $L = 45.2$ to 49.4 (compare values in table 12 of Patten et al. 2003). One of these, picked up at San Elijo Lagoon (L7) 5 January 1975, had been banded in a nesting colony in Weld County, Colorado.

One specimen from San Diego County, however, is *L. c. albertaensis* Jehl, 1987, distinguished by its paler back and larger bill and breeding in Canada and the Dakotas. A female collected at the Otay dump 8 January 1975, it has an exposed culmen of 46.4 mm, bill depth at gonys of 15.5 mm, and a value for L on the back of 51.6 (higher values correspond to paler colors).