

Heermann's Gull *Larus heermanni*

This most distinctive and attractive of North America's gulls is common along San Diego County's coast. Seasonally, the abundance of Heermann's Gull varies in tandem with that of the Brown Pelican, which the gull follows, stealing its fish. That is, the gull's numbers are lowest in spring, increase in summer as the birds return from their nesting colonies in the Gulf of California, then decrease again through the winter. Most Heermann's Gulls probably circumnavigate the peninsula, but a few cross overland, as there are scattered records from San Diego County's inland lakes.

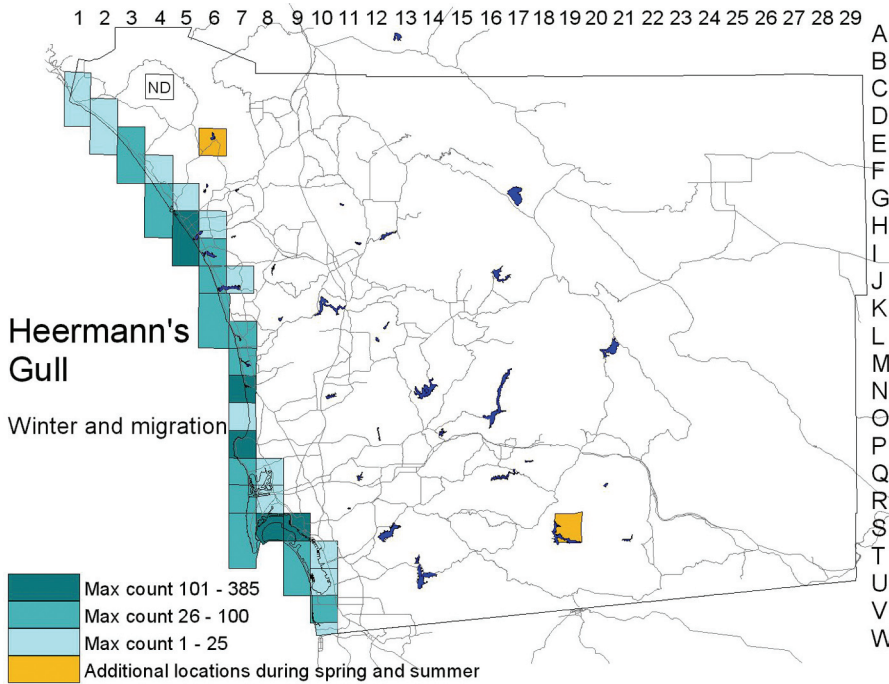


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Winter: Heermann's Gull occurs the length of San Diego County's coast and well out to sea. Areas of concentration are Torrey Pines State Reserve (N7; up to 560 on 23 December 2001, S. Walens), north San Diego Bay (444 on 14 December 1993, Mock et al. 1994), and the bight from Point Loma to Imperial Beach (535 on 15 December 2001, D. W. Povey). Few Heermann's Gulls, however, enter northern San Diego County's lagoons (maximum 10 in the east basin of Batiquitos Lagoon, J7,

22 December 2001, R. and A. Campbell) or even the inner reaches of Mission Bay (Q8; maximum 13 on 26 January 1999, J. C. Worley). Despite its abundance in north San Diego Bay, Heermann's Gull is uncommon in the south bay. On their regular surveys there, neither Macdonald et al. (1990) nor Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) found more than nine per day.

The only winter record inland is of one at Lake Henshaw (G17) 18 January 1980 (AB 34:306, 1980).



Migration: Numbers of Heermann's Gulls begin increasing in June, to reach a peak in September and October. On the basis of weekly counts of San Diego Bay, Mock et al. (1994) recorded their daily maximum of 1033 on 8 September 1993. On surveys of central San Diego Bay, both Mock et al. (1994) and Manning (1995) found numbers greatest in October. After this, Heermann's Gull decreases in abundance, to reach its nadir from March to May. Even during this interval, however, nonbreeding immatures are fairly common (up to 119 in north San Diego Bay 19 April 1995, P. J. Mock; 30 at La Jolla, P7, 1 April 2001, L. and M. Polinsky).

Most of San Diego County's inland Heermann's Gulls, like those at the Salton Sea, occurred at the time of postbreeding dispersal and likely arrived overland from the southeast. Up to two were at Lake Henshaw 5–7 July 1985, four were there 6 July 1986 (R. Higson, AB 39:962, 1985, 40:1255, 1986), and one was there 24 June 1989 (G. McCaskie, AB 43:1368, 1989). One was flying northwest over Scissors Crossing (J22) 7 July 2002 (J. R. Barth, not 3 July as in NAB 56:486, 2002), two were on Barrett Lake (S19) 21 June 1997 (J. Hannan), and one was at Jacumba (U28) 14 July 1968 (AFN 22:649, 1968). Also at this season but closer to the coast, so possibly originating from that direction, were one at O'Neill Lake (E6) 19 June 1998 (P. A. Ginsburg) and one on Otay Mesa (V13) 16–17 October 1979 (E. Copper).

Conservation: Heermann's Gull nests in just a few colonies around Baja California, and at least 90% of the population nests in a single massive colony on 150-acre Isla Rasa in the Gulf of California, making it vulnerable to catastrophes. Fortunately, Isla Rasa has been a wildlife refuge since 1964, putting an end to eggging and enabling the eradication of rats. Careful management has allowed the population to increase from 55,000 pairs in 1975 to 150,000–200,000 pairs by the end of the 20th century (E. Velarde). A corresponding increase in numbers in San Diego County, however, is not evident. In Christmas bird counts, annual variability overwhelms any trend.