

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*

The Ring-billed is San Diego County’s most wide-spread gull, the common gull scavenging in parking lots as well as on lakes, estuaries, and beaches. The ocean is the one aquatic habitat the species typically avoids—the Ring-billed is not a “sea” gull. Though the Ring-billed Gull is primarily a winter visitor to San Diego County, substantial numbers of non-breeders remain through the summer, far more than those of the other migratory gulls.

Winter: The Ring-billed Gull is common near water throughout San Diego County’s coastal lowland. Its abundance is greatest along the coast: up to 500 at the mouth of Las Pulgas Creek (E3) 24 December 1999 (R. and S. L. Breisch) and 700 at Mission Bay (Q8) 26 January 1999 (J. C. Worley). But numbers inland can be high as well, with up to 328 at the Wild Animal Park (J12) 29 December 2001 (K. L. Weaver) and 815 at Santee Lakes (P12) 13 February 1999 (I. S. Quon). Between 1500 and 3100 feet elevation the gull’s numbers are variable but sometimes high, with up to 325 at Lake Henshaw (G17) 7 February 1999 (W. E. Haas), 200 at Lake Sutherland (J16) 19 January 2000 (E. C. Hall), and 200 in Santa Teresa Valley (K16) 14 January 1999 (G. L. Rogers). Figures on Lake Henshaw Christmas bird counts range from 2 to 329 with a mean of 57 and a median of 19. We found no wintering Ring-billed Gulls at elevations higher than 3100 feet at Morena Village (T22; 35 on 19 December 1999, R. and S. L. Breisch). In the Borrego Valley the Ring-billed Gull is rare. Thirty-four at Club Circle (G24) 20 December 1998 (P. D. Ache), were the only ones found in 19 years of Anza-Borrego Christmas bird counts, and three in Borrego Springs (F24) 12 December 2001 (P. D. Jorgensen) were the only others seen there in winter during the atlas period.



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Migration: Ring-billed Gull migration has not been well studied in San Diego County. At the Salton Sea, juveniles begin arriving by 16 July (Patten et al. 2003), and the species’ numbers in San Diego begin increasing in this month. In their weekly surveys of the San Diego Bay salt works 1993–94, Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) found the gull’s numbers spiking sharply in November and dropping to summer lows in April. Dates for the Anza-Borrego Desert range from 1 November (1988, three at the Borrego sewage ponds, H25, A. G. Morley) to 9 May (2001, five at Club Circle, G24, P. D. Ache), except for a sick bird at Bow Willow (P27) 8 June 1973 (ABDSP file) and an anomalous four at Agua Caliente Springs (M26) 4 June 1998 (E. C. Hall).

By mid May the Ring-billed Gull is generally uncommon. Our highest summer counts were of 31 at the mouth of Las Pulgas Creek 17 May 1998 (R. and S. L. Breisch), 30 at Agua Hedionda Lagoon (I6) 20 June 1999 (J. Ciarletta), and 40 at La Jolla (P7) 27 May 1999 (L. Polinsky). Almost all summering Ring-billed Gulls are along or near the coast; the only lakes well inland where we noted them 19 May–15 July were Henshaw (eight on 18 June 2000,

P. Unitt), San Vicente (N13; one on 16 June 2000, R. and S. L. Breisch), and Morena (S21/S22; up to three on 1 July 2000, R. and S. L. Breisch).

Conservation: With its food supply hugely augmented by human waste, the Ring-billed Gull enjoyed an increase in number and spread of its breeding range through the 20th century (Ryder 1993). But numbers in San Diego County have declined since the 1960s, as suggested by results of San Diego Christmas bird counts: Ring-billed Gulls averaged 5400 from 1963 to 1970 but only 1131 from 1997 to 2002. Changes in agriculture, more packaging of waste, the reduction in the number of landfills, and the assiduous exclusion of gulls from landfills that remain likely contributed to this decrease.

