

BIRD OF THE MONTH

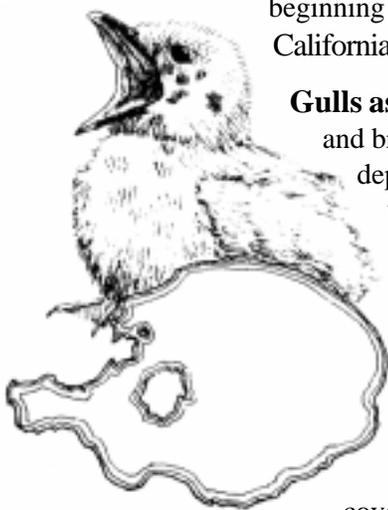
At Mono Lake



CALIFORNIA GULL (*Larus Californicus*): Junk birds? No Way!

About Mono's gulls. . . Mono Lake is home to the second largest California Gull rookery in North America (Great Salt Lake is the largest). By April, anywhere from 44,000 to 65,000 California Gulls arrive from winter haunts to breed on Mono's islands. Here, safe from land-based predators and humans, the gulls scratch out depressions in the rocky soil, decorate their chosen spot with feathers, and lay up to three black-speckled, khaki-colored eggs. Downy chicks hatch in June and fledge in July, following their parents back to their wintering grounds by early August. During the breeding period, the quiet of Mono's islands is shattered by the screams of gulls defending their nests against their neighbors (they often nest within two feet of each other!) and scattering raucously under the swift shadow of the occasional Great Horned Owl.

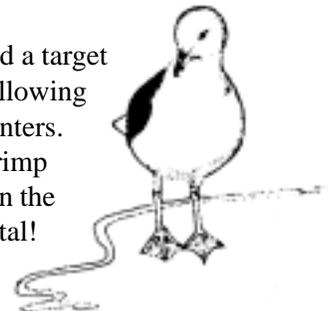
Shrimp soup. . . The gulls' primary food source is floating all around them in the briny waters of Mono Lake. An estimated trillions of thumbnail-sized brine shrimp, *Artemia monica*, inhabit the lake during the warmer summer months. This species of brine shrimp, found nowhere else in the world, produces tiny cysts that overwinter at the bottom of the lake. In the spring the cysts develop into tiny shrimp as the lake warms—beginning a new generation of shrimp. This spring shrimp hatch helps launch the year's California Gull chicks!



Gulls as a measure of Mono's health. . . California Gulls depend on brine shrimp, and brine shrimp depend on a healthy Mono Lake. Because of this simple chain of dependence, the annual breeding success of the gulls—which scientists have been tracking for almost 20 years now—can be a simple measure of Mono Lake's health. In scientific jargon, California Gulls are a good "ecological indicator" at Mono Lake. They help us understand how well Mono's overall natural system is functioning.

Threats to Mono's health. . . Mono Lake fell precipitously after the City of Los Angeles tapped the lake's tributary streams beginning in 1941. By 1979, water diversions had lowered the lake level so much that a landbridge emerged connecting Negit Island, their historic rookery, with the mainland. Hungry coyotes made easy prey of chicks, and the gulls abandoned the island. Since a protective order issued by the State Water Resources Control Board in 1994, the lake has been rising again and the landbridge no longer connects the islands with the mainland. But this rise in lake level has, in turn, resulted in a new situation. The sudden, large flow of freshwater into Mono Lake's artificially lowered (and correspondingly more saline) water led to a condition in which the lake's two chemically distinct layers do not mix. Instead, a fresher layer of water sits on top of a much saltier layer. This is known as "meromixis." In saltier water (i.e. in the lower layer), the shrimp-hatch in early spring is delayed. Just when the gulls most need the food for their recently-hatched chicks, there simply aren't enough shrimp to go around. In 1999, for example, .26 chicks were fledged per nest—resulting in an estimated total of only 4786 chicks fledged from the colony.

How the lake (and the gulls) are doing today. . . The State Water Board ordered a target average lake level of 6392 feet above sea level. The lake rose healthily in the 1990s, following a string of wet years. Today, the lake is dropping slightly after several relatively dry winters. The lake is still "meromictic," but because there is sufficient mixing in the top layer, shrimp numbers are good, and the spring hatch comes early. This vigor is reflected positively in the gull chick counts of last summer: 1.16 chicks fledged per nest—an estimated 27,935 total!



For more information visit www.monolake.org



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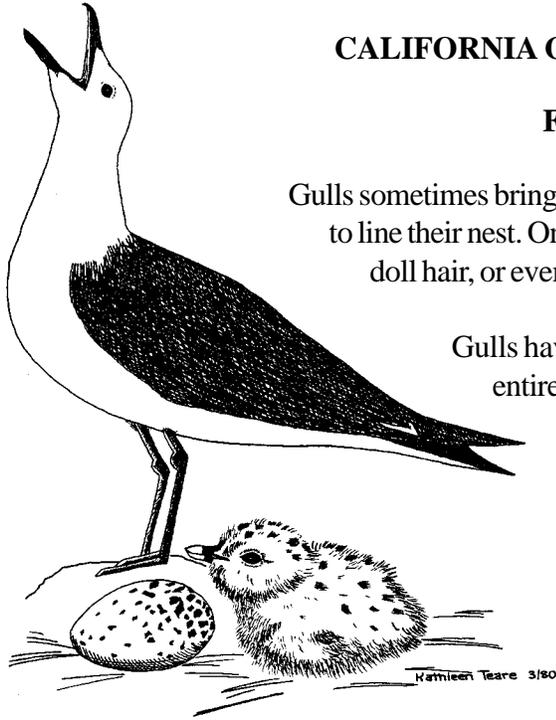
FUN FACTS

Gulls sometimes bring back “juju,” little pieces of this and that, to line their nest. One might find fishing string and bobbers, tinfoil, Barbie doll hair, or even plastic figurines of Bert and Ernie!

Gulls have been known to eat some pretty weird things, such as entire rib bones, swallows, and small ground squirrels!

You might see a gull running through a cloud of alkali flies clapping its beak. It looks funny, but they can catch an amazing number of flies!

The gulls nest so densely that you might find 4000 nests in an area the size of a football field!



WHERE TO SEE CALIFORNIA GULLS & WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Wonderful opportunists, gulls find food everywhere—in area lakes, meadows, rivers, campgrounds, parking areas, and—of course—local dumps. They play a very important ecological role as scavengers. Many of the gulls you see keeping the Pacific Coast clean of edible refuse were hatched at Mono Lake! You can see these birds just about anywhere in the Mono Basin between late March and early August. The first gull sightings in March are heralded by locals as a certain harbinger of spring.

You can recognize California Gulls by their mostly gray-and-white bodies, and black and white wingtips. Immature gulls, both those just fledged this year and birds returning for their first full season, can be recognized by their brownish-gray color. Like all gulls, California Gulls are masterful and graceful in flight, soaring effortlessly around the Mono Basin and over the mountains in search of food.

Up close, you can observe a red spot on the bill. This is believed to act as a target on parents at which chicks peck when they're hungry.

If you happen to notice a band on a gull's leg, you can guess that this bird hatched on Mono Lake's islands in one of the scientific monitoring plots established there. Researchers studying the gulls over the last 20 years have banded adults and young to further our understanding of the habits and survival of these gulls. Want to help with the research? Contact the Mono Lake Committee and ask about gull research seminars!

To prevent disturbance during the breeding season, Mono Lake's islands are closed to visitors from April 1 to August 1. Please respect the closure!

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