

Great Black-backed Gull

Larus marinus

The Great Black-backed Gull was not recorded as a possible, probable, or confirmed breeder in Vermont during the period of the Atlas Project. The Great Black-backed Gull was added to Vermont's list of breeding species in 1983, when on May 21 a pair, one of which was incubating eggs, was discovered on Young Island in Lake Champlain (BVR, R. M. and D. Lavallee; RVB, Spring 1983 and Summer 1983). The first record of the Great Black-backed Gull in the state was of an adult near Brattleboro on December 31, 1948; this bird was joined by an immature on January 2 (Smith 1950a; CBC 1948-49). Numbers increased steadily during the next two decades, especially on Lake Champlain, so that Spear (1976) considered the species a regular winter visitor and a rare summer straggler to Vermont. A first breeding occurred on New York's Four Brothers Islands in Lake Champlain in 1975, and by 1983 five nesting pairs occupied all the islands (J. M. C. Peterson, pers. comm.).

The traditional breeding range of the Great Black-backed Gull is along the coastal areas of the North Atlantic, although the species has also bred sporadically on the Great Lakes since 1954 (Bull 1974). Breeding pairs were also discovered at two inland New York sites in 1983. Before 1931, Great Black-backs were known to breed only as far south as Nova Scotia. The National Association of Audubon Societies employed wardens to protect important coastal bird colonies beginning in 1904, which led to dramatic increases in the numbers of nesting gulls, terns, and other birds (Norton and Allen 1931). In 1931 Norton and Allen (1931) documented nesting by Great Black-backed Gulls at 10 locations on the Maine coast, and the same year Eaton (1931) found the first Massachusetts breeding pair at Salem. The southward expansion has continued and this species is apparently in the process of extending its inland breeding range as well. Further population growth should be expected. Continued population

expansion may be a problem if it occurs at the expense of less aggressive species such as the Common Tern and Ring-billed Gull; Great Black-backed Gulls typically nest on islands among colonies of other gulls and terns, upon whose young they frequently prey.

Great Black-backed Gulls are among Vermont's longest-lived birds; some individuals may survive for nearly two decades. Since the young require 3 to 4 years to reach sexual maturity, a long life is a prerequisite to successful reproduction. The origin of the birds discovered on Young Island is unknown, but the likelihood seems high that they were descendents of the gulls breeding on New York's Four Brothers Islands only a few miles away.

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