

Herring Gull

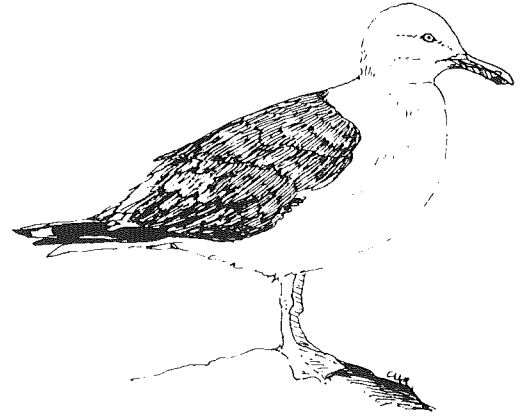
Larus argentatus

The Herring Gull is the common large gull of the Atlantic Coast and of lakes and rivers in the interior of the U.S. In Vermont, it is overshadowed by the much more numerous Ring-billed Gull.

Herring Gulls were *the* breeding species of gull on the Champlain Islands until the appearance of the Ring-billed in the 1940s. Thompson (1853) called Herring Gulls “not uncommon on Lake Champlain where numbers of them breed on the small, uninhabited islands,” and spoke of eggs collected from the Four Brothers Islands on the New York portion of the lake. Allen (1909) called the species an “uncommon migrant and rare summer resident” on Lake Champlain, and Fortner et al. (1933) noted that it was fairly common around Lake Champlain and less so at Lake Memphremagog. In 1944, Herring Gulls bred on Law Island off Colchester Point and on one or both of the Sister Islands (Perkins 1944). In 1963, a colony of 52 pairs nested on Sunset Island off Colchester Point; they continued to nest there until at least 1967, when the colony was deserted (GMAS records, P. Upton). Spear (Field notes) documented that this species nested on Rock (1965), Popasquash (1970), Young (1970), and Bixby (1970) islands, and estimated the size of the 1964 colony on Young at between 200 and 300 individuals.

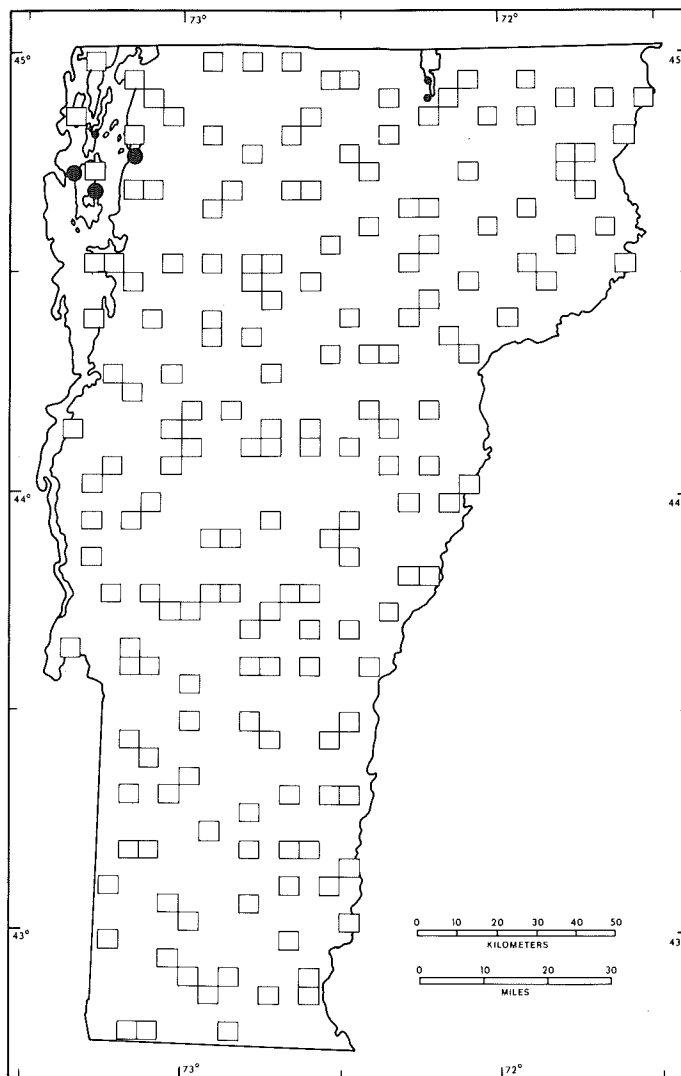
At present the only Vermont colony is on Young Island. In 1982, population estimates ranged from 20 to 30 pairs (J. D. Stewart, pers. comm.) to 50 pairs (S. B. Laughlin, A. L. Gosnell, pers. comm.). Herring Gulls’ nests fringe the rocky shoreline of the island, and Ring-billed Gulls occupy the interior. During the Atlas Project, pairs also nested on Rock Island and on Fish Bladder Island. Although Herring Gulls have been seen in summer on rocky islets in the Vermont portion of Lake Memphremagog (J. D. Stewart, pers. comm.), nesting was not documented there during the Atlas Project.

The chief Lake Champlain colony of Herring Gulls is in the New York waters of the



lake, on the Four Brothers Islands (Essex County, New York). Records of Herring Gulls nesting there reach back to at least the 1850s, when the Rev. G. Ingersoll presented Zadock Thompson with eggs from “one of the islands called the Four Brothers situated five or six miles from Burlington” (Thompson 1853). These islands have apparently been continuously occupied as a nesting site since at least that time, although counts of the nesting population have varied widely. In 1887 or 1888 Davis found 25 to 30 pairs on the islands; Wolfe, in 1923, found about 300 pairs in residence, and cited the protection offered by the owners—the Hatch brothers—for this notable increase (Wolfe 1923). More recent figures include 60 pairs in 1967 (Bull 1974), 250 pairs in 1974 (N. King, J. D. Stewart, Vt. Fish and Game Dept., pers. comm.), and around 200 pairs in 1982 (Peterson 1982).

Herring Gulls arrive at nesting areas as soon as Lake Champlain is relatively ice-free, usually in mid to late March. The ground nest is a bulky structure of grass, weeds, and other debris. Egg laying commences in late April. Clutches have been started as early as April 19 on Young Island; a completed clutch which was collected on “an island in Lake Champlain” on July 9, 1883 is in the Pember Collection at the University of Vermont. Laying appears to peak in early May. Most clutches are composed of 3 eggs, although reports of 2-egg clutches are not uncommon. The eggs are large, variable in shape, and range in color from olive



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL ○ (○%)

Possible breeding: ○ (○% of total)

Probable breeding: ○ (○% of total)

Confirmed breeding: ○ (○% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	○	○	○
Green Mountains	○	○	○
North Central	○	○	○
Northeast Highlands	○	○	○
East Central	○	○	○
Taconic Mountains	○	○	○
Eastern Foothills	○	○	○

to buff to light blue with scattered gray and brownish blotches. The incubation period ranges from 24 to 28 days. Young first hatch in mid to late May; there is an early date of May 27 for Vermont. The young fledge in early July.

The Herring Gull seems much more closely linked with the waters of its nesting lakes in Vermont than does the Ring-billed Gull, which often occurs at points far removed from Lake Champlain and forages on agricultural land—a habit only rarely displayed by Herring Gulls in Vermont. Over much of their breeding range, adult Herring Gulls are largely sedentary, whereas the younger birds (age 1 to 4 years) are at

least partly migratory. Since Lake Champlain freezes in most years there is a mid-winter exodus of virtually all gulls from the lake. It is not certain where most Lake Champlain Herring Gulls winter. Herring Gulls (mostly young birds) banded on the Four Brothers Islands have been recovered from eleven locations from Quebec to Mexico during the months of November through February (J. M. C. Peterson, pers. comm.). Most adults presumably winter nearby in the St. Lawrence or Hudson river drainages.

WALTER G. ELLISON