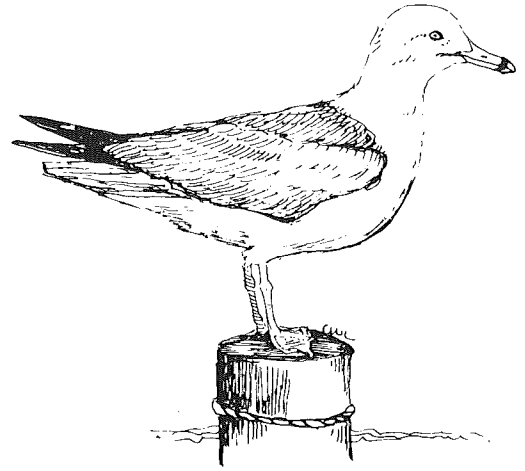


Ring-billed Gull

Larus delawarensis

Of Vermont's two nesting gulls, the Ring-billed is by far the most abundant, outnumbering the Herring Gull by at least 60 to 1. This was not always the case. Early references, including Thompson (1853) and Wolfe (1923), indicated that the Herring Gull was the sole nesting gull on Lake Champlain. In fact, no confirmed record of the Ring-billed existed for Vermont until November 1939 (Weaver 1939). It is entirely possible that before this date the species was overlooked during migration among the similar and more numerous Herring Gulls. The species first bred on Lake Champlain on the Four Brothers Islands in Essex County, New York in 1949 (Bull 1974). The first Vermont nesting occurred on Young Island—the current site of Vermont's largest colony—in 1951, when about 100 pairs were located (Miller and King 1981); duck hunters had cleared enough of the island to afford the gulls a foothold (N. King, J. D. Stewart, pers. comm.).

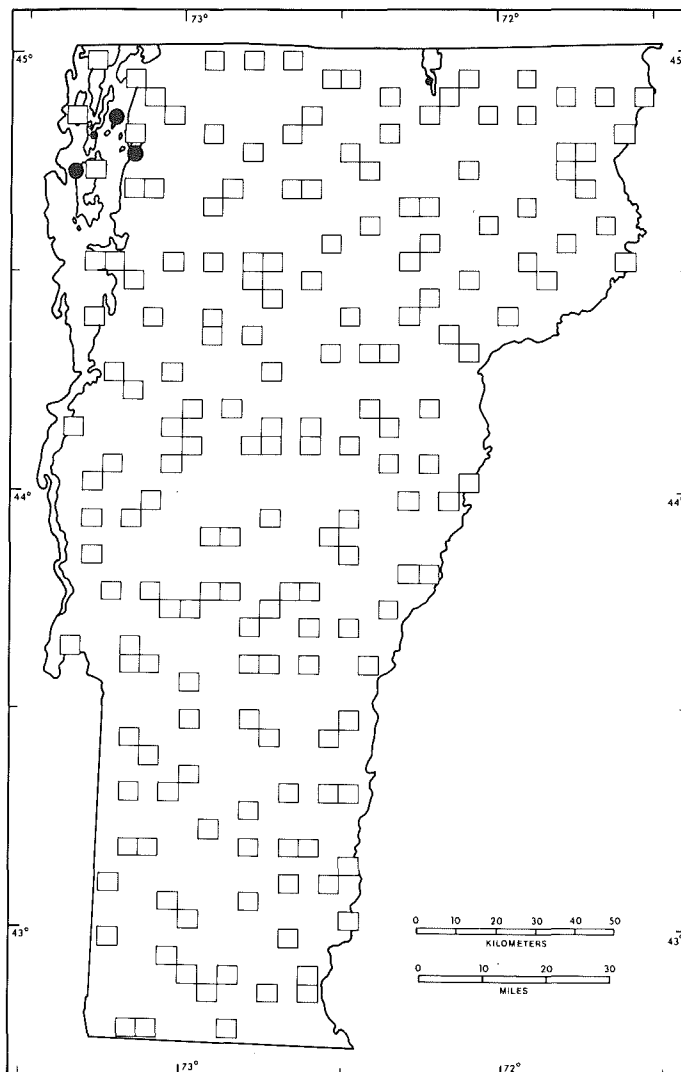
The Ring-billed Gull breeds largely inland in freshwater habitats. It is apparently more sensitive to persecution than the Herring Gull, and was nearly extirpated throughout its former broad eastern range by the early twentieth century (Bent 1921). The species reappeared on Lake Huron in 1926 after a quarter-century absence (Ludwig 1943), and was noted nesting on Lake Ontario by 1927 (Ludwig 1974). The species first nested in New York State in 1936 (Hyde 1948). After a lengthy period of relative stability, the population increased dramatically on the Great Lakes during the early 1960s (Ludwig 1974). Lake Champlain appears to have been colonized from gulleries in eastern Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. The gull population of Lake Champlain has grown rapidly since the 1970s. Although McLaughlin (1973) estimated the Four Brothers' population at about 2,500 pairs in 1973, Spear, after a careful survey, estimated it for that year at 15,000 pairs (R. N. Spear, pers. comm.). In 1982, 15,033



nest were counted (Peterson 1983). The population of Young Island in 1983, according to the most recent estimate, was roughly 9,000 gulls; there were also 4,000 nests (RVB, Summer 1983).

The Ring-billed Gull, like the Herring Gull, is a scavenger, but it is also a plow follower, and ranges throughout the Champlain Valley and adjacent river valleys searching for food in the fields. Spear (1970) speculated that the Ring-billed's additional methods of obtaining food—following plows, hunting worms on golf courses, hawking insects in the air—might account for the Champlain Valley's ability to support a much larger population of Ring-billed Gulls than Herring Gulls.

Ring-billed Gulls prefer to nest on islands where they are safe from most terrestrial predators. Ring-billeds return to their rocky, sparsely vegetated Vermont nesting islands in March or early April. The nest is a scrape lined with grass, weed stems, and sticks, with an inner lining of fine grass and feathers (Bent 1921). Eggs number from 1 to 5, with clutches of 2 or 3 most common. Incubation takes about 25 to 28 days (Nol and Blokpoel 1983), and the young leave the nest about a day after hatching. Seven dates for eggs from Vermont islands range from May 1 to June 17 (N. King, J. D. Stewart, pers. comm.). Early dates for young are from late May. Eighty percent of the clutches on St. Lawrence River islands in 1978 were



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL ○ (0%)
 Possible breeding: ○ (0% of total)
 Probable breeding: ○ (0% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: ○ (0% 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	○	○	○

completed between May 5 and May 28; the last completed clutch was reported on July 11 (Maxwell and Smith 1983).

The Ring-billed Gull's nesting distribution in Vermont is restricted to northern Lake Champlain. During the Atlas Project, nesting was documented on five islands: Young, Hen, Sunset, Popasquash, and Rock—all in non-priority blocks. The largest colony was on Young Island, with Popasquash Island (1,500 pairs) second (J. D. Stewart, pers. comm.). The total Vermont nesting population appeared to be in the range of 5,500 to 6,000 pairs at the close of the Atlas Project period in 1981. The Vermont Institute of Natural Science's estimate was that the adult

population of Ring-billed Gulls on Lake Champlain was about 40,000 birds in 1983. A few birds may nest on tiny, rock islets and sandbars on the larger lakes of northern Vermont, in particular Lake Memphremagog, where the species is common throughout the summer (although these birds may come from Lake Champlain via the Missisquoi drainage). Ring-billeds depart for winter quarters along the coast, especially the Gulf Coast of Mexico, in November and December. A few may be seen throughout the winter on Lake Champlain and its tributaries, or as long as sections remain free of ice.

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