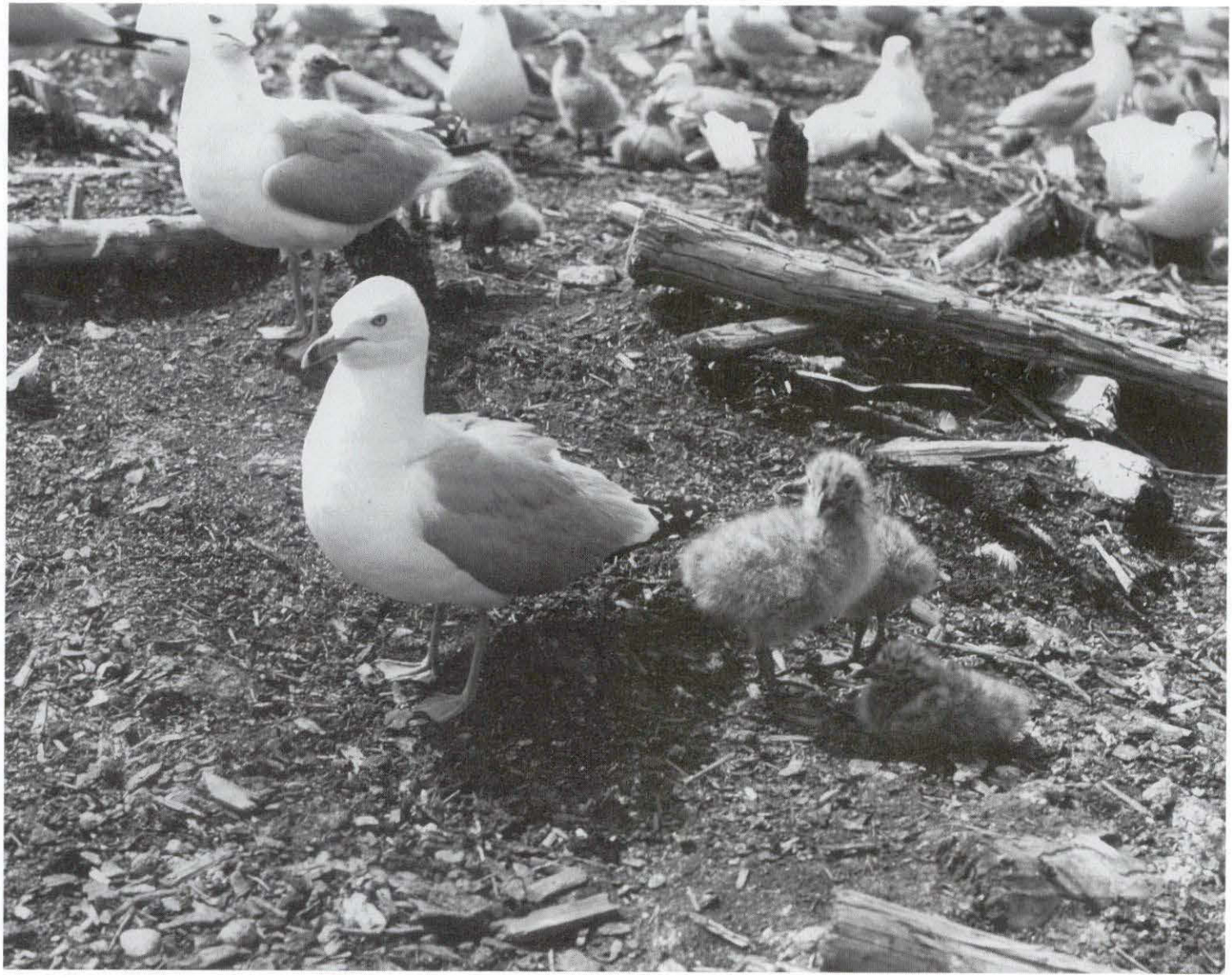
Ring-billed Gull



Environment Canada | Environnement Canada

Canadian Wildlife Service | Service canadien de la faune

A member of the Environmental Conservation family

Canada

The aerial acrobatics and tameness of gulls have always given them a special appeal. It is hard to imagine seashores and lakeshores without them — effortlessly riding the wind over the waves, hovering over quays, and trailing after fishing boats, in a daily quest for food. Over the past 50 years, gulls have become increasingly numerous and tame, and they have greatly expanded their range. Now many of us see "seagulls" as we go about our daily lives, whether we live in a city or in the country.

Although 18 species of gulls breed in Canada, this dramatic population increase involves only a few gull species. One of these, the Ring-billed Gull, called *Larus delawarensis* by scientists, has become the best known gull in Canada.

Expansion of the gull's range

At the start of the 20th century, the Ring-billed Gull was found in several discrete areas centred primarily on the Prairies, and including the Great Lakes. In eastern Canada it occurred in small colonies on the western shore of James Bay, on the lower North Shore of the St. Lawrence, and in Labrador.

Today, the breeding range of the Ring-billed Gull includes all Canadian provinces (see map). This change has been steady and rapid. After colonizing the edges of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie in the 1930s, this gull colonized the length of the St. Lawrence River. It established its first colony in the Montreal area in 1953. Subsequently it invaded the Atlantic Provinces in stages: northern New Brunswick in about 1965, Newfoundland in the early 1970s, and Prince Edward Island in 1974. In British Columbia, Ring-billed Gulls nest sporadically, but the species does not seem to be expanding its range there.

Over the last few years, breeding gulls have established their new inland colonies principally in Ontario and Quebec. If this trend continues, the breeding distribution shown on the map will soon be out of date. The wintering range of this species also continues to expand. Most ring-bills winter along the coasts of the United States, but growing numbers are wintering inland.

Distribution of the Ring-billed Gull

Breeding range

Breeding and wintering range

Wintering range

Distinctive features

Adults are 40–50 cm long, with a wingspan of about 100 cm. As with many other species of gulls, the female is slightly smaller. Males weigh, on average, about 565 g, and females weigh about 470 g. The legs and feet are yellow-green. The bill is yellow and encircled by a black ring near the tip.

The breeding plumage is completely white save for the top of the wings and the back, which are grey, and the black-and-white spotted wing tips. The winter plumage is almost the same; however, in winter brownish dots cover the head and neck. The plumage is the same on males and females.

The plumage of young gulls changes with each successive moult. A mottled brown dominates in younger gulls, but fades with each season until the bird acquires its distinctive white-and-grey plumage at the age of three.

Initially, the Ring-billed Gull and the Herring Gull are hard for birdwatchers to tell apart, but the Herring Gull is much larger and it has flesh-coloured legs and feet and a red dot on its bill. The Western Canadian Mew Gull is slightly smaller than the Ring-billed Gull, and its bill is a uniform yellow-green. The California Gull often has some black on the lower part of its bill, but careful observation reveals a red dot in this area, which the Ring-billed Gull doesn't have.

Gull colonies

Ring-billed Gulls form large breeding colonies of thousands, and even tens of thousands, of pairs. Once ensconced, a gull is extremely difficult to dislodge from its colony. In large colonies, population density can be extremely high, sometimes reaching levels of 1.5 nests per square metre.

In establishing their colonies, gulls choose locations that offer a certain protection from predators. According to availability, sites such as islands, peninsulas, or piers are often colonized, particularly if there are nearby sources of food. The nature of the terrain seems to be less important, though the bird favours barren areas without trees or bushes.

Often, other species nest with Ring-billed Gulls. Depending on the location, American White Pelicans, California Gulls, Double-crested Cormorants, Common Terns, Caspian Terns, Great Black-backed Gulls, or Herring Gulls may use the same colony site. On various islands in the St. Lawrence, there are high concentrations of Mallards and Northern Pintails inside gull colonies: possibly gulls provide them with some protection from predators. On the other hand, at some mixed-species colony sites in the Great Lakes, the increasing numbers of nesting gulls are displacing Common Terns from their traditional nesting sites. The larger gulls return to the colony sites well before the terns

and begin nesting in areas where terns had nested in previous years.

Ring-billed Gulls have few natural enemies, but foxes, coyotes, skunks, racoons, and domestic animals occasionally eat eggs and young, or even adult birds. Humans who visit colonies during the breeding season cause increases in deaths of young birds, and repeated visits lead to abandonment of the colony.

Breeding biology

In the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence regions, the birds return to their colonies by mid-February or early March. On the Prairies, the first migrants appear towards the end of March or the beginning of April. The weeks that follow are devoted to claiming territory, courtship rituals, mating, and nest building. At this time, an abundant food supply is critical, especially for the female.

The nest is made of vegetation, feathers, and sometimes miscellaneous objects, like discarded plastic. In Ontario and Quebec, the first eggs are laid in early April, and on the Prairies, in early May.

The female usually lays three eggs, one every 1–3 days, and incubation begins as soon as the first egg has been laid. Most eggs are fawn-coloured, with greenish-brown splotches, but eggs with a blue or green tinge are not uncommon. The male and female take turns sitting on the eggs for 27 or 28 days.

When newly hatched, the chicks weigh about 40 g. During the first few days, they remain at the nest. After four or five days, they begin to explore nearby; however, if they wander too far, their neighbours will attack them. As a result, many chicks die during their first week.

The most important determinant of reproductive success is the feeding of the young birds. The chicks' diet will vary acording to the food available, which depends in turn on where the colony is and how it is situated. The diet comprises fish, earthworms, insects, small mammals, and all manner of garbage. In colonies near cities, garbage makes up up to 40% of the food brought to the chicks.

The young become independent as soon as they are capable of sustained flight, at around 35 days. They leave the breeding colonies between mid-July and mid-August, depending on the region.

Post-breeding dispersion

It is during the months between breeding and migration that people see Ring-billed Gulls most often. They seek food during the day and rest at night. Each morning, young and adult birds regroup and set off for their day's foraging. The growth of colonies near cities means that more and more birds seek food around restaurants, picnic areas, golf courses, parks, quays, and beaches. At dusk, groups of varying sizes fly to safe roosting areas where they spend the night, sometimes in very large numbers.

Population explosion

Throughout Canada, Ring-billed Gull populations have exploded. In the Great Lakes area, for instance, the Ring-billed Gull population increased from 3000 pairs in 1930 to more than 700 000 pairs in 1990. Whenever food is plentiful, the population increases.

At the turn of the century, the Ring-billed Gull was not so common. It came close to extinction because of excessive commercial sales of gull eggs, flesh, and feathers. In 1916, Canada and the United States signed the *Migratory Birds Convention*, a treaty which, among other things, outlawed all further hunting of this and other imperilled birds.

This treaty, combined with the high survival rate, long life (12–15 years), and early breeding (at age three) of Ring-billed Gulls, has contributed to strong and rapid population growth. The population explosion now under way can be attributed to the ease with which the ring-bill adapts to new nesting sites and foods, and the virtual absence of predators.

Problems resulting from the population explosion

The Ring-billed Gull has a useful role as nature's garbage collector—it clears edible garbage from riverbanks, dumps, landfills, and public places—but the explosive growth in its population is not problem-free. At fish farms, dumps, and public parks, the presence of large flocks of gulls causes financial losses and concerns about sanitation. Some farmers object to gatherings of gulls during the ploughing and haying seasons, and blame the birds for lowering earthworm numbers and increasing the risk of disease among livestock.

Every year, the activities of gulls give rise to an increasing variety of complaints. Some of their habits are surprising. In Ontario, gulls have nested on rooftops. They consume large quantities of small fruits, such as cherries, strawberries, and blueberries. Near outdoor snack bars there can be so many gulls watching for the chance to grab some food that people feel harassed. When Ring-billed Gulls feed or rest on public beaches, the bacteria in their droppings can affect water quality, and consequently, public health.

Serious problems also arise in the vicinity of airports, where massed gulls present a hazard for air traffic. In Canada, there are dozens of collisions with gulls every year. Gull–aircraft collisions have not caused loss of human life, but there are financial costs. To avert these, a variety of techniques is used to scare the gulls, but sometimes the birds must be killed. At Toronto and Dorval airports, Northern Goshawks, Peregrine Falcons, and other raptors are used to scare away the gulls.

The Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) is involved in ongoing research to find ways of managing the problems caused by Ring-billed Gulls. Over the years, CWS has collaborated with other groups in developing techniques for scaring gulls. In some cases, programs have been initiated to reduce the size of certain colonies.

What can people do to help reduce these problems?
The recovery of the Ring-billed Gull population since the turn of the century is a remarkable example of how adaptable birds can be. In a sense, the Ring-billed Gull has adapted too well to living around human settlements, attracted by—among other things—easily accessible garbage.

Good citizenship can help to reduce some of the conflicts between people and Ring-billed Gull populations. Municipalities can improve their waste management practices. Individuals can place garbage in closed containers, and only put trash out on the morning it is to be picked up. Feeding gulls is not really a good idea, as it encourages them to rely on humans as a source of food.

Reading list

Godfrey, W.E. 1986. The birds of Canada. Revised edition. National Museums of Canada. Ottawa. 595 pp.

Ryder, J.P. 1993. Ring-billed Gull. In Poole, A. and F. Gill, editors, The birds of North American, No. 33. Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences and Washington D. C.: the American Ornithologists' Union.

The Canadian Wildlife Service
The Canadian Wildlife Service handles wildlife matters that are the responsibility of the Canadian government. These include protection and management of migratory birds as well as nationally significant wildlife habitat. Other responsibilities are endangered species, control of international trade in endangered species, and research on wildlife issues of national importance. The service cooperates with the provinces, territories, Parks Canada, and other federal agencies in wildlife research and management.

For more information about the Canadian Wildlife Service or its other publications, please contact:

Publications
Canadian Wildlife Service
Environment Canada
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0H3
(819) 997-1095 (phone)
(819) 997-2756 (fax)
http://www.ec.gc.ca/cws-scf

Address for access to the Hinterland Who's Who on the Internet:
http://www.ec.gc.ca/cws-scf/hww-fap/index.html

Également disponible en français sous le titre *Le Goéland à bec cerclé.*

Published by the authority of the Minister of the Environment

Catalogue number CW69-4/63-1998E
ISBN 0-662-26465-7
Text: Pierre Brousseau
Revised by H. Blokpoel, 1997
Photo: Pierre Brousseau