

Status and Occurrence of Black-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) in British Columbia.

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Introduction and Distribution

The Black-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) is found in the Old World from Iceland to Siberia (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The species winters from Europe, throughout the Mediterranean Sea, parts of North Africa, India, Southeast Asia to Japan (Olsen and Larsson 2004). In North America, the Black-headed Gull breeds locally in Newfoundland and Labrador (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Black-headed Gull occurs in numbers along the east coast of North America and with great frequency throughout the eastern states and provinces (Olsen and Larsson 2004). It is a very rare species in the mid-western states and provinces (Olsen and Larsson 2004). Alberta has only 1 recent accepted Provincial record (Hudon *et al.* 2014). Along the west coast of North America, the Black-headed Gull is a rare migrant in western Alaska in both the Aleutian Islands and the Bering Sea region (West 2008, Gibson *et al.* 2013). This species becomes much rarer the further east and south you travel in the state and is a casual visitor in southeastern Alaska (West 2008). In Washington State there are 16 accepted records by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). There are only 3 accepted records in Oregon by the Oregon Rare birds Committee (OFO 2012). The species is also quite a rarity in California where there are only 22 accepted state records by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). In British Columbia, the Black-headed Gull is a casually occurring species with just over 20 records for the province (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). The Black-headed Gull is accidental in Cuba, Trinidad, Surinam, French Guiana and Hawaii (Hamilton *et al.* 2007).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Black-headed Gull is covered in all standard North American field guides. The Black-headed Gull is 16 inches (41 cm) in length and has a wingspan of 40 inches (102 cm) which makes this species a bit similar in size to a Mew Gull (*Larus canus brachyrhynchus*) which is 16 inches (41 cm) in length and has a wingspan of 43 inches (109 cm) (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The only regularly occurring species that can cause confusion for observers is the smaller Bonaparte's Gull (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*) which is 13.5 inches (34 cm) in length and has a wingspan of 33 inches (84 cm) (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In many cases observers looking through migrating flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls will find a single Black-headed Gull, allowing for direct comparisons (Wahl *et al.* 2005). The Black-headed Gull takes 2 years from the time it is born to reach adulthood (Olsen and Larsson 2004).

Adult birds have a dark red bill with a blackish tip (Sibley 2000). In breeding plumage, the Black-headed Gull has a dark brown hood (Olsen and Larsson 2004). In winter plumage the head is

fairly white with a dark ear spot behind the dark eye (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The throat, chest, flanks and undertail coverts are white (Sibley 2004). The mantle is a light silver colour, similar to an adult Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) (Sibley 2000, Olsen and Larsson 2004). The legs are bright red (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The folded wing has black primaries with the outer primaries having white edges that extend beyond the tail tip (Olsen and Larsson 2004). In flight, the upper wing shows light silvery gray with large white primaries that have black tips (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The underside of the wing has white axillaries with a dark secondary edge that extends into the primaries (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The outer primaries p10 and p9 are white (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The tail is pure white (Sibley 2000).

First cycle birds have an orange-pinkish bill with a black tip (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The crown is dirty but not black (Olsen and Larsson 2004). There is a large black spot behind the dark eye that has white eye arcs both above and below the eye (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The legs are fleshy-pink (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The throat, chest, flanks and undertail coverts are white (Sibley 2000). The upper mantle is silver-gray like the adult (Olsen and Larsson 2004). There is a large dark line that cuts across the wing to the tertials with the primaries black (Olsen and Larsson 2004). In flight, the upper wing shows a dark line that extends the entire length from the secondaries to the primary tips (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The dark area where the primaries meet the secondaries extends into the wing as a slight wedge (Olsen and Larsson 2004). There is a heavy carpal bar that cuts across the upper wing (Olsen and Larsson 2004). Below the carpal bar is gray that extends into the base of the primaries (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The underside of the wing in flight shows white secondaries with a dark secondary edge that extends to the primaries (Olsen and Larsson 2004). There is a thick black tail band across the tip of the tail (Sibley 2000). The base of the tail is white (Sibley 2000). Birds in 2nd cycle have variable brownish hoods, a reddish bill with a black tip and a wing pattern similar to first winter birds (Olsen and Larsson 2004).

In British Columbia, the only species that can cause confusion is the smaller Bonaparte's Gull. Adult birds in breeding plumage have a black hood, all black bill and dark eyes (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There are white eye arcs both above and below the eye (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The throat, chest, flanks and undertail coverts are white (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The mantle is a darker bluish-gray (Olsen and Larsson 2004). On the folded wing the primaries are black with white edges with the leading edge of the primaries white extending past the tail (Olsen and Larsson 2004). In flight, the upper wing is bluish-gray with a large white primaries that have black tips (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The underside of the wing is pale white with the primary tips black (Sibley 2000). The tail is short and white (Sibley 2000). The legs are red (Sibley 2000).

First winter birds have a darkish-dirty looking crown with a large dark ear spot behind the dark eye (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The bill is all black (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The throat, chest, flanks and undertail coverts are white (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The upper wing is bluish-gray with a large dark band cutting across the wing onto the dark tertials and primaries (Olsen and Larsson 2004). In flight, the upper wing has a dark line running the entire length of the wing from the secondaries to the primaries (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The dark line also runs the entire length of the leading edge of the wing (Olsen and Larsson 2004). There is also a dark carpal bar that cuts across the wing (Olsen and Larsson 2004). Below the carpal bar is bluish-gray that extends up into the base of the primaries (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The underside of the wing is pale white with the primary tips black (Olsen and Larsson 2004). The legs are fleshy-pink (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There is a thick black tail band across the tip of the tail (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The base of the tail is white (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Black-headed Gull is a casual species in British Columbia with 24 Provincial Records (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). Almost all records are of birds seen along the coastline where Bonaparte's Gulls are found in large numbers (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There are no interior records for the Province (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). Out of the 24 Provincial records 18 of these are from Vancouver Island with the vast majority coming from the Victoria area (Toochin *et al.* 2014b). There are 4 records from the Vancouver area and 2 records from the Sunshine Coast to Powell River region (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). The records for the Province are almost exclusively from the fall period from August – November (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There are 3 records of birds either staying into or found in the winter with one bird in Delta wintering until early March (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There are no spring records for the British Columbia region (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There are 2 summer records of 1st summer birds from June and July (Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). The pattern of vagrancy in British Columbia is mirrored by other states along the west coast of North America. In California, the Black-headed Gull has been found throughout the year, but most records are for the winter months (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). In Oregon there are only a handful of records, but there are a couple of winter observations (OFO 2012). In Washington State, the pattern is similar to British Columbia, but there are many more wintering records and even a couple of spring observations (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). It would seem logical given the number of documented birds that have been recorded wintering from California to Washington there should be a spring record of Black-headed Gull found in British Columbia in the future. It is unclear if birds that are found in British Columbia originate from the east coast of North America or come from birds that migrate from Siberia into Alaska (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). Observers should always check carefully through all small gulls, particularly Bonaparte's

Gulls, for this beautiful rarity. It is much more likely to turn up along the coast of the province, but interior birders should pay attention as well, as this species could turn anywhere in the future.



Figure 1: Record #19: Black-headed Gull adult in a field along 72nd St. & 36th Ave., Delta on January 2, 2001. Photo © Neil Hughes.



Figure 2-5: Record #23: Black-headed Gull adult at Qualicum Beach on November 8, 2009. Photos © Michael Ashbee.

Table 1: Records of Black-headed Gull for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult October 27-November 13, 1974: Chaucey Wood, mobs (RBCM Photo 374) Clover Pt., Victoria (Wood 1976)
- 2.(1) adult August 15-November 8, 1975: John & Marian Steeves, mobs (RBCM Photo 413) Clover Pt., Victoria (Crowell and Nehls 1976a, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 3.(1) adult October 19 – November 8, 1975: Mike Shepard, Ron Satterfield, mobs: Victoria (Crowell and Nehls 1976a, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- (2) adults October 17-November 9, 1975: Mike Shepard, and other observers: Clover Point, Victoria (Shepard 1976a, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 4.(1) 1st summer June 19, 1976: Bob Hay: Harling Point, Victoria (Shepard 1976c, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- (1) 1st summer July 28 – August 16, 1976: Ron Satterfield, mobs: Victoria (Crowell and Nehls 1976d, Shepard 1976d, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 5.(1) adult winter plumage August 26, 1977: Mark Gwan: Tsawwassen Ferry Terminal, Tsawwassen (Roberson 1980)
- 6.(1) adult September 22, 1979: Mike Shepard, Bruce MacDonald, Chris Oliver: Victoria (Mattocks and Hunn 1980a, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 7.(1) adult October 17 – 21, 1980: Ron Satterfield, Jeremy Tatum, Donald Carruthers, mobs: Victoria (Hunn and Mattocks 1981, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)

- 8.(1) adult August 20 – October 27, 1983: Keith Taylor, mobs: (RBCM Photo 893) Victoria
(Hunn and Mattocks 1984, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 9.(1) adult winter plumage September, 1983: Ervio Sian (RBCM Photo 1057) Iona Island
Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 10.(1) adult August 17 – September 30, 1984: Vic Goodwill, and other observers: Victoria
(Hunn and Mattocks 1985, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 11.(1) adult October 1, 1985: Mike Edgell, Ron Satterfield: McMicking Point, Victoria
(Anonymous 1986i, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 12.(1) adult winter plumage November 3-December 17, 1988: RJC, mobs (photo) Spanish
Banks to Stanley Park, Vancouver (Cannings 1989)
- 13.(1) age unknown October 17, 1990: *fide Victoria Bird Alert*: Victoria
(Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 14.(1) adult August 22-29, 1991: Rick Toochin, and other observers: Sidney Island and Inlet,
near Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 15.(1) adult September 22, 1994: Hue MacKenzie, Jo Anne MacKenzie: Active Pass
(Bowling 1995a, Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 16.(1) adult August 21-September 22, 1997: Ken Wright, and other observers (photo) Point
Holmes and Kye Bay, Comox (Wright and Joy 1998)
- 17.(1) adult winter plumage October 31, 1998: Bruce Whittington: Esquimalt Lagoon
(Bain and Shannon 1998c, Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 18.(1) adult October 14, 2000: Pierre Geoffray, mobs (photo) near Powell River
(Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 19.(1) adult winter plumage December 28, 2000-January 28, 2001: Markus Tomlinson, mobs
(photo) 72nd St. & 36th Ave., Delta (Cecile 2001a, Toochin 2012a)
 - (1) adult winter plumage February 10-24, 2001: Allan Jensen: 52nd St & 28th Ave, Delta
(Cecile 2000b, Toochin 2012a)
 - (1) adult winter plumage February 25, 2001: Rick Toochin, Corina Isaac: Tsawwassen Ferry
Jetty Base, Tsawwassen (Cecile 2000b, Toochin 2012a)
 - (1) adult winter plumage March 2-4, 2001: Mike Toochin, mobs: Highway 17 & 28th Ave.,
Delta (Cecile 2000b, Toochin 2012a)
- 20.(1) 1st summer July 14, 2001: David Allinson: Rocky Point Bird Observatory, Metchosin
(Bain 2001d, Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 21.(1) adult October 25, 2004: Jo Ann MacKenzie: Active Pass, near Victoria (Cecile 2005a,
Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 22.(1) adult winter plumage December 1, 2007: Rick Toochin: Sooke Estuary, Sooke
(Toochin 2012b)
- 23.(1) adult winter plumage November 7-8 & 14, 2009: Tom and Evelyn Constable (photo)
Qualicum Beach River Estuary (Charleswort 2010a)

- (1) adult winter plumage November 14, 2009: Roger Taylor, and other observers (photo)
Qualicum Beach River Estuary (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 24.(1) adult molting into winter plumage August 16-18, 2012: Penny Hall, mobs (photo)
Porpoise Bay, Sechelt (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)

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