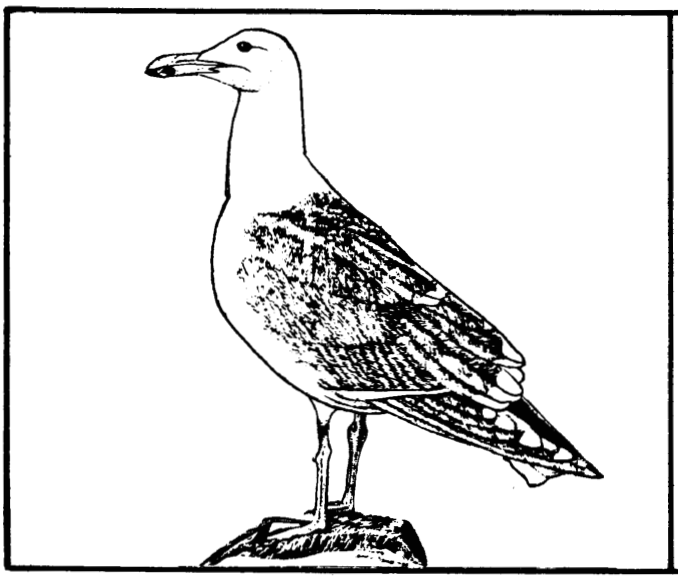
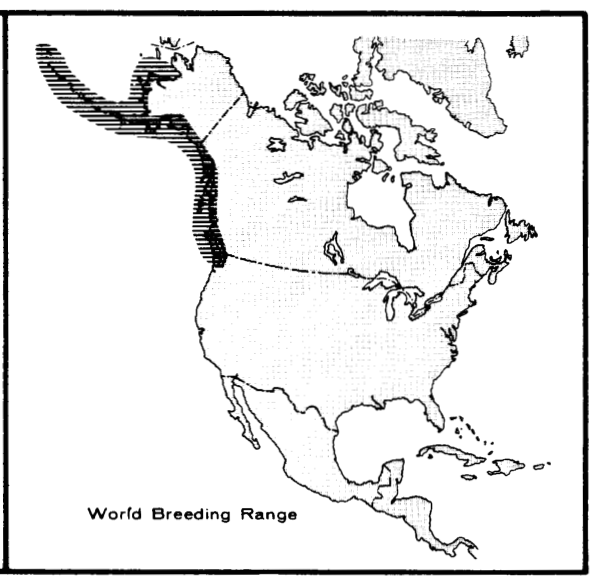
Glaucous-winged Gull *(Larus glaucescens)*

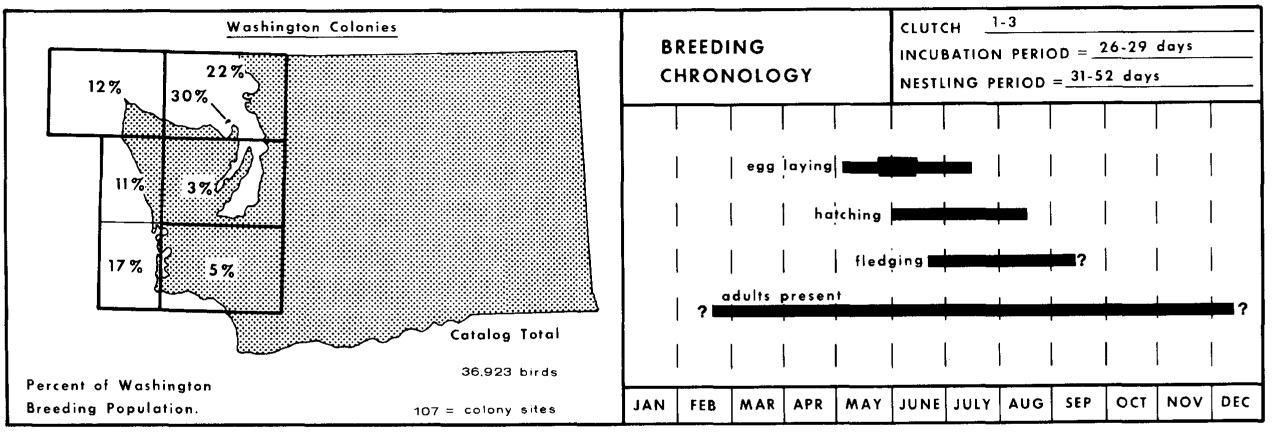




The Glaucous-winged Gulls nest around the perimeter of the North Pacific Ocean, from the area of Destruction Island off Washington to northern Japan. They are the most abundant and widespread gull nesting in Washington and the one most familiar to most people. Glaucous-winged Gulls and Western Gulls hybridize, and the varied plumage characteristic of many large gulls hatched in Washington display this to the confusion of many observers.

Like Western Gulls, Glaucous-winged Gulls nest in many different habitats and situations, from rocky islands off the coast to accreted gravel spits, roofs of downtown buildings in Seattle, abandoned piers, inaccessible dolphins at ferry docks, and log piles at sorting yards. Some of the largest seabird colonies in Washington are those of the Glaucous-winged Gull. The combined colonies of this species and the Western Gull total up to more sites than any species except the Pigeon Guillemot.

Glaucous-winged Gulls are omnivorous in their feeding habits and range from open-ocean diets of fish and other natural foods to fishing vessel discards, anchovies, and intertidal organisms like starfish, crabs, and clams. They have become accustomed to foraging at garbage dumps, sewage ponds, and outfalls and to following plows for grubs and other organisms. Glaucous-winged Gulls commonly feed on earthworms that come to the surface in farm fields and athletic fields saturated by winter precipitation. They have become closely associated with humans in many situations and boldly approach picnic tables, fishing piers, and bird feeders in many places in western Washington.



WASHINGTON COLONIES

Glaucous-winged Gulls breed at virtually any suitable location along the shoreline of the State. They are essentially absent as nesting birds along the exposed sand beaches from North Head, near the Columbia River, to Point Grenville where the coastline becomes suitable. They do not nest along the Strait of Juan de Fuca between Seal and Sail Rocks and Dungeness. And, while there are colonies on piers and other waterfront situations in Seattle, Tacoma, Olympia, and Shelton, there are very few nesting in Puget Sound in "natural" situations south of Colvos Rock at the entrance to Hood Canal. The largest colonies in the State, a number of which include Western Gulls and intergrades between the two species, are at Protection, Gunpowder, Tatoosh, East Sand, Colville, Smith and Minor, Carroll, and Destruction Islands.

HISTORICAL STATUS AND VULNERABILITY

Glaucous-winged Gulls steal food from other seabirds, particularly birds nesting nearby. They also prey on young birds of many species, including alcids and Black Oystercatchers. Consequently, they have probably suppressed populations of other species as Western Gulls have in California (Sowls et al. 1980) and large gulls have in eastern North America (Nettleship 1972; Nisbet 1973).

Like the closely related Western Gull, this species has increased in numbers in recorded time, taking advantage of increased food availability in the form of garbage, waste and discards from fisheries activity and sewage, and also through protection from shooting, feather collecting, egging, automation of lighthouses, and establishment of refuges for maintenance of nesting areas. While population data are limited, increases in nesting populations at several inland Washington colonies are documented (Thoreson and Galusha 1971), and qualitative observations by many observers indicate the trend has been area-wide.

Glaucous-winged Gulls appear to be less vulnerable to effects of

oil spills than other, more specialized marine birds, which spend more of their lives in the water, which dive for prey, and are less adaptable to changing conditions. However, the species, like all surface-nesting birds, is vulnerable to disturbance while nesting; and high mortality may result from entry of humans and dogs into colonies during times when there are chicks in the nests. Disturbance at this time can easily result in chilling of eggs or chicks, chicks leaving home territories and being killed by neighboring gulls, and eggs being stolen by crows. For the most part, however, since large gulls are adaptable, opportunistic, and aggressive, populations of large gulls in Washington appear likely to be maintained at current levels, at least for the foreseeable future.

FIELD NOTES

The authors would appreciate copies of your field notes for updates