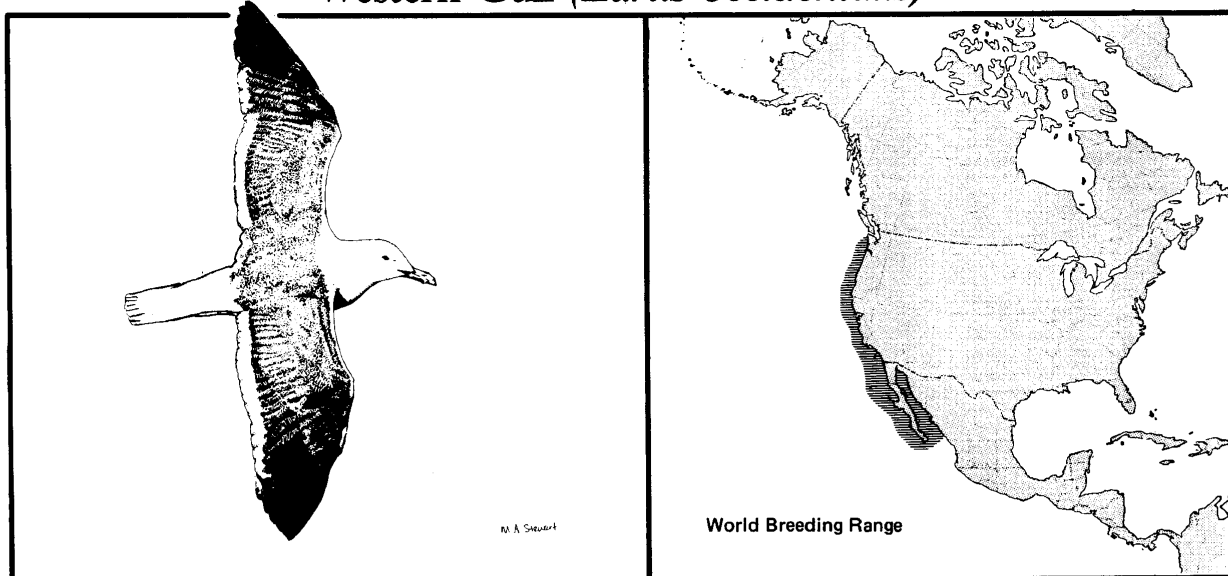


Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*)



Western Gulls reach the northern edge of their breeding range on the outer coast of Washington at about Destruction Island. However, Glaucous-winged Gulls are sympatric with Western Gulls, and hybrids of the two are found well to the north and into the inland marine waters of the State (see Hoffman et al. 1978).

Western Gulls nest in a variety of habitats, but in Washington the most frequently used nest sites are on offshore rocks and islands, and on several accreted, low, sandy islands in Grays Harbor and Willapa Bay. Birds nesting on the mainland select areas, such as steep slopes and cliff faces, inaccessible to predators. The nests are substantial and usually made from vegetation collected nearby. The normal clutch is three eggs.

Like most of the large gulls, Western Gulls feed on a variety of

prey, including fish, euphausiids and other plankton, and fishing discards and offal. They are opportunistic feeders, of course, and forage readily at garbage dumps and fish-processing plants.

WASHINGTON COLONIES

Western Gulls are concentrated at colonies along the southern Washington coast. However, we have not separated Western Gulls from Glaucous-winged Gulls in population estimates, and thus numbers given for the latter species include a large proportion of Western Gulls, at least in the colonies from Destruction Island south to the Columbia River. This is due to the fact that, though Dawson (1908b) recognized that different forms were present, few observers since then have differentiated between the two, perhaps because the extent of hybridization (see Hoffman et al.

1978) makes identification of many individuals difficult. Observer variability and differences in what are considered "pure" forms and "hybrid" forms further add to the confusion of field determinations. This subject is discussed at length by Hoffman et al. (1978), and K. Richter (pers. comm.) gives additional ideas of proportions of the two species or forms at the colony at East Sand Island. The population of large gulls nesting from Destruction Island south, about 12,000 birds, might include about 6,000 to 8,000 Western Gulls.

HISTORICAL STATUS AND VULNERABILITY

Western Gulls and Glaucous-winged Gulls are probably the least likely of Washington seabirds to suffer population declines as a result of human activities. Their populations have grown substantially over recorded history (Thoreson and Galusha 1971); and while changes in human garbage and sewage disposal methods may limit these food sources, gull populations remain at a high level and may still be increasing. Increases in numbers of large gulls may cause safety problems around airports, and gull predation and competition may reduce populations of other seabirds.

Increases in the size of several populations of large gulls have been attributed to the availability of human food wastes and sewage (Vermeer 1963; Kadlec and Drury 1968; Drury 1979). Both Herring Gulls (Larus argentatus) and Great Black-backed Gulls (Larus marinus) in eastern North America have increased in number

and caused substantial damage to tern and Atlantic Puffin (Fratercula arctica) colonies by usurping optimal nesting habitat, stealing food, and eating eggs and chicks (Nettleship 1972; Nisbet 1973).

Populations of Western Gulls in Washington appear to have increased during the past 100 years, but there are no data to support this from the early explorations on.

The effects of gull populations on other seabirds are difficult to assess. Western Gulls are the most important predators on storm-petrels and Cassin's Auklets on the Farallon Islands in California (Manuwal 1974b; Ainley et al. 1974), and the situation in Washington is likely similar. Large gulls kleptoparasitize cormorants, Rhinoceros Auklets, and probably Tufted Puffins. Rates of incidence are unknown, but are probably higher and effects on other seabird populations more severe at present than in the past when gulls were less abundant.

Large gulls are probably less vulnerable to oil spills than other seabird species nesting in Washington. They are highly mobile and frequently return to land to rest and roost. They are susceptible, like other surface-nesting birds, to disturbances while nesting. Disturbance in a particularly dense colony may result in intraspecific pirating of eggs and cannibalism. Chicks frightened from their territories may be killed by neighboring gulls or become lost and starve. However, with many nesting sites either in refuge status or inaccessible, populations of the large gulls nesting in Washington will probably continue at high

levels. Because of their ability to feed on a wide variety
relatively high reproductive of prey, the large gulls would
potential, an excess of likely make a rapid recovery from
nonbreeding adults, and their any decline.

FIELD NOTES

The authors would appreciate copies of your field notes for updates
