

SLATY-BACKED GULL *Larus schistasaugus*

Conservation Status

ALASKA: None

N. AMERICAN: Insufficient Information

GLOBAL: Least Concern

Breed	Eggs	Incubation	Fledge	Nest	Feeding Behavior	Diet
May-Aug	3-4	25-28 d	40-50 d	rock ledge, tops of rocks	surface dip, shallow dive, scavenging	fish, marine invertebrates, chicks and eggs, garbage

Life History and Distribution

Slaty-backed Gulls (*Larus schistasaugus*) are very large, barrel-bodied gulls with powerful heads, and relatively short, yellow bills. A distinct pattern on the wings makes it easiest to identify them in flight. The back and upper side of the wings are deep slate-gray with a broad, conspicuous, white trailing edge and black in the outer primary feathers. The underwing shows a “string-of-pearls” pattern, considered to be the most characteristic identification feature of this species. Sandwiched between a wide arc of pure white wing linings and the white trailing edge of the wing is a wide row of dark gray formed by the bases of the primary and outermost secondary feathers. A row of black primaries, tipped white and an extra line of translucent spots (the “string of pearls”) crosses the gray. Remaining physical traits of these stout gulls include; pale eyes ringed with pinkish-red; short, dark pink legs; and white tails, bellies, and heads. In winter, adults also acquire gray-brown streaking on the back of the neck.

This species most commonly chooses inaccessible breeding locations along rugged seacoasts and on rocky islets in northeast Asia. Nests are composed of loose vegetation placed on rock ledges and on the tops of rocks. Colonies range in size from a few pairs to over a thousand pairs and are usually located near or among other seabird species.

Fish, marine invertebrates, chicks of other seabird species, and garbage are some of the food items of Slaty-backed Gulls. Diets vary annually and seasonally. Small mammals and berries may also be taken.

Breeding occurs in the Russian Far East along most of the mainland coast, from the Koryak Highlands in the north to the southern boundary of Russia with China. Colonies are common on the Kamchatka Peninsula, but are almost absent on the Komandorskiye Islands. Nesting continues south through the Kuril Islands, Sea of Okhotsk, to Hokkaido and northern Honshu, Japan.

In Alaska, this species is a rare spring migrant and summer and fall visitor along the Bering and Chukchi seas. The first confirmed breeding record for Alaska and North America was from Aniktun Island in July 1996. Aniktun is a low, sandy, barrier island located about two miles south-southwest of Cape Romanzof in the Bering Sea. This area is part of the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge. The nest contained a single egg, and was located among primarily, Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*)



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nests, some Glaucous-winged Gull (*Larus glaucescens*) nests, and a few Glaucous-winged/Glaucous Gull hybrid nests. Two adults and an immature Slaty-backed Gull were also observed in the area. In 1997, a pair of Slaty-backed Gulls was again recorded nesting on Aniktun Island. That nest contained three eggs and was located within a group of about ten Glaucous Gull nests.

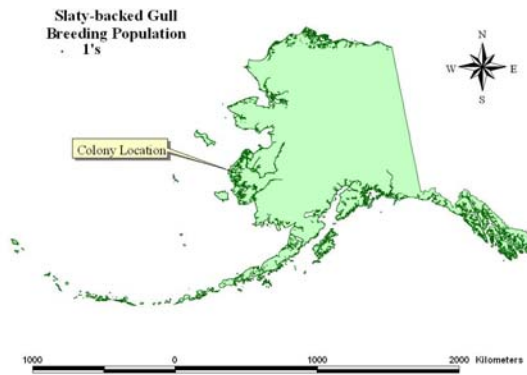
Alaska Seasonal Distribution

AK Region	Sp	S	F	W
Southeastern	-	-	+	+
Southcoastal	+	+	+	+
Southwestern	R	R	R	U
Central	-	-	-	-
Western *	R	R	R	U
Northern	R	R	R	-

C= Common, U= Uncommon, R= Rare, += Casual or accidental, - = Not known to occur, * = Known or probable breeder, Sp= Mar-May, S= June and July, F= Aug-Nov, W= Dec-Feb. © Armstrong 1995.

Wintering of Slaty-backed Gulls occurs along the coasts of northeast Asia from the Kurile Islands south to China. This species frequently wanders east to the Alaskan mainland, Aleutian, and Pribilof islands.

Slaty-backed Gulls are most similar in appearance to the Siberian or Vega form of the Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus vegae*) and the Western Gull (*Larus occidentalis*). Both of these species may be found in western Alaska. The Slaty-backed Gull can usually be distinguished by the very dark mantle color and the



Seabird breeding population maps created from data provided by the Beringian Seabird Colony Catalog Database. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska.

wingtip pattern. First-year birds can be quite difficult to identify. Structurally, the Slaty-backed Gull is slightly thinner billed than the Western Gull and stockier and broader-winged than the Vega form of the Herring Gull.

Population Estimates and Trends

The total world breeding population is estimated at 131,300 pairs (Larisa Zelenskaya, unpubl. data). The Russian population comprises the majority of birds with only 10,000 pairs nesting in Japan.

Shelikan Island in the northern Sea of Okhotsk hosts one of the largest colonies of Slaty-backed Gulls known in the Russian Far East. In 1986, the population was estimated at 2,000 pairs and increased to 5,500 pairs in 2005. Some colonies in the Russian Far East appear to be increasing dramatically. Verkhoturova Island in the Bering Sea, northeast of the Kamchatka Peninsula had 150 pairs in 1975, but by 1994, numbers had reached 4,800 individuals.

Conservation Concerns and Actions

In general, Slaty-backed Gull populations in the northern Sea of Okhotsk and Kamchatka are not currently considered threatened. However, human impacts, both direct and indirect still influence Slaty-backed Gull populations.

There is a large Japanese driftnet fishery operating in the Russian Economic Zone. Observers were placed onboard these vessels to monitor seabird bycatch. Slaty-backed Gulls were among the 25 species of birds that were observed drowned in fish nets. An estimated 42 Slaty-backed Gulls were taken as bycatch in the Japanese driftnet salmon fishery between 1993-1997. These large white-headed gulls have also been recorded as bycatch in the Russian demersal long-line fisheries. In the waters of Eastern Kamchatka, 57 Slaty-backed gulls were caught in 2003 and 38 were taken in 2004.

Harvest of eggs and birds on seabird colonies in the northern Sea of Okhotsk dates back about 3000 years. Today, illegal egg collecting is a common activity of people from nearby villages and crews from visiting vessels. On Umara Island, there were no chicks of Slaty-backed Gulls in 1995 as a result of excessive egg collection. Declining resources for environmental and game inspections in the Russian Far East have allowed an increase in these illegal activities.

In recent years, there has been indiscriminant disposal of garbage, fur farm waste, and fish waste in the northern Sea of Okhotsk. This has provided an additional food

source for Slaty-backed Gulls during periods of poor foraging in autumn and winter. As a result, more gulls have survived and populations of this species have increased in the region. During the breeding season, Slaty-backed Gulls prey on chicks of other seabirds. Predictably, an increase in gulls resulted in an increase in predatory activity in seabird colonies in the region. Thus, indirectly, human activity may have caused an increase in Slaty-backed Gulls, which is having negative impacts on other bird species.

Recommended Management Actions

- Determine the Alaskan breeding population of Slaty-backed Gulls.
 - Reconfirm nesting at Aniktun Island in the Bering Sea.
 - Create a Slaty-Backed Gull “WATCH” enlisting the public, state, other federal agencies, and USFWS biologists involved in monitoring and surveying of other species to report sightings of Slaty-backed Gulls, especially nesting birds, in Alaska.

Regional Contact

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References

Armstrong 1995; Artyukhin and Burkanov 2000; Artyukin *et al.* 2006; Bent 1921; Brazil 1991; Enticott and Tipling 1997; Hasegawa 1984; Hashimoto 1977; IUCN Internet Website (2005); Kessel and Gibson 1978; Kondratyev 1991; Kondratyev *et al.* 2000a; Kondratyev *et al.* 2000b; Kushlan *et al.* 2002; Shuntov 2000; Sibley 2000; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2006; Zelenskaya 2006 unpubl. data.
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