MEW GULL *Larus canus*

Conservation Status

ALASKA: Not At Risk N. AMERICAN: Not Currently At Risk GLOBAL: Least Concern

Breed	Eggs	Incubation	Fledge	Nest	Feeding Behavior	Diet
May-Aug	2-3	24-26 d	30-32 d	ground, shrub, floating vegetation	surface dip, piracy	insects, worms, fish, mollusks, rodents

Life History and Distribution

Mew Gulls *(Larus canus)* are the smallest of the white-headed gulls in North America and are named for the "mewing" sounds of their breeding calls. Formerly they were known as the Short-billed Gull.

Across the extensive breeding range of the Mew Gull three distinct forms are recognized and sometimes considered different species. The American Ornithologists' Union (1998) recognized these forms as subspecies. The three groups include the North American birds (*Larus canus brachyrhynchus)*, the European and central Asian breeders (*Larus canus canus)*, and the northeast Asian breeders *(Larus canus kamtschatschensis)*. The North American birds are the smallest of the races, and have a relatively thinner bill.

North American breeding birds are solid white above and below, with white tails, and light gray wings and backs. Although solid white in summer, their heads and the back of the neck are washed with brown in winter. The eyes are large, dark, and rimmed in red. Thin and solid yellow, their unmarked bills distinguish Mew Gulls from all other Alaskan gulls (except Kittiwakes, which have a red dot on their lower bill). Their legs are a dull yellow and the wings have black tips with prominent white spots, which may appear as a white band. Adults of both sexes appear similar. Many stages of juvenile plumage precede attainment of adult plumage in the third year.

These noisy, social birds are primarily scavengers. They are also known to hunt insects, earthworms, mollusks, crustaceans, and occasionally young birds and mice. To break open hard shells, they drop prey, such as sea urchins, onto the beach. Grain, garbage, and fish are also included in the diet. Large groups sometimes congregate at garbage dumps, sewage treatment plants, and fish docks to scavenge and pirate food from each other.

Mew Gulls build nests in conifers, on islands in marshes (in vegetation), and on the ground. Adults aggressively defend their nests, often diving and swooping upon intruders.

The breeding range extends in North America from Kotzebue Sound in northwest Alaska, east through the Yukon River valley (south of the Brooks Range) to the Yukon and Northwest Territories of Canada. South of these localities, it breeds throughout most of Alaska, south to the Alaska Peninsula (from Vicar River west to Isabel Bay, Morzhovoi Bay, and Dolgoi Island). It also occurs in coastal Southeast Alaska, east in Canada to central Mackenzie, south to northern Saskatchewan, and along the coast to southern British Columbia.

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Wintering occurs along the Pacific Coast from Southeast Alaska south to Baja California. In Alaska, the Mew Gull also winters around Kodiak Island, on the Kenai Peninsula, west (very locally) to Bristol Bay, and north to the Tanana River.

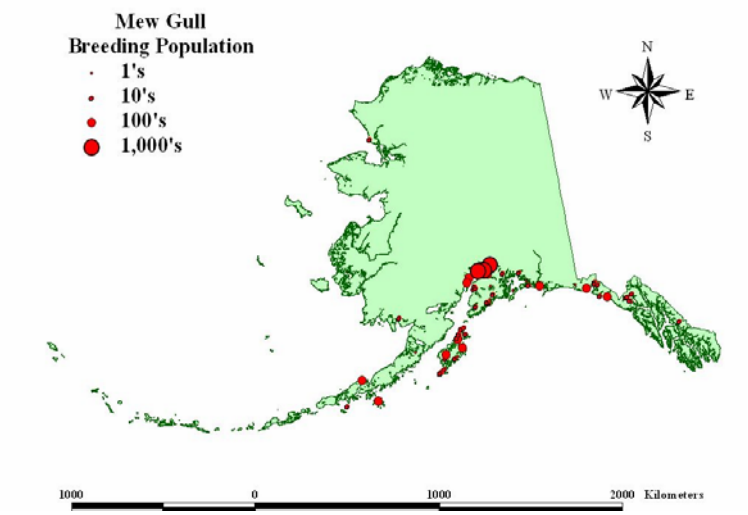
Alaska Seasonal Distribution

AK Region	Sp	S	F	W
Southeastern *	C	C	C	C
Southcoastal *	C	C	C	C
Southwestern *	C	C	C	C
Central *	C	C	C	-
Western *	C	C	C	-
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.

Population Estimates and Trends

No precise data exist for total numbers of Mew Gulls. The global population estimates range from 585,000 to one million pairs. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



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

Beringian Seabird Colony lists 69 colonies with approximately 14,400 individuals. This includes colonies only on coastal lands and islands in the eastern Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska. North American Breeding Bird Surveys conducted in Alaska and Canada report high numbers on a regular basis. The greatest abundance has been recorded on the Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) where the annual count total for all CBCs is about 50,000 individuals. There are no systematic data for trends from North America.

Conservation Concerns and Actions

This species does not appear to be threatened in any part of its range. There are no confirmed data, but the influences on population numbers are probably adequate food resources, nesting habitat, harsh weather, and human disturbance.

When threatened by predators, especially introduced species, reproductive success suffers. Mew Gulls' choices of nesting sites reflect predation pressures. Introduced predators include domestic dogs, cats, and red *(Vulpes vulpes)* and arctic *(Alopex lagopus)* foxes.

Mew Gulls are vulnerable to oil pollution and were negatively impacted by the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska.

In Alaska, adult Mew Gulls and their eggs are still taken by Native subsistence hunters. Between the early 1990s and 2000, about 145 adult Mew Gulls and almost 6,689 eggs were taken annually. Effects on the populations are not directly known, but current harvests are not thought to cause severe impacts.

Mew Gulls often congregate on airfields to feed on soil invertebrates and to nest in grassy areas around runways. This interaction has had negative impacts on both gulls and human safety. Lake Hood Airport in Anchorage, Alaska has had problems with Mew Gulls and has instituted several measures to control gull populations in and around the airport. Control measures included introducing taller, thicker grass to deter nesting; the use of loud noises to scare off gulls; intentional human disturbance to thwart nesting efforts; the relocation of nesting pairs; and placing monofilament line over areas to deter gulls from landing.

Where fed on a regular basis, Mew Gulls may become tame. However, if threatened around nesting areas, birds will retaliate with aerial attacks creating another potential urban problem.

Recommended Management Actions

- Establish a monitoring program.
- Determine wintering areas and migration routes.
- Support efforts to minimize the incidence of fuel spills near breeding and wintering areas and measure contaminants in Mew Gull eggs.
- Work with the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council (AMBCC) to monitor subsistence use of Mew Gulls.
- Continue efforts to minimize negative human/gull interactions.

Regional Contact

Branch Chief, Nongame Migratory Birds, Migratory Bird Management, USFWS, 1011 E. Tudor Rd., Anchorage, Alaska 99503
Telephone (907) 768-3444

References

American Ornithologists' Union 1998; Armstrong 1995; IUCN Internet Website (2005); Kushlan *et al.* 2002; Moskoff and Bevier 2002; Stephensen and Irons 2003; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2006, 2002; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Internet Website (2005).

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