

MASSACHUSETTS' NEWEST IMMIGRANT: THE COMMON BLACK-HEADED GULL

by Jane Cumming

A hundred years ago the Common Black-headed Gull was unknown on this side of the Atlantic. This Eurasian species was first recorded in the New World in Barbados in 1911, and the first North American record north of the Mexican border was of one at Newburyport in 1930. (There is a Mexican record from 1912.) Massachusetts scored another "United States first" with a breeding pair at Monomoy in 1984, although a dozen nests have been found in Canada since 1977. This gull's spread to North America can be traced more readily in Massachusetts than anywhere else in the United States, making it of particular interest to local birders.

A number of questions arise whenever a species begins to appear regularly in a new region. Where do the North American birds originate? Having arrived, do they migrate exclusively up and down the American coast, or is there a continuing two-way exchange across the Atlantic? Are we seeing isolated occurrences involving consistently small numbers of birds, or are we witnessing a new and growing trend? Is the species experiencing a population explosion and a corresponding range expansion in Europe? Is the bird genuinely occurring more often, or should we credit observer awareness and improving identification skills for the increased number of sightings? This article will propose answers to some of these questions and perhaps stimulate further discussion about the status and movements of the species in Massachusetts.

Common Black-headed Gulls have been expanding their breeding range to the north and west in Europe since about 1850. They first reached Iceland in 1911 and are now well established there with a breeding population of some ten thousand pairs. Reasons put forward to explain this expansion have included the warming of the North Atlantic climate, reduced persecution, increased food sources, particularly in urban areas, and the growing number of man-made reservoirs that provide safe roosts (Cramp 1983). Veit (1983 unpublished manuscript) deduces from the early Caribbean records that some birds may have arrived in America via a southern route from West Africa, and Bond (1980) lists four records from the West Indies, three of which occurred in winter. Richard Forster reports two January 1986 records of his own and suspects that many others go unrecorded in tropical America. The recent and more numerous Canadian immigrants, however, probably hale from Iceland's growing population (Cramp 1983).

Veit (1983) suggests that the numbers in North America appear to have stabilized below a peak reached in the early 1970s. In part, he attributes the

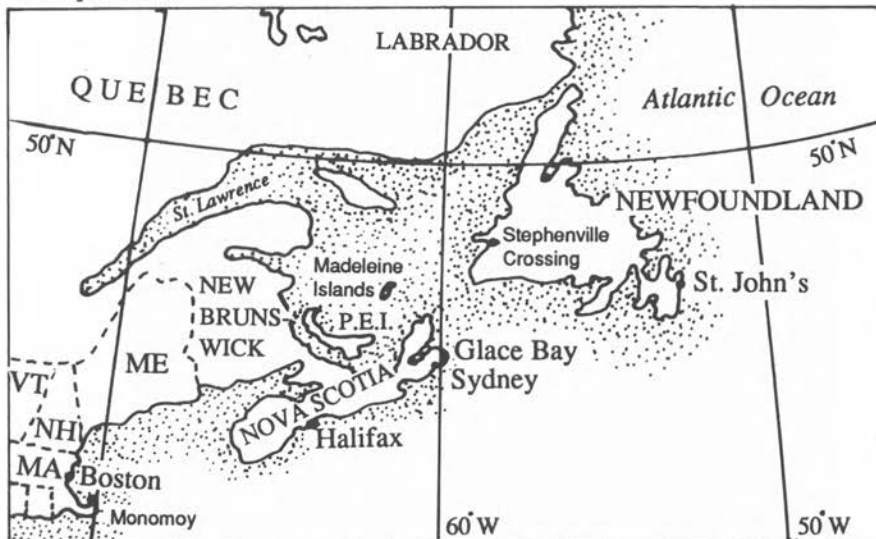
decrease in Massachusetts to harbor cleanups in Boston and Newburyport since that time. What factors may be at work elsewhere, if this decrease is general, are open to conjecture. It remains to be seen whether the previous maximum counts will be topped and whether the species will eventually establish itself as a permanent American breeding species, since a dozen nesting records cannot be said to constitute an established breeding population.

Summary of range expansion of the Common Black-headed Gull.

- 1850** Range expansion begins in western Europe.
- 1867** Norway: first breeding record.
- 1880s** Following a decline, numbers increase in Britain.
- 1911** Iceland: first breeding record.
- 1911** November, first New World record; recovery in Barbados of a bird banded in Kaliningrad, East Prussia, in July 1911.
- 1912** February, one at Vera Cruz, Mexico.
- 1930** Icelandic breeding colony established and starting to grow.
- 1930** January, adult male collected at Newburyport, Massachusetts.
- 1933** Dutch-ringed bird recovered in Labrador.
- 1941** More North American occurrences.
- 1962-63** Winter population of about 400 birds in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia (Cramp 1983).
- 1969** Greenland: first breeding record.
- 1971** Immatures ringed in Iceland are recovered in Greenland and Newfoundland.
- 1970s** First half of decade, peak abundance in northeastern North America.
- 1972** December 17, high count of 26 at Wollaston, Massachusetts.
- 1975** March 25, high count of 17 at Newburyport, Massachusetts.
- 1977** Two nests found at Stephenville Crossing, Newfoundland: five adults accompanied by one recently fledged young.
- 1979** May 21, high count of 25 on Attu Island in Alaska.
- 1981** Five nests found on Madeleine Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Quebec; success unknown.
- 1982** Five nests found on Madeleine Islands, Quebec: six chicks and juveniles observed.
- 1982** One adult summered at Monomoy Island, Massachusetts.
- 1983** One adult defended territory on Monomoy.
- 1984** Pair attempted to nest on Monomoy. Nest with two eggs washed out by rain as the chicks were hatching; both died.
- 1985 on** Individuals continue to summer on Monomoy.
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This gull, like many others, has probably benefited immensely from man's impact on the environment. Gulls worldwide haunt garbage dumps, especially in areas of the Old World where kites and vultures have been exterminated, leaving an ecological niche that gulls have readily filled. Gulls also follow fishing boats, a habit that may explain the increasing vagrancy of some species in recent years. Cornwall in England, which has many fishing ports, has become renowned in recent winters as one of the best counties to search for larid rarities, probably because gulls follow the boats in from the Atlantic and Arctic oceans. Such behavior provides an excellent opportunity for successful species to discover and exploit new feeding, wintering, and even breeding areas. It may well be that Icelandic fishing boats led the first Common Black-headed Gulls into Canadian waters.

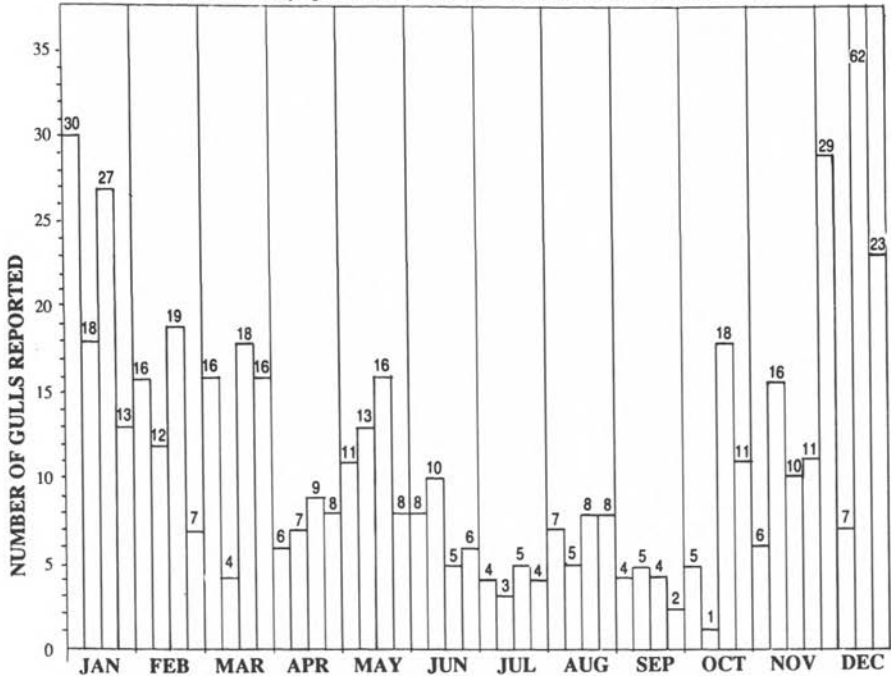
Most records of this species occur along the coast. In Britain, no part of which is more than seventy miles from the sea, flocks of black-headed gulls are commonly found at city dumps, following the plough in farming country, or joining the huge gull roosts at inland reservoirs. In seaside towns they frequent public parks where they join the gangs of panhandling pigeons, though there are always plenty around the waterfront as well. This may represent an expansion away from their preferred coastal habitat owing to population pressure, but North American birds, too, might in time move inland to exploit other food sources. An inland record at Southwick, Massachusetts, on October 21, 1987, is worthy of note.



The map shows the known North American breeding sites: Stephenville Crossing, Madeleine Islands, and Monomoy. The main wintering areas, as pinpointed by high Christmas bird counts, are also indicated.

**Seasonal Distribution of Black-headed Gull Reports in Massachusetts
1979-1987**

(In monthly quartiles, 1-8, 9-15, 16-23, 24-end of the month)



The seasonal pattern observed in western Europe is reflected in the Massachusetts records (see figure above). Adults return to the breeding colonies in March-April, and postbreeding dispersal begins in July with the main influx to wintering areas occurring from mid-September to late October. The general trend in Europe is for coastal birds to move inland after nesting so that the direction of the movement is variable (Cramp 1983). Yearlings do not return to the colonies. Perhaps they wander farther from the breeding area than adults in order to check conditions in new areas. My observations on Boston's North Shore, where this species occurs regularly, suggest a similar pattern, which is borne out by an analysis of *Bird Observer* records.

Massachusetts black-headed gull records fall into the following groups:

1. passage migrants, sighted occasionally in flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls that move through the area in spring and fall;
2. wintering individuals, which turn up later and leave earlier than the passage birds; and
3. summering birds, including breeders, unmated adults, and loafing immatures that may be exploring new territory. Summer records are rarer than they used to be on the North Shore, but the Monomoy breeding attempts make any bird summering in our area worth watching closely.

Christmas Bird Count Totals for Common Black-headed Gulls
Massachusetts*

COUNT CIRCLE

| YEAR | COUNT CIRCLE | | | | | | | | | | TOTAL | |
|---------|-----------------|----------|----------|-------------------|------------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------|-------------|----------|-------|--------|
| | Buzzards Bay | Cape Ann | Cape Cod | Greater Boston | Marshfield | Martha's Vineyard | Mid Cape Cod | Nantucket | Newburyport | Plymouth | | Quincy |
| 1987-88 | 1 | 2 | - | 12 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 2 | 17 |
| 1986-87 | - | - | - | 12 | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | 1 | 14 |
| 1985-86 | - | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | - | 1 | - | - | - | 3 | 10 |
| 1984-85 | - | - | 1 | 6 | - | 4 | 1 | - | 1 | - | 1 | 14 |
| 1983-84 | 2 | - | 1 | 6 | - | 1 | - | - | 1 | - | - | 11 |
| 1982-83 | - | 1 | 1 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 1 | 3 |
| 1981-82 | 1 | - | - | 4 | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | - | 6 |
| 1980-81 | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | - | 3 | - | - | - | 4 |
| 1979-80 | - | - | 6 | - | - | 1 | - | 1 | - | - | - | 8 |
| 1978-79 | 1 | - | 1 | 3 | - | - | - | 2 | - | - | 2 | 9 |
| 1977-78 | 1 | - | 1 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 8 | 10 |
| 1976-77 | - | 1 | 1 | 3 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 8 | 13 |
| 1975-76 | - | - | 3 | 3 | - | - | - | - | 2 | - | - | 8 |
| 1974-75 | 2 | - | 3 | 4 | - | 1 | - | - | 7 | - | 10 | 27 |
| 1973-74 | 2 | - | 3 | 15 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 3 | 23 |
| 1972-73 | 1 | - | 2 | 1 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 26 | 30 |
| 1971-72 | - | - | 1 | - | - | 1 | - | - | 2 | - | 3 | 7 |

* Reports from other New England Christmas Bird Counts were as follows: 1986-87, 2 in ME, 3 in NH, 2 in RI; 1984-85, 1 in NH, 2 in RI; 1983-84, 2 in ME, 2 in RI; 1982-83, 1 in ME; 1981-82, 2 in RI; 1980-81, 1 in RI; 1979-80, 3 in ME, 1 in NY; 1978-79, 2 in CT, 2 in ME; 1975-76, 2 in ME, 3 in RI; 1974-75, 3 in RI; 1971-72, 1 in CT, 1 in RI.

Christmas Bird Count Totals for Common Black-headed Gulls
Canadian Atlantic Provinces

| YEAR | COUNT CIRCLE | | | | | TOTAL* |
|---------|--------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------|--------|
| | St. John's Nfld | Glace Bay/ Sydney, NS | Halifax, NS East | Halifax, NS West | Other | |
| 1986-87 | 32 | - | 58 | 18 | 4 | 112 |
| 1985-86 | 42 | - | 60 | 39 | 26 | 167 |
| 1984-85 | 81 | - | 54 | 4 | 9 | 148 |
| 1983-84 | 50 | 6 | 88 | 27 | 10 | 181 |
| 1982-83 | 25 | 24 | 83 | 8 | 6 | 146 |
| 1981-82 | 46 | 15 | 93 | 1 | 6 | 161 |
| 1980-81 | 62 | 20 | 20 | 24 | - | 126 |
| 1979-80 | 13 | 2 | 21 | 1 | 11 | 48 |
| 1978-79 | 5 | 4 | 12 | 4 | - | 25 |
| 1977-78 | 34 | 6 | 19 | 3 | 4 | 66 |
| 1976-77 | 3 | 9 | 15 | 20 | 3 | 50 |
| 1975-76 | 4 | 10 | 13 | 26 | 1 | 54 |
| 1974-75 | 11 | 6 | 23 | 8 | 10 | 58 |
| 1973-74 | 26 | 63 | 4 | 8 | 11 | 112 |
| 1972-73 | 9 | 47 | 8 | 21 | 2 | 87 |
| 1971-72 | 27 | 10 | 10 | 24 | - | 71 |

*The TOTAL column represents the complete count for Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick.

Well over a hundred Common Black-headed Gulls are regularly recorded on Christmas Bird Counts from the Canadian Atlantic Provinces. It has been suggested, given the numbers of migrating and wintering birds observed in North America, that there may be an undiscovered breeding colony in one of the uninhabited regions of Canada. If not, there must be a considerable annual influx from the European colonies. Where and when do these birds join the flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls with which they generally arrive in New England? The breeding ranges of the two species are completely allopatric, meaning that they do not overlap. Bonaparte's Gulls move east in the fall from their tundra nesting grounds, and there are none in the eastern provinces of Canada, where presumably black-headed gulls would arrive from Iceland. Veit (1983) does not suppose that these black-headed gulls necessarily travel with Bonaparte's Gulls, and certainly they are more likely to be found with winter flocks of Ring-billed Gulls after cold spells have driven most Bonaparte's Gulls farther south. My observations on the North Shore lead me to suggest that the birds seen here in

August roost, feed, and perhaps travel onward with flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls, but our wintering birds either arrive separately or part company quickly with Bonaparte's Gulls as the latter move through our region in the fall. There seems to be a gap between a spate of passage birds and the arrival of the winter residents. In spring, the black-headed gulls depart in late March (their destination at present unknown) before Bonaparte's Gulls arrive in any numbers on spring passage, and I presume the two species travel separately.

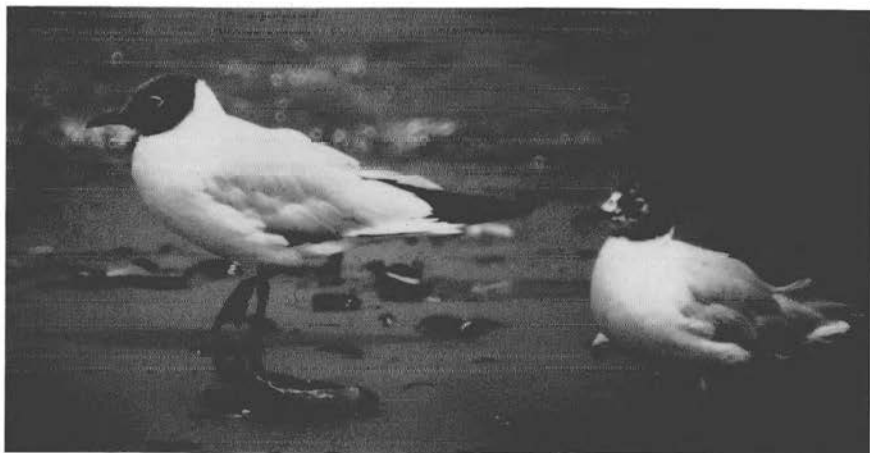
It is clear, even when allowance is made for Christmas Count and New Year bias, that the majority of our Common Black-headed Gulls arrive in mid-October and leave at the end of March. The consistent midsummer figures mainly represent a handful of birds present at the same sites throughout the breeding season. It would appear that they disperse in July and that there is a small August passage during which birds turn up briefly at new places. The September lows indicate that these birds move away well before the arrival of the wintering population. Similarly, there appears to be a spring passage in May.

Vagrant Common Black-headed Gulls in the western states generally occur with flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls (Roberson 1980). Being widespread across Europe and Asia, they occur as rare but regular spring migrants on the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands. Away from Alaska there have been only eight records (Roberson 1980), of which those in the Pacific Northwest are dated between summer and mid-November. The California records, on the other hand, fall between Christmas and April. Roberson (1980) suggests the possibility of an eastern origin for these birds, citing the occurrence in two consecutive years of both a Common Black-headed Gull and a Little Gull in a flock of Bonaparte's Gulls wintering in the Central Valley of California. This hypothesis, however, needs further substantiation.

Identification and plumage variations.

The surest identification feature for Common Black-headed Gulls at all ages and seasons is the bill: deep red on adults with a black tip in winter and dusky-orange to pale yellow with a black tip on immatures. The bill is a little longer and sturdier than that of a Bonaparte's Gull and is not so fine and pointed but is more daggerlike in shape. In spring the adult's hood is also distinctive, not only in being chocolate brown rather than charcoal gray to black, but also in its extent. It hardly covers the crown, leaving the nape white, with the demarcation line rising almost vertically up the side of the neck. The hood shape is thus quite different, being more sharply angled than the hood of a Bonaparte's Gull. Beware, however, of Bonaparte's Gulls in molt.

To distinguish between these two species at other seasons, the observer must rely on subtler features. In flight, the black-headed gull's greater size is usually apparent, and the diagnostic dark underside of the inner primaries can be picked out from a feeding flock of Bonaparte's Gulls at quite a distance.



*Summer adult gulls: Common Black-headed (left) and Bonaparte's (right)
August, Winthrop, MA*

Photo by J. Cumming



*Adult in changing plumage
August*

Winthrop, MA

Photo by J. Cumming



*Winter adult, November, England
Photo by J. Cumming*



*Immature, September, Copenhagen
Photo by C. W. Leahy (courtesy MAS)*

Bonaparte's Gulls show bright white underwings with a neat black border to the primaries at all ages. On the water, the bill is again the black-headed gull's most obvious distinguishing feature. On land, the black-headed gull's greater height and bulk are noticeable; it stands a good head taller than a Bonaparte's Gull, assuming the terrain is smooth enough to allow a direct comparison between neighboring birds, and it has comparatively longer legs. In addition, its longer head presents a more bullnecked appearance, whereas the head of a Bonaparte's Gull is small and rounded; this is apparent in the accompanying photographs.

If the birds in a flock are tucked, it can be worth checking through the forest of orange-pink legs for a dark red pair; this can be a surprisingly effective method of finding a black-headed gull in a mixed roost. Later in the year the black-headed's legs are a lighter red, but by then the legs of a Bonaparte's Gull are pale pink or blackish. Field guides often mention that the mantle of the Common Black-headed Gull is paler than that of the Bonaparte's, but shades of gray are notoriously difficult to discern in the field, especially in bright sunlight, and I have never found this distinction particularly useful.

It is interesting to note the frequent occurrence of rosy-breasted Common Black-headed Gulls in Massachusetts. These birds show a flush from throat to vent that may be anywhere from pale rose to a deep flamingo pink. In Britain such birds are rare enough to generate letters to *British Birds*, but they are common among Scandinavian populations. Storkersen (reply to *British Birds* 1986) writes that in central Norway, up to half of the birds seen during the spring migration are pink-tinged, with some also occurring in summer and a few in winter. He notes that this population is 97 percent migratory, in contrast to the largely sedentary population in Britain and farther south. The percentage of pink gulls occurring in New England may eventually offer another clue to the origin of these American birds, so the pink flush or lack of it is worth noting in local records.

Several theories have been postulated to account for this flush. Storkersen (1986 letter) thinks the cause is dietary, as in flamingos, and ascribes the color to the spring bloom of crustaceans in Norwegian waters that coincides with the birds' passage through the region and with their spring body molt. Alternatively, it may be a type of "cosmetic" pigmentation caused by secretions from the preen gland, presumably varying by race or region.

Where to observe this species in Massachusetts.

Common Black-headed Gulls used to winter regularly at Wollaston Beach and Newburyport Harbor until these areas were cleaned up. It is to be hoped that the improvements now being made to waste-water treatment in Boston Harbor do not drive away the Winthrop birds! For the time being, one of the easiest ways to study Common Black-headed Gulls in Massachusetts at close range is to spend time at Lewis Lake in Winthrop, especially at high tide between

December and March. Here, a flock of predominantly Ring-billed Gulls generally includes from six to ten black-headed gulls from October through the winter, but they are most reliably seen after the pond freezes. When the tide is out, the birds can often be found along the tide line on Winthrop Beach. In March 1988 the five adults and three first-winter birds that were present exhibited at least five variations in plumage.

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JANE CUMMING has birded since childhood in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. In 1982 she moved to America in order to get to know better the Nearctic avifauna and took a computer programming job in a Boston financial house. She has been active in birding circles in New England, making substantial contributions to the bird records for Boston's north shore area and for Winthrop, where she lives. Jane describes herself as a "transatlantic vagrant [who] expected to find her way home within a year or two but instead formed a pair-bond with a native and has been resident for six years." *Bird Observer* hopes she remains transplanted. Jane's permanent mailing address in this country is 172 Kent Farm Road, Hampstead, NH 03841.

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