

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*



Folk Name: Gray Gull

Status: Winter Resident

Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

Habitat: Open water of lakes and rivers, landfills

The Herring Gull is a widespread gull that breeds throughout the northern United States and Canada. The southern extent of its breeding range is now the coast of North Carolina. This breeding range expansion was first discovered on Gull Island in the Pamlico Sound in 1962, and the resident population has been growing since.

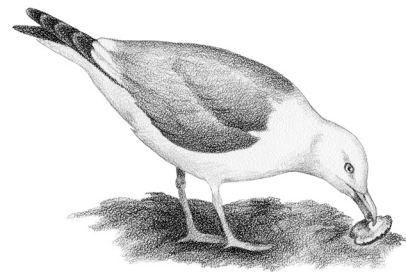
Herring Gulls are a regular fixture on all Carolina beaches. At 25 inches, this gull is 2 inches larger than an Osprey, over 7 ½ inches larger than a Ring-billed Gull, and 8 ½ inches larger than the common Laughing Gull; thus, they are quite noticeable. In fact, they are generally the largest bird on the beach unless a Great Black-backed Gull is present. Herring Gulls can be found each winter visiting large inland lakes and rivers throughout the Carolina Piedmont, where they are usually seen with Ring-billed Gulls.

In the late 1920s, A.L. Pickens, who later taught at Queens College in Charlotte, reported the collection of specimens of Herring Gull in upper South Carolina. He noted this gull had become an “occasional” visitor to the large man-made bodies of water created from the recent development of large hydroelectric dams. Pickens was one of the first biologists in our region to report that this large landscape-scale modification of habitat had resulted in the increase of many species of waterbirds above the fall line. The *Statesville Record and Landmark* reported that a Herring Gull was shot by Mr. Wiley Mullis of Union Grove on April 18, 1930, on Hunting Creek. Mullis had mistaken the bird for a hawk.

Herring Gulls were first regularly reported by birders in the Central Carolinas beginning around 1950. Alexander Sprunt reported a Herring Gull had been sighted in Lancaster County before 1949. John Trott and others



Herring Gull. (Jeff Lemons)



reported this gull on Stanly Christmas Bird Counts from 1954 onward. Mecklenburg Audubon members found the first Herring Gull in Mecklenburg County at the city garbage dump while conducting the 1958 Charlotte Christmas Bird Count. A total count of 30 was reported on the Stanly Spring Bird Count held May 7, 1966, which is a curiously large count for that time and could possibly represent a typographical error. Allen Bryan reported a total of 45 Herring Gulls on Moss Lake near Shelby on September 22, 1989, after Hurricane Hugo blew through the area, and David Wright found seven on Lake Norman that day.

Today, there are flocks of thousands of gulls wintering on Lake Norman and our other large lakes. These flocks are mostly made up of Ring-billed Gulls, but there are always a small percentage of Herring Gulls mixed in, estimated at less than 1%. Herring Gulls begin to arrive in the region in September, and some stay through early May. We have one June record (possibly an injured bird), from the Town of York in York County, and we have no records from July or August.

Most of our counts have numbered fewer than 30 birds. Judy Walker reported our highest count, a group of about 120 birds. These were mostly immature birds found mixed in with a flock of Ring-billed Gulls roosting near the Lake Norman dam on January 12, 2014. On December 29, 2015, Dwayne Martin shared this comment about Herring Gull numbers in the region:

Lori Owenby and I found at least 13 Herring Gulls on Lake Hickory, just behind the Oxford Dam this afternoon. Mostly 1st and 2nd year birds, with a couple adults. This is by far the most Herring Gulls I have seen on the lake at one time. May not seem like a lot to those of you down east, but this far west, this a large number. Seems odd to see this many without any real cold anywhere in the eastern US.

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative warns that the breeding population of the Herring Gull is declining throughout its range.