

## Laughing Gull *Leucophaeus atricilla*



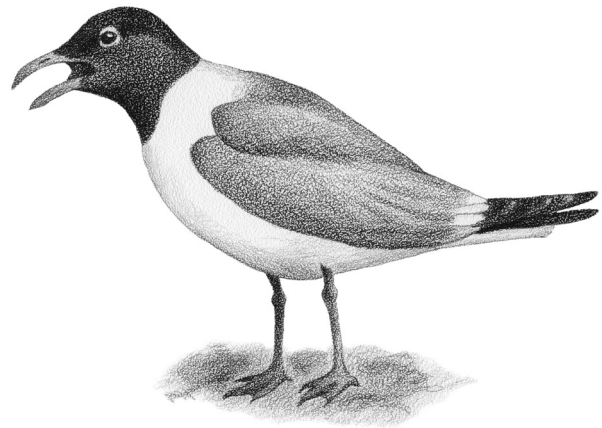
**Folk Name:** Blackhead, Fool Gull  
**Status:** Migrant, Winter Visitor  
**Abundance:** Rare to Uncommon  
**Habitat:** Open water of lakes and rivers

The Laughing Gull is a common, well-known bird of the Carolina coast. Every tourist visiting the beach is familiar with these black-hooded birds, their noisy laughs, and their ocean-side antics while they search for food. This bird is such an iconic bird of the beach that many Carolina cottages, restaurants, taverns, and other businesses are named after them. At 16 ½ inches, the Laughing Gull is just an inch smaller than the also common Ring-billed Gull. The Laughing Gull, Herring Gull, and Great Black-backed Gull are the only gulls that breed in North Carolina, and the Laughing Gull is the only gull that bred here prior to the 1960s.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, back-to-back catastrophes wreaked havoc on North Carolina's Laughing Gulls. First, market hunters targeted this bird along much of the East Coast, shooting scores each year and selling their valuable feathers for use in the millinery trade. Fortunately, the state's "Audubon Law," passed in 1903, provided some relief from this indiscriminate hunting. Second, the entire breeding population of this gull in North Carolina was decimated after a devastating hurricane-strength storm wreaked havoc on colonial nesting sites from July 28 through August 1, 1907. The storm was described as "more destructive to the breeding sea-birds than any storm of which we have had previous experience in the territory. ... The six, low, sandy islands occupied by the birds were completely swept by the waves, and all the eggs and young birds, as yet unable to fly, were carried away." Fortunately, the colony survived both calamities, and over a century later, nesting colonies of Laughing Gulls are still present in the state today.

Though common on the coast, the Laughing Gull is a rare to uncommon transient in the Carolina Piedmont. We have records of this bird in the region for all months except February and March. Many of our records appear to be the result of coastal storm activity. Hurricane Hugo deposited an astounding total of 285 Laughing Gulls on Moss Lake and several other spots near Shelby in Cleveland County on September 22, 1989. These birds were reported by Allen Bryan. David Wright tallied six on Lake Norman on that same day, but the following day only one Laughing Gull was found on the lake. The majority of these birds apparently dispersed immediately after the storm passed.

In both Carolinas in the spring of 1990, "there was a remarkable influx of this species to inland lakes on 28



April," presumably this influx was storm related as well. David Wright found a flock of seven at the Charlotte Water Reservoir on 28 April, Kevin Hennings reported a Laughing Gull on 29 April on Lake Wylie in York County, and Heathy Walker reported one in Charlotte on 10 May.

Other records from the end of the twentieth century include: one in Mecklenburg County on November 10, 1991, an unusual winter sighting of a single bird in Mecklenburg County on Lake Norman on January 3, 1993, and a flock of five Laughing Gulls videotaped while flying over Lake Norman on October 17, 1993. Four of these birds were described as "1st year"-plumaged birds. Another lone winter bird, this time seen in York County on Lake Wylie, on December 17, 1994. Three were seen on Lake Norman on September 4, 1995. A flock of 12 was spotted on Lake Norman on August 27, 1999. It was noted at the time that the presence of this flock was probably not related to the passage of a storm.

There have been numerous records of Laughing Gull in the Central Carolinas since the turn of the twenty-first century. Individual Laughing Gulls were seen at the Oxford Dam on Lake Hickory on May 7, 2002; May 18, 2003; and June 13, 2004. Taylor Piephoff found "a sleeping and somewhat tattered" storm-blown Laughing Gull resting on a Lake Norman dock on July 2, 2003. A total of six were seen on Lake Norman on September 11, 2004, after Tropical Storm Frances rolled through. Two were found there on September 29, 2004, and one was found on Lake Hickory on November 5, 2004. One Laughing Gull was seen on Lake Norman on September 18, 2005.

There were two reports from 2008. Ricky Davis found a Laughing Gull on Blewett Falls Lake on 4 May, and Kevin Metcalf saw one at Lake Don T. Howell in Cabarrus County on 27 September.

Dwayne Martin has provided many of the most recent sight reports of Laughing Gull in the region. On May 6, 2013, he found two adults in breeding plumage on Lake Hickory, and on May 31, 2013, he found three immature birds on the same lake feeding on a catfish carcass. On August 12, 2014, Martin reported an unprecedented total count of 15 Laughing Gulls on Lake Hickory in a single day, writing: "Fifteen Laughing Gulls on Lake Hickory in one day, wow!!! I'm guessing the storms knocked them down." Five were still present on Lake Hickory

in Alexander County on August 15, 2014. These birds were seen feeding with four Caspian Terns. Martin was surprised that the birds had remained in the region, noting correctly that these gulls are "almost always one day wonders" here. The following spring, Dwayne Martin observed a Laughing Gull in breeding plumage flying with four Forster's Terns on Lookout Shoals Lake on April 14, 2015. He noted the bird's "black head, red bill, white eye arcs" and the fact that it had very little white on the wing tips.