

Ring-billed Gull

Larus delawarensis



Often referred to as a seagull, the Ring-billed Gull is, instead, a freshwater species that is most widespread and abundant in the prairies of the western United States and Canada. Its range continues eastward through the Great Lakes, along the St. Lawrence River, and northward to Newfoundland. This medium-sized, white-headed gull began nesting on islands in Lake Champlain during the late 1940s, and numbers grew rapidly for the next several decades. Like most gulls, the ring-billed is an opportunistic feeder, and is found commonly around landfills, dumpsters, restaurants, and waterfront parks. Its bread-and-butter foraging sites are farm fields, where earthworms, rodents, snakes, and grains are readily available. On Lake Champlain, Ring-billed Gulls can sometimes be seen in large flocks feeding on dense schools of rainbow smelt; at other times they have been observed hawking large insects.

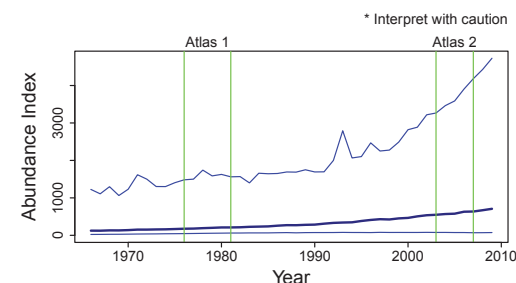
Ring-bills nest in colonies, usually with other species of gulls, terns, cormorants and herons. They lay eggs in a shallow depression on the ground lined with grasses and forbs. Nests may be so dense that adjacent incubating birds almost touch each other. Nesting colonies are almost always located on islands with sparse vegetation and no resident predatory mammals. It is not unusual to see adults congregate on Lake Champlain nesting areas as early as mid-March; they lay eggs by the third week in April. Peak hatching occurs about a month later (D. E. Capen unpubl. data).

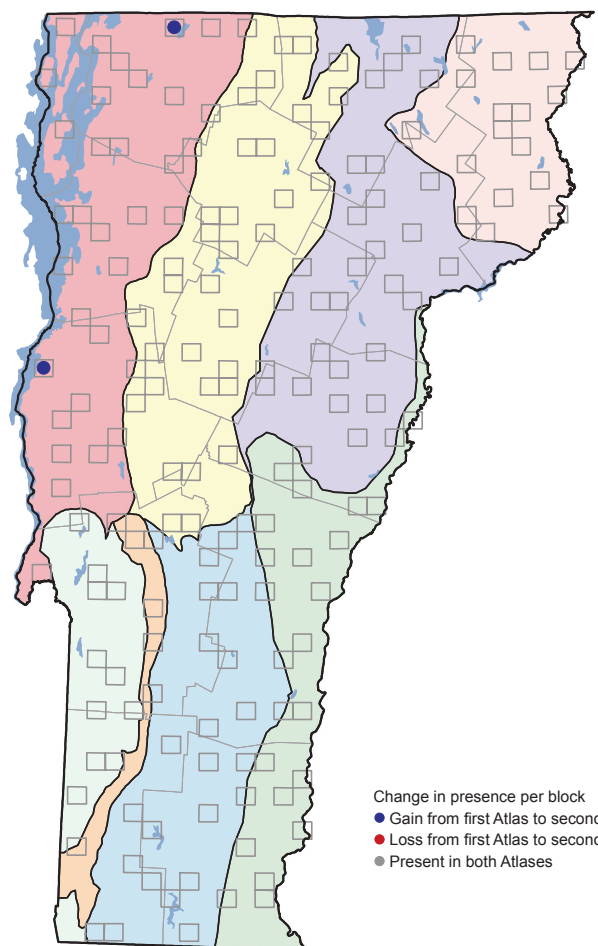
In both the first and second Vermont atlases, Ring-billed Gulls were confirmed as nesting only in the Champlain Valley, confined to several islands in Lake Champlain. Young Island, a state-owned wildlife management area, hosts the greatest number of breeding Ring-billed Gulls: more than 10,000 nests annually for the past three decades (D. E. Capen unpubl. data). The species also nests on Papasquash Island and nearby Rock Island, both owned by the Green Mountain Audubon Society. Atlas data probably represent the distribution of ring-bills in Vermont quite well. Breeding confirmation is difficult to overlook because the birds nest in large num-

bers in open sites that are easily observed. Observations of adults during the breeding season in atlas blocks away from Lake Champlain are most likely foraging birds from breeding colonies at the lake. A study in the early 1980s found that ring-bills nesting on Lake Champlain islands foraged widely across northern and central Vermont (D. E. Capen unpubl. data).

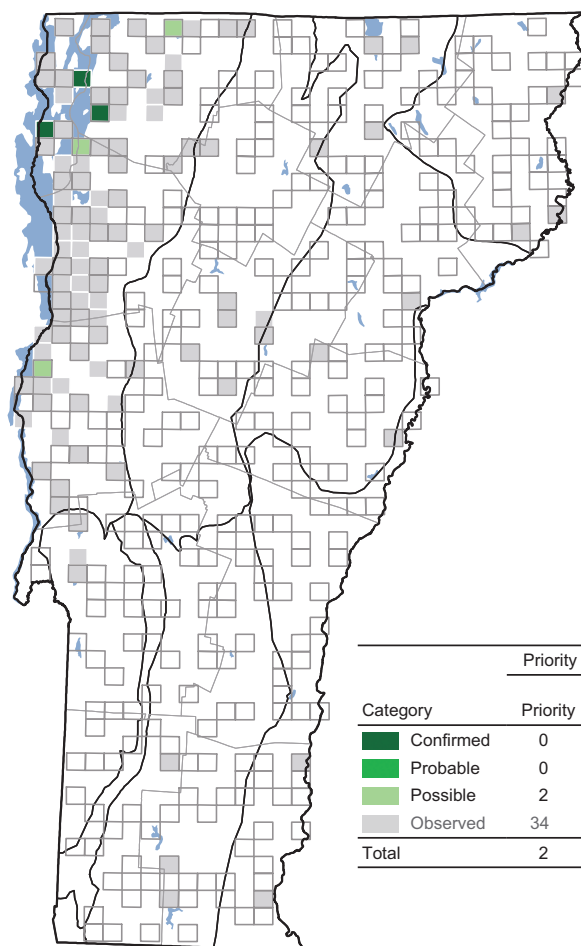
Nesting gulls on Lake Champlain have been censused periodically since the 1950s. The breeding population of Ring-billed Gulls peaked in the early to mid-1980s, when almost 28,000 nests were counted on Young Island and nearby Four Brothers Islands in New York. Since then, numbers of nesting pairs have declined slowly to approximately 20,000 (VFWD, High Peaks Audubon, and D. E. Capen unpubl. data). Presumably, the population decline can be attributed to a reduction in available food resources. Local landfill closings in Vermont and New York in the 1980s, and better management of remaining landfills may have eliminated a supplemental food source that made the difference between a growing population and more stable numbers. A 9 percent loss of cropland acreage in Vermont from 1982 to 2007 (USDA 2007) might also have contributed to the decline. In New York and southern Ontario, second atlas projects confirmed substantial expansions of breeding distributions. Much like Lake

RELATIVE ABUNDANCE OVER TIME





Change in presence per block
 ● Gain from first Atlas to second
 ● Loss from first Atlas to second
 ● Present in both Atlases



Category	Priority Block Count	
	Priority 1	Priority 1 & 2
Confirmed	0	1
Probable	0	0
Possible	2	3
Observed	34	72
Total	2	4

CHANGE IN DISTRIBUTION BETWEEN ATLASES

Biophysical Region	First Atlas	Second Atlas	Change	% Change
Champlain Valley	0	2	+ 2	+ 200
Northeastern Highlands	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Vermont Valley	0	0	+ 0	+ 0
Totals	0	2	+ 2	+ 200

DISTRIBUTION IN CURRENT ATLAS

Biophysical Region	% of region species occupies	% of all records for this species found in region
Champlain Valley	5	100
Northeastern Highlands	0	0
Northern Green Mountains	0	0
Northern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Southern Green Mountains	0	0
Southern Vermont Piedmont	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0
Vermont Valley	0	0

Champlain, though, numbers increased steadily after the first atlas, then began to decline; some of the range expansion may be due to control activities (Weseloh 2007, Richmond 2008).

The estimated North American breeding population of 1.7 million Ring-billed Gulls is widely distributed across 12 of 37 Bird Conservation Regions (Kushlan et al. 2002). In Bird Conservation Region 13, which includes the Champlain Valley, Hartley et al. (2007) classified the species as overabundant, consistent with a common perception that ring-bills have become a nuisance species.

Indeed, biologists with the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department have begun to reduce numbers of ring-bills on Young Island by systematically applying corn oil to eggs to prevent them from hatching and, beginning in 2009, by shooting nesting birds. The objective is to restore vegetation to its condition in 1959, when the agency purchased the island. Despite the abundance of ring-bills, however, the predator-free islands where they nest are not abundant, and such habitat needs to be protected and managed accordingly.

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