

Gulls

Three large gulls are commonly found in Alaska. These are the **glaucous-winged gull** (*Larus glaucescens*), **glaucous gull** (*L. hyperboreus*), and **herring gull** (*L. argentatus*), in order of decreasing abundance. These gulls are closely related, and hybrids are not uncommon.

Glaucous-winged Gulls

Glaucous-winged gulls are the common “seagulls” familiar to many on the south coast of Alaska. Glaucous-winged gulls breed in Alaska from the British Columbia border to the end of the Aleutian chain and northward to Bristol Bay, western Nunivak Island, and the Pribilofs.

General description: Adults have white heads and bodies, pink legs, brown eyes, gray backs, and wing tips typically the same shade of gray as the back. Their heads are heavily flecked with gray in winter. Recently fledged juveniles are dark-brownish gray. The plumage becomes lighter each year to age 4, when adult coloration is acquired and they first begin breeding. Adults typically live about 10 years and average 23 to 26 inches (58-66 cm) in length.

Life history: Glaucous-winged gulls are found principally in intertidal coastal habitats, although they follow major rivers and salmon streams inland. They also range hundreds of kilometers seaward, especially in winter. These birds are adaptable to a wide variety of natural and artificial settings, including highly urbanized environments. Efficient garbage collectors, they congregate at natural food sources such as salmon streams where they perform a useful function—they scavenge intertidal areas, riverbanks, and open sea for dead fish, invertebrates, birds, and mammals. These gulls also take small live fish at sea and in intertidal pools and prey upon eggs and chicks of other birds. They feed in circling flocks over fish schools and floating waste. Unfortunately, gulls tend to flock around onshore fish processing plants, garbage dumps, sewage outfalls, offshore factory ships, and trawlers. Thus their populations increase rapidly when new sources of food become available, and artificially high populations cause many problems. Glaucous-winged gulls were demonstrated to be vectors of *Salmonella* in an epidemic associated with contaminated water supplies at Ketchikan. In some places, glaucous-winged gulls also pose a hazard to aircraft, especially where garbage dumps are close to airports. Unless care is taken to reduce the availability of artificial food supplies, industrial and economic development of Alaska will cause gull population explosions with the resulting problems for public health, safety, and conservation of other Alaska seabirds.

Gulls tend to colonize and are very aggressive, often exhibiting much antagonism toward members of their own and other species. In late winter and early spring, glaucous-winged gulls appear at their colony sites, often before the snow melts. They prefer open, grassy hillsides of islands but will nest in a variety of locations. Colony size may range from less than 10 to as many as 10,000 pairs. A clutch of one to three eggs is laid in mid- to late May. Chicks hatch in mid- to late June and are raised within the nesting territory.

Glaucous-winged gulls are partially migratory; some populations shift to British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California in fall and winter. The Southeast Alaska, Vancouver, B.C. — Puget Sound area is a major wintering area for glaucous-winged gulls. Others remain in Alaska throughout the year.

Glaucous-winged gulls have few natural enemies; ravens, crows, and jaegers take eggs; bald eagles take chicks, juveniles, and adults. However, most loss is because of cannibalism and territorial defense killings by other gulls.

Glaucous Gulls

Glaucous gulls breed along the coast of western and northern Alaska from the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta to Demarcation Point on the Canada border and on several islands in the Bering Sea. The center of abundance of glaucous gulls in Alaska is the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and the east side of the Bering Strait. The largest breeding concentration of glaucous gulls is on St. Matthew/Hall Island. Glaucous gulls are common in the Aleutians in winter.

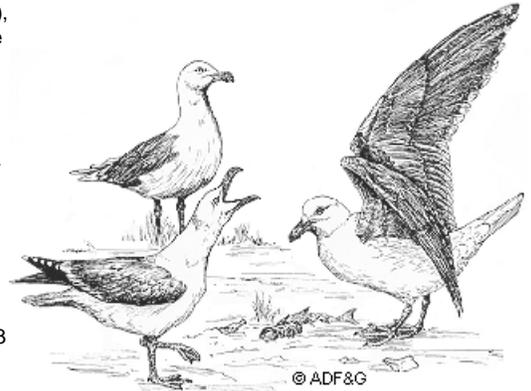
General description: Glaucous gulls are somewhat larger than glaucous-winged gulls, have white bodies and heads, yellow eyes, gray backs, and white wing tips. Adults average 25 to 31 inches (58-79 cm) in length. Glaucous gulls first breed at age 4. Immature glaucous gulls are light grayish-brown in their first year and nearly all-white (except for black-tipped bills) in their second year.

Life history: Glaucous gulls are occasionally seen in spring and summer along the south coast of Alaska as far as Cordova, Yakutat, and Glacier Bay. They occur on river deltas, coastal tundra, lagoons, sea cliffs, barrier islands, and pack ice. They are scavengers as well as important predators on waterfowl and other seabirds. However, coastal glaucous gulls away from marine bird colonies feed mainly on fish. Glaucous gulls nest in colonies on sea cliffs as well as in isolated pairs on tundra ponds. Colony size is usually far smaller than that of glaucous-winged gulls. Glaucous gulls appear on nesting territories before snow melts. They begin breeding in May. Clutch size is usually three eggs. Newly fledged juveniles remain with their parents close to nesting territories for several weeks after learning to fly, gradually moving to the sea in September and October.

Surveys of 1,500 miles (2,400 km) of northwestern Alaskan coast suggest that glaucous gulls may be entering a period of rapid population growth. Domestic and industrial development activities on the North Slope are generating large volumes of solid waste in unnatural settings, precisely the sort of environment that facilitates explosive increases in juvenile gull survival. Artificially high glaucous gull populations will pose problems in northern and western Alaska similar to the problems abnormally high glaucous-winged gull populations present in southcoastal areas.

Herring Gulls

Herring gulls have white heads and bodies, gray backs, typically yellow eyes, and black wing tips with small white spots. Total length is 22 to 25 inches (56-64 cm). Juvenile herring gulls are difficult to tell from juvenile glaucous-winged gulls. Herring gulls are usually found breeding in low numbers on boreal lakes and rivers in interior Alaska. Some herring gulls, however, breed on the south coast of Alaska, notably in Upper Cook Inlet near the mouth of the Susitna River; at Dry Bay, mouth of the Alsek River, near Yakutat; and in Glacier Bay in recently deglaciated fjords. Hybridization with glaucous-winged gulls occurs in these locations. Hybrid gulls display characteristics of both these parental forms and are found at river mouths and near tidewater glaciers. They nest on flat gravel bars, sloping grassy hillsides, and on nearly vertical cliff faces. A Siberian form of the herring gull (*Larus argentatus vegae*) breeds on sea cliffs on St. Lawrence Island and occasionally appears in western Alaska, where it hybridizes with glaucous gulls. In addition, many glaucous gulls on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta show signs of interbreeding with glaucous-winged gulls.



Almost all features of reproductive biology of Interior herring gulls resemble those of glaucous-winged gulls. However, the food of Interior herring gulls is limited and consists mainly of fish. This may account for their lower numbers. Alaska herring gulls are completely migratory, leaving lakes and rivers for the coast in September. Herring gulls banded on Alaska lakes have been resighted during winter in southern California and Mexico. Herring gulls return to Alaska lakes in May.

Alaska's herring gull populations are not likely to expand in the foreseeable future because of restricted nesting space and lack of substantial sources of artificial food. Indeed, as recreational boating traffic on lakes increases, disturbance of their relatively small colonies may result in population declines.

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