

HERRING GULL (*LARUS ARGENTATUS*) TRENDS IN COASTAL NORTHWEST
FLORIDA - ALABAMA BASED ON CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT DATA

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Several observers, including the author, have noted an apparent decline in gull numbers in the coastal area in recent years. In order to test this "impression," I examined data published in the *National Audubon Society Field Notes*, (formerly *American Birds*) Christmas Bird Counts, published by the National Audubon Society, New York, for the five year period 1980-1984 and compared the results with the latest five year period, 1990-1994. Five Christmas Bird Counts (abbreviated CBC) were chosen: Gulf Shores, Al., Ft. Morgan, Al., Perdido Bay, Al.-Fl., Pensacola, Fl., and Choctawhatchee Bay, Fl. The results are contained in Table 1. Numbers represent the actual numbers of gulls counted with the birds per party hour in parentheses. The average birds per party hour (B/PH) for each five year period is also given. A count was not conducted for the Choctawhatchee CBC in 1980 and 1981.

All five counts showed diminishing numbers with substantial declines in Gulf Shores (49%), Ft. Morgan (20%), Pensacola (36%) and Choctawhatchee (94%) when the average for the two-five year periods are compared. The drastic drop in Choctawhatchee numbers can be explained partly by the fact that the Ft. Walton Beach, Fl. dump, which was inside the CBC circle, was closed in 1990. It had been a magnet for attracting gulls.

Lower Herring Gull numbers along the Gulf Coast may also reflect a

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seventeen year effort by the US Fish and Wildlife Service to reduce populations of this aggressive species in tern colonies along the Atlantic coast (*Pensacola News-Journal*, AP release, May 1996). Since 1980, Herring Gull pairs at Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge, Mass., fell from 15,300 pairs to 5,200 in 1995. Also involved in the eradication effort, Great Black-backed Gulls (*Larus marinus*) declined from 8,000 to 7,350.

Also analyzed were Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) which showed declines in four of the five counts: Gulf Shores (40%), Ft. Morgan (36%), Pensacola (10%) and Choctawhatchee (82%). Once again, the precipitous drop on the Choctawhatchee count can be attributed partly to the dump closing. Perdido Bay experienced the only increase, a jump of 61%. This may be explained by the fact that the circle is being suburbanized rapidly, resulting in increasing foraging opportunities for this "garbage" gull.

The 1996-97 CBC's again revealed low numbers for Herring Gulls. Birds per party hour were: Gulf Shores, 0.77; Perdido Bay, 0.80; Pensacola, 2.01; and Choctawhatchee, 0.48. Data for Ft. Morgan were not available. It is apparent that Herring Gull numbers have decreased significantly in this part of the Gulf Coast since the early 1980's. **Robert A. Duncan**, 614 Fairpoint Dr., Gulf Breeze, FL 32561.

Table 1

HERRING GULLS ON CBC'S

	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	Ave B/PH
GULF SHORES	282 (3.18)	226 (2.15)	77 (0.66)	192 (1.21)	269 (1.72)	1.78
FORT MORGAN	142 (4.18)	59 (1.32)	119 (3.28)	28 (0.77)	131 (2.75)	2.46
PERDIDO BAY	250 (4.50)	303 (4.80)	135 (1.44)	155 (1.60)	194 (1.98)	2.86
PENSACOLA	300 (3.23)	302 (4.03)	146 (1.76)	303 (2.78)	177 (1.99)	2.76
CHOCTAWHATCHEE			303 (5.05)	660 (12.45)	764 (12.22)	9.91
	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	Ave B/PH
GULF SHORES	212 (1.17)	168 (1.04)	148 (0.92)	131 (0.84)	94 (0.59)	0.91
FORT MORGAN	112 (1.31)	447 (4.79)	85 (0.85)	160 (1.63)	118 (1.34)	1.98
PERDIDO BAY	495 (4.46)	267 (2.27)	122 (0.96)	356 (2.92)	286 (2.28)	2.58
PENSACOLA	267 (2.84)	209 (2.03)	129 (1.33)	158 (1.53)	106 (1.14)	1.77
CHOCTAWHATCHEE	121 (1.00)	65 (0.51)	102 (0.77)	77 (0.64)	45 (0.34)	0.65

Note: Birds per Party Hour (B/PH) in parenthesis.