

This Month

# Great Black-backed Gull

Nicknames: Seagull  
 Scientific Name: *Larus marinus*



**Field Markings:** Adults have an all-white head and body with distinct black back and wings, large yellow bill, with a bright orange-red spot near the tip of the lower bill.

**Size:** 28 to 31 inches long, with a wingspan of 65 inches

**Habitat:** Ocean coasts, bays, beaches, piers, landfills

**Seasonal Appearance:** Year-round, plus overwintering population

## DISTINGUISHING FEATURES AND BEHAVIORS

The great black-backed gull is the largest species of gull in Narragansett Bay, distinguishable from other gulls by their large size, white head and characteristic black back

To reach the full, black adult plumage takes four years, with young birds going through stages of different plumage with every molt.

Juveniles are identified by their smaller body and bill size - their head and body are mottled with dark gray and the wings are spotted somewhat darker.

Compared to a young herring gull, their heads and bodies appear lighter and their wings more spotted.

When gulls of different species gather together to feed, the great black-backed will drive away or steal the other birds' food. They feed on eggs, small birds, squid, carrion, shellfish, fish, berries, grain, scraps from fishing boats and garbage.

Great black-backed gulls nest in colonies with other species, such as herring gulls and double-crested cormorants. They



great black-backed gull that is not yet fully matured

colonize small islands in the Bay and offshore, setting up territories around their nests up to a six-foot diameter. Nests are built on the ground from mounds of seaweed, grasses, vegetation and available debris.

The male and female court, forming a pair bond that can last more than one breeding season. The female lays two or three eggs, and both birds take turns incubating for 26 days and feeding the fledglings for another 42 to 49 days.

Because great black-backed gulls overwinter along the Atlantic coast from Newfoundland to North Carolina, with large numbers on Cape Cod. Great numbers of young birds can be found farther out to sea where they follow fishing vessels - unlike herring gulls that stay closer to the coastline.

## RELATIONSHIP TO PEOPLE

Because great black-backed gulls are good scavengers and have adapted to living near people, their population is increasing. In Rhode Island, the nesting population reached its peak with 1,920 nests in 1992. Since then, next numbers seem to be declining, however the regional increase in these gulls may pose a serious threat to other coastal sea birds.

The great black-backed gull competes for nesting sites and food and is notorious for robbing nests of eggs and nestlings. They are responsible for reducing tern and eider duck populations by stealing fish from parent birds as they feed their own nestlings.

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