

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Birds of the Rocky Mountains -- Paul A. Johnsgard

Papers in the Biological Sciences

2009

***Birds of the Rocky Mountains*—Species Accounts, pages
183–196: Jaegers, Gulls, & Terns**

Paul A. Johnsgard

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, pajohnsgard@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/bioscibirdsrockymtns>



Part of the [Ornithology Commons](#)

Johnsgard, Paul A., "*Birds of the Rocky Mountains*—Species Accounts, pages 183–196: Jaegers, Gulls, & Terns" (2009). *Birds of the Rocky Mountains -- Paul A. Johnsgard*. 13.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/bioscibirdsrockymtns/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Papers in the Biological Sciences at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Birds of the Rocky Mountains -- Paul A. Johnsgard by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Pomarine Jaeger (*Stercorarius pomarinus*)

Identification: This gull-like bird is dark-colored, with dark underwings and variably dark underparts. In adults the central tail feathers are blunt-tipped and extend a rather short distance beyond the rest of the tail feathers. Immature birds cannot be readily identified in the field.

Status: An accidental vagrant in the region. There is a specimen record for Rocky Mountain N.P. There are at least three Montana records, one Wyoming record, and three other Colorado records.

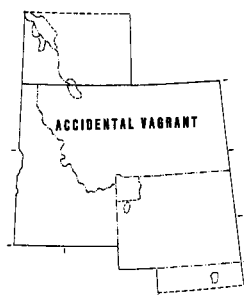
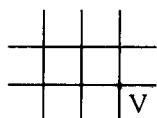
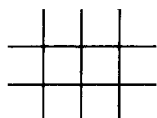
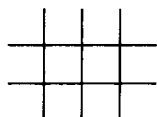
Habitats and Ecology: Like the other jaegers, this is an arctic-breeding species, which most often winters in coastal areas, and is unlikely to be seen in interior regions. The nearest breeding areas are in extreme northern Canada.

Seasonality: Too few records exist to judge migration times; the record for Rocky Mountain N.P. was for November, and probably many records involve immatures wandering. The Colorado records are from late September to mid-November.

Comments: Jaegers, especially immatures, are often very difficult to identify, and vary greatly in their plumage coloration, typically existing in both light and dark phases. Up to three or four years may be required for the tail feathers to reach their full length and make identification easier.

Suggested Reading: Anderson, 1973; Pitelka et al., 1955.

LATILONG STATUS



Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

Identification: Very similar to the preceding and following species, but in adults the central tail feathers are pointed and extend out only a short distance for the other feathers. Field identification of non-adults is almost impossible except for experts.

LATILONG STATUS

	?		
			V

V			
	V		

	V		
			M

Status: An accidental vagrant throughout the region except in Alberta, where it is very rare. The nearest breeding area is in northeastern Manitoba, along the coastline of Hudson Bay.

Habitats and Ecology: Breeds in arctic and subarctic tundra areas of North America and Eurasia, extending somewhat farther south in Canada than the other two species. Like the other jaegers a predator rather than a scavenger, feeding on small rodents, nestling birds, and the like.

Seasonality: There are relatively few regional records, but they are largely for late summer and fall.

Comments: This is the jaeger most likely to be seen in the region; it has been reported from six latilongs in Montana, three in Wyoming, and six in Colorado.

Suggested Reading: Pitelka et al., 1955; Perdeck, 1963.



Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*)

Identification: Very similar to the two preceding species, but adults can be identified by their two long, pointed, and streamer-like central tail feathers. The birds are more graceful and tern-like than the other species, and adults always lack whitish areas on the underwings that the others usually show.

Status: An accidental vagrant throughout the region, more common northwardly, and reported from April 15 to June 17. Nestlings have been seen in Wyoming in June, and fledged young in Montana in early July.

Habitats and Ecology: Similar to the other two jaegers in being an arctic tundra nester, where it has circumpolar breeding distribution. The nearest breeding areas are in the Northwest Territories.

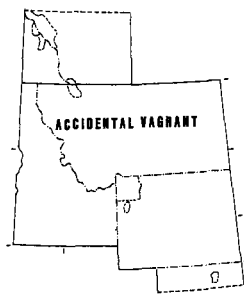
Seasonality: There are few regional records, but they are largely for late summer or fall. Reported from at least four Montana latilongs, and one in Colorado.

Comments: Jaegers are important predators on lemmings in the arctic, and in addition they are effective in stealing waterfowl eggs or taking laggard ducklings or goslings. They have at times been observed catching small birds in flight.

Suggested Reading: Pitelka et al., 1955; Anderson, 1971.

LATILONG STATUS

	V	
	V	V



Franklin's Gull (*Larus pipixcan*)

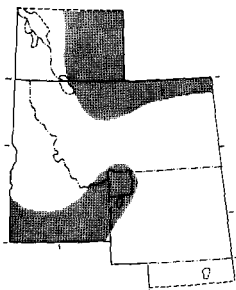
Identification: In breeding plumage, the black head and dark upper wing surface of this gull make it easily identifiable and unique among gulls of the region. In late summer or fall the head is mostly grayish, but retains black ear patches; immature birds are similar. The rarer Bonaparte's gull is also black-headed, but shows white upper wing patches on the outer flight feathers.

LATILONG STATUS

		S	M
M	M	M	S
V	M		

M	M	S	M
S	S	S	
S	M	M	

M		M	M
M	M	M	M
M	M	M	M



Status: A migrant and local summer resident in the area, primarily on the plains; relatively rare in the montane parks, but there is an undocumented breeding record from Yellowstone N.P., where it is rare in summer.

Habitats and Ecology: Breeding occurs in large, relatively permanent prairie marshes having extensive stands of emergent vegetation, where the birds nest in colonies. Unlike other gulls of the region, the nest is constructed over water, in dense vegetation. On migration they typically feed on dry land, often in fields that are being cultivated prior to planting.

Seasonality: Migration in Wyoming and Montana is from late April to mid-May, and from late August to early October. Extreme Colorado records are April 1 and November 22. In Alberta the birds usually arrive the third week of April, and most have left by the end of September. Egg records are few, but in Montana nesting occurs from early June to early July, with hatched young reported by June 23.

Comments: This gull is a highly beneficial species, eating grasshoppers, cutworms, and many other agricultural pest insects that are exposed by plowing. Unlike the other gulls they rarely if ever scavenge at dumpgrounds, but instead are almost entirely insectivorous.

Suggested Reading: Burger, 1974.

Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*)

Identification: This small and beautiful gull closely resembles the Franklin's gull in having a black head, but it also has primarily white primary feathers that are tipped with black. Immature and fall-plumaged birds lack the black head, but instead have a small back ear-patch, and the white outer wing feathers provide the best fieldmark.

Status: An uncommon to rare migrant throughout the region, mainly in the plains regions, and rare or accidental in the montane parks. The nearest breeding areas are in central Alberta (from Battle Lake and Edmonton northward), in muskeg forests.

Habitats and Ecology: This gull is unique in its tree-nesting adaptations; it typically nests in small coniferous trees well above ground level, but at times also nests in reedbeds of marshes. Jackpines, spruces, and other conifers are the usual nesting site; typically the mate stands watch in a nearby tree as the other bird incubates. The birds often nest in loose colonies, and outside the breeding season they are highly gregarious, often forming flocks numbering in the hundreds.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from April 18 to late May, peaking in late April, and from early September to November 18, peaking in November. Montana records are from May 13 to 18, and from July 31 to November 5. Large numbers concentrate in the lakes of central Alberta in mid-September.

Comments: This is among the most beautiful of the North American gulls, and a fairly close relative of the common black-headed gull of Europe, which is starting to colonize eastern Canada, probably from Iceland.

Suggested Reading: Henderson, 1926; Twomey, 1934.

LATILONG STATUS

M	M	M	
	M		M
V	M	M	M

M	M		
M	M		
M	M		

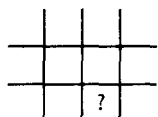
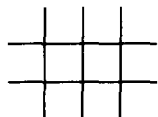
		M	
	M	M	M
M	M	M	M



Mew Gull (*Larus canus*)

Identification: This rather large, white-headed gull resembles a California gull, but has a small and short bill that is uniformly yellow in adults. The legs are more pinkish than those of the California or ring-billed gulls. Immature birds are best identified by their short and relatively weak bill.

LATILONG STATUS



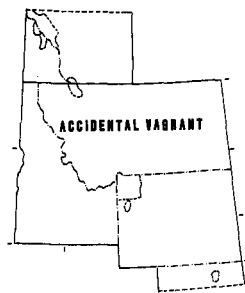
Status: An accidental vagrant in the region; reported most often in Alberta and a rare migrant or vagrant in its montane parks. The nearest breeding areas are in extreme northern Saskatchewan or perhaps Alberta.

Habitats and Ecology: Nesting occurs on the shorelines of lakes in northwestern Canada and Alaska, usually on the ground but occasionally in trees as typical of the Bonaparte's gull. A common breeder in Europe (where it is called the "common gull").

Seasonality: Regional records south of Alberta are few (one October record for Montana; one August record for Wyoming); records for Banff and Jasper parks are from May through September.

Comments: This species used to be called the "short-billed gull," a better name for it than the current one (which does not refer to its voice). Recognition of it in the field is difficult in any plumage unless the bill color and shape are seen clearly.

Suggested Reading: Weidmann, 1955.



Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*)

Identification: This abundant and familiar gull is best identified by the black band that surrounds it near the tip (in adult and second-year birds); younger birds have a black-tipped bill and are very difficult to separate from other white-headed gull species.

Status: A summer resident and local colonial breeder over most of the region, primarily on the plains; reported breeding in the montane parks is limited to Yellowstone, where the last known breeding was in 1949. The range is gradually expanding in western North America, and there are now numerous colonies in the region (Wilson Bulletin 95:362-83).

Habitats and Ecology: A highly adaptable gull, exploiting new habitats in the form of reservoirs. Breeding usually occurs on isolated and sparsely vegetated islands of lakes and reservoir impoundments, sometimes in colonies of a thousand pairs or more.

Seasonality: Wyoming records extend from March 7 to November 30; most migration there and in Montana occurs from late March to early May, and from mid-August to late November. Some overwintering occurs as far north as Colorado. Egg records in Montana are from April 27 to June 18.

Comments: Probably this is the commonest gull of the region, incorrectly called "seagulls" by the average person. However, many ring-bills do winter coastally, mixing with several other species of white-headed gulls.

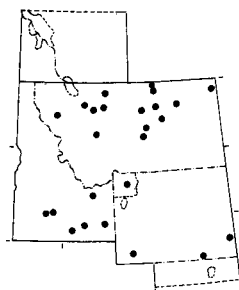
Suggested Reading: Tinbergen, 1959; Vermeer, 1970; Johnson & Forster, 1954.

LATILONG STATUS

M	M	s	S
M	S	M	S
s	M	M	s

M	M	S	M
M	S	M	M
M	M	M	M

M	M	M	M
M	M	M	S
M	M	s	r



California Gull (*Larus californicus*)

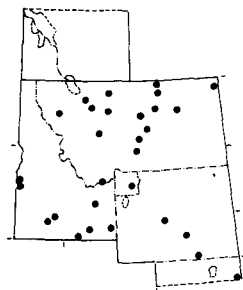
Identification: Similar to the ring-billed gull, but adults show red and black spots near the tip of the lower mandible, thus resembling a small herring gull. The birds have darker upper surfaces than ring-billed or herring gulls, and are somewhat intermediate in size between them. Immature birds are extremely difficult to identify in the field except by experts.

LATILONG STATUS

	?	s	S
M	S	M	S
s	M	s	M

M	M		M
M	S	M	
r	M	M	S

M	M	S	M
M	M	M	S
M	M	s	r



Status: A summer resident and local breeder over much of the region, mainly on the plains; the only breeding in the montane parks is in Yellowstone, where 200–300 pairs breed yearly on the Molly Islands of Yellowstone Lake. The breeding range of the species in the general region is increasing at present (*Wilson Bulletin* 95:362–83). There are large colonies in Wyoming (Banforth and Ocean lakes) and Montana (Freezeout Lake).

Habitats and Ecology: Like the ring-billed gull, this species usually nests on gravelly islands of large lakes or reservoirs or along their shorelines, and in many areas the two species nest in close proximity. In Alberta the California gulls tend to nest on more elevated and boulder-strewn sites, while ring-bills occupy more level terrain. Ring-bills also tend to cluster their nests more strongly, while California gulls space their nests more randomly.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from April 18 to November 16, while Montana records extend from March 27 to late October. In Wyoming egg-laying begins as early as April 21 and extends to June 11; fledged young have been seen by the end of June. In Montana nesting records are from April 27 to June 18, with nestlings seen as late as July 19.

Comments: This is the species made famous by the Mormons, when it helped save their crops in Utah by feeding on locusts.

Suggested Reading: Vermeer, 1970; Baird, 1976; Behle, 1958; Diem & Condon, 1967; Green, 1952; Raper, 1976.

Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)

Identification: This is the largest of the regional gulls, and probably the most abundant North American gull. In adults, the yellow bill with a red spot near the tip of the lower mandible provides the best field-mark, in addition to its large size; however, some California gulls also have very similar bill markings during the breeding season, complicating identification. Immature birds are highly variable, and require expert identification.

Status: An uncommon to rare migrant or vagrant in much of the area, becoming more common northwardly in the montane parks. There is only a single regional nesting record, for Big Lake (Stillwater County), Montana, in 1918. The nearest breeding areas in northern Alberta south to Namur Lake and Lower Therien Lake.

Habitats and Ecology: This is primarily a coastal gull, but also breeds in small colonies across northern Canada on the islands of larger lakes, sometimes among colonies of ring-billed or California gulls where they often nest as single pairs. They usually winter coastally, but sometimes spend the winter on ice-free lakes or impoundments in the more southerly states.

Seasonality: In southern Alberta these birds are usually seen as spring and fall migrants, generally appearing in April and early May, and again in September and October. In Montana the records are mostly from September to May, including several winter occurrences. In Wyoming they are occasional from summer to winter, mostly in eastern areas, and in Colorado they are largely winter visitors, from October 17 to May 17.

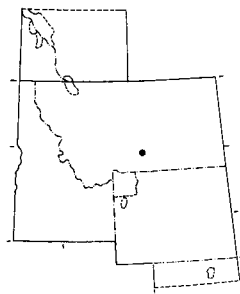
Suggested Reading: Keith, 1966; Burger, 1977.

LATILONG STATUS

	M	M	
	M		M
M	M		

M		?	?
?	M		
		M	

		M	
		M	M
		M	W



Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*)

Identification: The only black-headed gull (in breeding plumage) that has a large, triangular patch of white feathers formed by the inner primaries and secondaries, and bounded in front by black. The bill is black, with a yellow tip. Younger birds lack the black head, but have the distinctive wing patterning. This is also the only gull with a forked tail, although the tail forking is rather slight and easily overlooked.

LATILONG STATUS

	V		

V		V	
	V		
	V		

			?
			?
		V	V

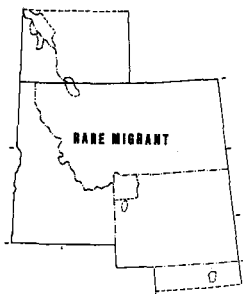
Status: A rare migrant or vagrant in the region; accidental in the montane parks. A high-arctic breeder, with the nearest nesting areas in extreme northern Canada. Most likely to be encountered in northern portions of the region.

Habitats and Ecology: This arctic nester is most likely to be observed in flocks of migrating Franklin's or Bonaparte's gulls, but it is extremely rare south of Canada. It nests in colonies on the high-arctic tundra, and migrates to a restricted wintering area off the coast of Peru.

Seasonality: In Alberta this gull has been observed between May 18 and July 4, and again during mid- to late September. Colorado records are from September 3 to November 17, as well as a summer (July) record. Most of these are of immature birds.

Comments: Apparently these birds must migrate more or less directly from the Pacific Ocean to their high-arctic breeding grounds, as few observations are made of them on spring migration.

Suggested Reading: Bent, 1921; Brown et al., 1967.



Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*)

Identification: The largest tern of North America, almost as large as a ring-billed gull, and with a massive red bill and a slightly crested black "cap." Immatures have more grayish "caps" and less colorful bills.

Status: An uncommon to rare migrant and very local summer resident in the region; a regular breeder in Yellowstone N.P. where a few pairs nest yearly on the Molly Islands. Has bred once in Montana (*American Birds* 36:991) and has nested in southern Idaho and southeastern Wyoming.

Habitats and Ecology: This species usually nests near coastlines, but has also nested interiorly on shorelines or islands of large lakes or reservoirs, usually on sandy or stony beaches. Often in these locations only one or two pairs nest among other terns or gulls, but normally nesting is done in colonies.

Seasonality: In Alberta the birds are regular in summer, and nested irregularly at the west end of Lake Athabaska as recently as 1952; now they are mainly seen as summer visitors in the province. Terns nesting on the Molly Islands of Yellowstone Lake begin incubation in late May, and flightless young have been seen from July 10 to August 24.

Comments: This large and beautiful tern usually nests in colonies of more than 150 pairs in the Great Lakes area, sometimes with as many as 500 pairs. Territories are very small, with nests as close as about two feet apart in such colonies. Caspian terns seem to be gradually extending their range in interior North America, nesting rarely as far inland as North Dakota and Minnesota.

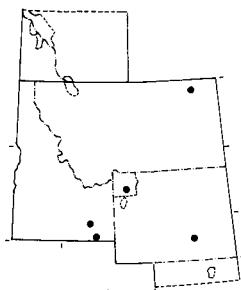
Suggested Reading: Bent, 1921; Ludwig, 1965.

LATILONG STATUS

M	M	M	
	M		M
V			

M		M	M
	S		
	M		M

M		S	
		S	S
			V



Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*)

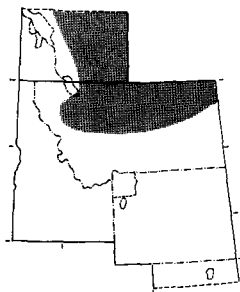
Identification: This species is not as common regionally as the Forster's tern in spite of its name; the two species are easily confused, but the common tern has a less silvery upper wing surface, showing a medium gray in this area. Breeding adults have a more reddish than orange bill color, and their outermost tail feathers are edged with black. Late summer and immatures of the two species are very similar, but common terns tend to have darker heads than Forster's terns. Common terns are also more likely to be seen on lakes than on prairie marshes.

LATILONG STATUS

		M	M
	S	M	S
	M	M	M

M	M	M	?
s	M		
	M		

	M		
			M
			V



Status: A regional migrant and local summer resident from central Montana northward, mainly on plains lakes; rare in the montane parks. Although breeding has reportedly occurred in Yellowstone N.P. this is not documented, and there is no current evidence of this.

Habitats and Ecology: Islands in large lakes are favored breeding grounds in this region; sparsely vegetated areas are used for colonial nesting. Occasionally a pair or two will also build nests in reedy vegetation over water, but this behavior is much more typical of Forster's terns. Sometimes the two species will nest in close proximity, but normally they are well isolated ecologically.

Seasonality: Montana and Wyoming records are from mid- to late May to September; Colorado records extend from May 15 to October 18. In Alberta they usually arrive about the second week of May and rarely remain beyond the end of October, as feeding areas begin to freeze over. There are few regional nesting records, but in North Dakota egg dates range from June 8 to July 28, within which range the available regional records fall.

Suggested Reading: Palmer, 1941.

Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*)

Identification: Differs from the preceding species in having (in breeding plumage) a more orange bill, more silvery gray upper wing surfaces, and pale outer tail feathers. Late-summer and immature birds have little or no black on the nape. The birds are associated with shallow prairie marshes rather than deep lakes.

Status: A summer resident locally in the area, mainly on plains marshes; rare or accidental in the montane parks, with no breeding records.

Habitats and Ecology: Large marshes having extensive reedbeds or muskrat houses for nest sites are the typical breeding habitats of this species, which breeds colonially in such locations, with as many as five nests sometimes situated on a single muskrat house. Such sites that are close to open water areas for foraging are especially favored nesting locations.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from May 2 to September 30, with migration peaks in May and early September. Montana records are from late April to late September, and extreme Colorado dates are April 10 and October 18. In Wyoming egg records are from July 2 to 30, and in Colorado from May 15 to July 1.

Comments: Apart from their habitat differences, Forster's terns and common terns are very similar in appearance and behavior, including similar courtship displays. Thus, the two species are often confused by all but the keenest observers.

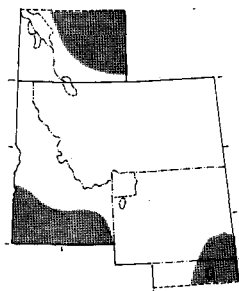
Suggested Reading: Bergman et al., 1970; McNicholl, 1971.

LATILONG STATUS

	M	M	
	s		M
V	M		

M	M		M
s	M		
S	M	M	M

		M	M
M	M	M	S
M		S	s

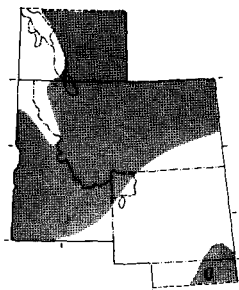


Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*)

Identification: This is the only slate-colored North American tern; in breeding plumage the body is mostly black, with gray wings and almost no white evident. In late summer and non-adult birds the body is much whiter, but there are usually darker patches of feathers on the breast, at least while the birds are in this region. This is the most insectivorous of the regional terns, and often can be observed catching insects in the air or skimming them from the surface of the water, rather than plunging-diving for fish.

LATILONG STATUS

s	S	S	
	S	S	s
S	M	S	s
M		S	M
s	S	M	
S	M		M
M		M	M
M	M	M	S
M	M	S	S



Status: A summer resident over much of the region, mainly in plains marshlands; rarer in the montane parks but breeding occasionally or regularly in several.

Habitats and Ecology: Typical nesting habitat consists of small to large marshes with extensive stands of emergent vegetation and some areas of open water. Fish populations are not necessary, as the birds feed mostly on insects while on the nesting grounds. Nests are more often placed among emergent vegetation than on muskrat houses, although the latter are sometimes used.

Seasonality: Wyoming records are from May 11 to October 1, with migration peaks in May and September. In Alberta the birds usually arrive the third week of May and are usually gone by September. Wyoming and Montana nest records are from June 12 to early July; nesting in Colorado extends from late May to the end of June.

Comments: In this species, courtship "fish-flights" usually involve the carrying of insects rather than fish, but otherwise the social behavior patterns of the birds resemble those of the other terns. The adaptive significance of black coloration, rather than white as in most terns, is not obvious, but it may have to do with reduced need for camouflage from fish during foraging.

Suggested Reading: Bergman et al., 1970; Bailey, 1977; Goodwin, 1960.