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LAUGHING GULLS IN WESTERN NEBRASKA

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In this article, we describe two recent sightings of Laughing Gulls in western Nebraska in 1992 and 1994. The only previous acceptable record for Nebraska is a bird collected on 2 April, 1915 at Inland, Clay Co. (Bray et al., 1986). The birds described here are the second and third accepted records of this species in Nebraska.

On 30 June, 1992, Stephen J. Dinsmore and James J. Dinsmore observed a second-summer Laughing Gull at gate 9 on Lake McConaughy, Keith Co. The bird was resting on a sandy spit with about 100 other gulls, mostly Ring-billed. They observed the bird from 2:11-2:40 PM CST. Compared to several nearby Franklin's Gulls, it was 25% larger with a distinctly longer-winged appearance. The forehead and throat were white with a dull-gray area on the nape and rear portion of the crown, forming an indistinct cap. The eye was dark with no visible white eye crescents. The bill was dark with a pronounced gonys, and lacked the stubbier appearance of the bill of a Franklin's Gull. The mantle and upperwings were dark gray, slightly darker than those of a Franklin's Gull. In flight, there was no white separating the black outer primaries from the dark-gray primary coverts. A narrow, white trailing edge to the wing was also visible. The underparts, vent, undertail, and rump

were white. There was a fairly broad, black subterminal band on roughly the distal one-fourth of the tail, while the remainder of the uppertail was white. The legs were dark and were proportionately longer than those of a Franklin's Gull. The dark legs, tail band, incomplete hood, and dark-gray rather than brown upperwings and mantle indicate that the bird was in second-summer plumage.

On 22 December, 1994, the authors and Gordon Brown observed a first-winter Laughing Gull at Sutherland Reservoir, Lincoln Co. The bird was observed from 8:45-9:10 AM CST in the company of several Ring-billed and Herring Gulls resting on ice near the southwest corner of the reservoir. The Laughing Gull was an estimated 15% smaller and much slimmer than the Ring-billed Gulls. The bill was black, about the length of that of the Ring-billed, and had a clear "droop" to it. The head was mostly white except for a darker-gray area behind the eye which extended across the nape. The forehead and throat were white. The mantle was dark-gray, slightly darker than that of a Ring-billed or Herring Gull. The breast, belly, and vent were white except for gray smudging on the flanks and across the lower breast. The legs were black and the same length as those of nearby Ring-billed Gulls. In flight, the upperwing pattern was as follows: primaries and their coverts black except that the inner 2-3 primaries showed some pale color; secondary coverts dark-brown, and secondaries slightly darker, forming a distinct, dark trailing edge to the inner wing. The rump was white. The uppertail was mostly white except for a wide, black, subterminal band and a narrow, white band at the tip. The dark tail band was roughly an inch wide and included the outermost rectrices.

Laughing Gulls are rare vagrants to the Upper Midwest, though the number of records has increased markedly in the last decade. Most records fall in the period from April-November with peaks in May and July-September. Winter records are extremely unusual. States east of Nebraska have more records. Iowa has at least a dozen records, all of them since 1989. The most recent was a juvenile at the Midwest Power Settling Ponds south of Council Bluffs in October, 1994 (Kent 1995), just across the Missouri River from Bellevue. In Missouri, Laughing Gulls are very rare transients along the Mississippi River and casual elsewhere in the state with about 30 records (Robbins and Easteria 1992). Laughing Gulls are casual in Kansas, with all records falling between 4 April and 8 October (Thompson and Ely 1989). They are casual migrants in Colorado with about 15 records, the first as recently as 1974 (Andrews and Righter 1992). There are no records for Wyoming (Scott 1993). There are two records for South Dakota, including an unusual record of a bird from 10 January-28 April, 1990 at Gavin's Point Dam in Yankton Co. (S.D.O.U. 1991). If trends in surrounding states continue, more records of this species in Nebraska can be anticipated.

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