

Gulls: Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*),



Ringed Billed Gull

(*Larus delawarensis*),



Laughing Gull (*Larus atricilla*),



Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)

Gulls, often mistakenly called seagulls, are medium to large birds that are generally gray and white with black markings on their heads and wings. Most have long bills and webbed feet. These intelligent birds can be observed throughout the New York/New Jersey Harbor Estuary co-existing successfully with development and people. In fact, most gull populations in our area are increasing due to the gull's keen ability to make the best of human activities.

Their diet consists of crabs and small fish, but they are scavengers as well, happy to feed on trash. Some eat insects too, assisting us not only with litter removal but pest control. The presence of gulls can be seen as an indicator of ecological health. Gulls, like humans, are at the top of the food chain. Their rapid metabolism makes them an early indicator of environmental change and potentially harmful conditions.

Bird watching along the Estuary's coastal areas is a fast growing form of tourism that represents a good source of revenue. Because gulls may be hard to identify when immature, some "birders" seek out our area's gulls, considering them a challenge to identify and a great accomplishment to identify correctly.

Gulls found in the Harbor Estuary are the Great Black-backed Gull, Ringed Billed Gull, Laughing Gull and Herring Gull. Great Black-backed Gulls are the largest of the four. The adult has a white head, neck and underside with a black mantle. Their legs are pinkish and their bill is yellow with a dark reddish spot on the lower tip. Great Black-backed Gulls like to breed on small islands, salt marshes, spoil islands and barrier beaches. They travel far out to sea during the winter months. Great Black-backed Gulls can be a serious predator of other colonial nesting birds, such as terns.

A medium-sized, white-headed gull, the Ring-billed Gull looks similar to the Herring and California Gull but is smaller and has a shorter bill with a broad, black ring around it. Ring-billed Gulls are common throughout North America, living near fresh or salt water. They rarely go far offshore. They are considered opportunistic, taking advantage of foraging opportunities in developed areas such as parking lots, restaurants, garbage dumps, and agricultural areas. This species suffered a major decline at the beginning of

the twentieth century due to hunting, but has since rebounded and currently thrives throughout its range including the NY/NJ Harbor Estuary. To some, it is considered a nuisance species.

In the summer, the Laughing Gull adult's head is black, and its bill is dark red. In the winter, the adults have a mottled gray head and a black bill and legs. They are a regular visitor to the New York/New Jersey Harbor Estuary during the summer and fall. Laughing Gulls are rarely found inland, preferring the salt marshes and bays of the Estuary. At one time, the Laughing Gull was hunted and killed for its fine plumage which was then used by milliners to decorate hats. Over the years it has been protected and is no longer threatened.

Herring Gulls are common over much of North America and the Herring Gull population in the area of the New York/New Jersey Harbor Estuary has increased dramatically in the last few decades, more than likely due to the abundance of human-generated garbage. This gull is slightly smaller than the Great Black-backed Gull. Adults have white heads, necks and under parts with gray mantles. Their legs are pinkish and their bills are yellow with a reddish spot on the lower half. Herring Gulls are predators and scavengers, eating a wide variety of foods from fish caught at sea to edible bits of garbage. For this reason they can colonize a wide range of environments including those altered by humans.



This entry was researched and written by Claire Antonucci, Rosemary Higgins and Cathy Yuhas of the New Jersey Sea Grant Consortium Extension Program. It is part of a larger project, "The Key Species of New York/New Jersey Harbor Estuary" produced with funding from the New York/New Jersey Harbor Estuary Program.