

Mew Gull

Larus canus

Gulls of the family *Laridae* (=gull) are sturdy, robust birds with webbed feet, hooked bills and squarish tails. Most are gray and white and have long, pointed wings with black wingtips. These noisy, social birds are primarily scavengers and will aggressively "steal" or pirate food from one another. Often, gulls are closely associated with water but as powerful and deliberate flyers, these adaptable generalists are found in almost any habitat. Although adults of both sexes appear similar, many stages of juvenile plumage precede attainment of adult plumage in the third year. Mew Gulls are smaller, white-headed gulls so named for the "mewing" sounds of their breeding calls. Their Latin name, *Larus canus*, reflects their coloration and means "gray- and white-haired gull."

Common and assertive, Mew Gulls inhabit rocky, sandy coasts and inland lakes and rivers. As breeding adults, these 109cm gulls are solid-white above and below, with light-gray wings and backs and dark gray tails. Although solid-white in summer, their heads and napes are washed in brown in winter. Their large, dark eyes are rimmed in red. Thin and solid yellow, their unmarked bills distinguish Mew Gulls from all other gulls (except Kittiwakes).

Reminiscent of a mewling kitten, the high-pitched call of the Mew Gull is heard in the breeding colony. Their calls are higher and weaker than those of Herring Gulls and begin with high squeals. When alarmed, the call is a rapid series of nasal and yapping notes, "yadadadadada..."

Nesting in colonies or in solitary pairs, Mew Gulls may build nests in conifers, in marshes or on the ground. However, protective cover is a critical factor in selection of all nesting sites. Assembled by both parents, cup-shaped ground nests are placed in shallow depressions (scrapes) in the highest part of the habitat (river bars, dry land or marshes). Alternatively, shallow cups on platforms of seaweed, twigs, mosses and lichen placed at the top of a low-growing spruce or stump may also serve as nest sites. In marsh habitats, these gulls often build floating platforms. Scantily lined with dry grasses, the nests house the 2-3, 57cm eggs of the clutch. Adults aggressively defend their nests, often diving and swooping upon intruders. Eggs are brownish-olive buff in color, marked in brown and occasionally wreathed. Both parents participate in incubation of the clutch, which lasts from 24-26 days. Young birds fledge in another 30-32 days post-hatching.

Although predominantly scavengers, Mew Gulls are known to hunt insects, earthworms, mollusks, crustaceans and occasionally young birds and mice. To break open hard shells, these clever gulls drop prey, such as sea urchins, from heights onto the beach. These omnivorous gulls also feed on grain, garbage and fish. They may congregate by the thousands at garbage dumps and fish docks to scavenge and pirate food from each other. Both parents feed chicks regurgitated

meals (mostly fish) through fledging. When foraging, Mew Gulls glean food from the surface of the ground or shoreline. They also take food from the water's surface or just below while floating or swimming.

In winter, Mew Gulls occur along the Pacific coast from central Alaska to Baja. They are found inland throughout most of Alaska, Yukon and parts of British Columbia and the Northwest Territories during the breeding season.