

GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL

Large, loud, and locally common, the **Glaucon-winged Gull** (*Larus glaucescens*) is the most numerous and conspicuous of several species of gull found in Richmond. It is the “seagull” encountered at marinas, schoolyards and parks, inserted within quotes because the correct term for any of the approximately 50 species of web-footed, usually grey-backed birds with white heads and undersides, typically found near coasts and large bodies of water, is simply “gull.”

The Glaucon-winged Gull is found from Alaska to Baja California, and is a year-round resident along the British Columbia coast. It is 50 to 68cm from bill to tail, with a wingspan of 150cm, and can weigh almost a kilogram. Adults in breeding plumage have white heads, yellow bills with a red dot below the tip, medium-grey back and wings and grey (“glaucon”) tips on the wing feathers, as opposed to black in most species. The legs are pink, and the eyes are dark, in contrast to the pale eyes of the similarly-sized Western Gull and Herring Gull. In winter, Glaucon-winged Gulls have faint brown streaks or smudges on the neck and head. Young birds are grey or brown with black bills and through a series of molts over four years achieve adult colouration.

Glaucon-winged Gulls occasionally hybridize with other species, notably the Western Gull in southern British Columbia and Washington State, and the Herring Gull in the northern part of its range. Hybrid individuals can be challenging to assign to species, and can frustrate even experienced birdwatchers.



Habitat

Glaucon-winged Gulls live along the Pacific Coast, and within estuaries and river deltas. Roosting and foraging habitats include beaches, rocky shores, mudflats, farm fields, ponds, school yards and garbage dumps.



Nesting

Glaucon-winged Gulls may nest singly or in variably-sized colonies. Most nest on small offshore islands along the British Columbia Coast on sand bars, beaches or the flat tops of more rugged islands. In recent years, in areas including the Fraser Delta, nesting on non-natural surfaces, such as breakwaters and the roofs of waterfront buildings, has become increasingly common.

Nests are rudimentary, a patch of ground scraped clean, usually surrounded by a ring of dried grass or similar vegetation. Clutches of two or three eggs are laid from late May to early July. Incubation lasts 26 to 29 days, and young leave the nest at 40 to 45 days. The number of young that fledge successfully is dependent on the amount and quality of available food. Glaucon-winged Gulls start breeding at four to seven years, and tend to keep same mate over multiple breeding seasons.





Diet

Glaucous-winged Gulls are both predators and scavengers. Like all gulls they are strong flyers and may cover long distances daily from overnight roost to food source and back. They congregate near river mouths and follow the movements of fish, including herring, salmon and eulachon. They also forage along the shore, at low tide flipping debris to uncover small fish, crustaceans, molluscs, worms, echinoderms and other invertebrates. The bycatch tossed from fishing boats is another food source and the reason gulls swarm behind working vessels. Gulls also eat carrion and garbage, and will tear open plastic bags and other containers in search of food items.

Conflict with People

Feeding

Gulls are bold and observant, and learn to take handouts from people, or even snatch food from the plates of unwary diners at outdoor restaurants and picnic areas. They learn from each other where to obtain easy food. A few gulls intentionally fed will quickly attract a flock, which, once familiar with the food source, will return repeatedly and linger even if no food is offered, scattering their droppings on rooftops and other surfaces. Gulls will eat food left outside for pets, with similar messy results. It is recommended that pets be fed inside to prevent gulls and other wildlife from dining on your property.

Garbage

Gulls are well known for raiding garbage, removing and pulling apart plastic bags and food containers in search of food waste, creating a mess. The adoption of hinge-lidded bins for residential garbage has reduced this problem, but around grocery stores, restaurants and picnic areas, gulls still make the most of exposed trash.

Aircraft

Gulls are attracted to open water and fields near airports. As large birds that gather in large numbers, they can be a hazard to planes landing and taking off. Hazing techniques, including pyrotechnics, noise-makers, trained birds of prey and dogs are used to scare gulls away from runways, and dissuade them from returning.

Nest Sites

Glaucous-winged Gulls are protected under the Migratory Bird Convention Act. Once eggs are laid, it is a federal offense to move or disturb a gull's nest in either a natural or urban setting. This can be problematic when workers must access the roof of a building where gulls are nesting. To avoid conflict, if possible, regular external building maintenance can be scheduled during the non-breeding season, from fall to early spring. After gulls have finished nesting, the remains of nests can be removed and the site altered using gull wires or other means to discourage nesting the following year. If an active nest must be moved, a Canadian Wildlife Service officer, who is licensed to do so, should be contacted.



Status and Conservation

In the southern Strait of Georgia, numbers of Glaucous-winged Gull nests peaked in the 1980s and have declined since. This may be due to a reduction in high quality food within the marine environment, nest habitat disturbance from human activities, or increasing populations of Bald Eagles, their main predator. Despite this apparent downturn in numbers, at present the population in British Columbia is sufficiently large to be considered secure.

Other Local Gulls

Over the course of a year, it is possible to see eight or more species of gull in Greater Vancouver, including the Western Gull and Herring Gull, which are similarly-sized to the Glaucous-winged Gull, the relatively small Bonaparte's Gull and Short-billed Gull, and the intermediately-sized Thayer's Gull, California Gull and Ring-billed Gull. Several of these species are very similar-looking and can be hard to tell apart, and not all are expected to be seen in every season.

For those daring to venture into the somewhat challenging field of gull identification, a concise and helpful reference, [Gull Identification in the Lower Mainland](#), has been produced by [Bird Studies Canada](#).

