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Status of the Little Gull in Oklahoma

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The Little Gull (*Larus minutus*; Fig. 1), primarily an Old World species, has recently been found breeding in small numbers in North America (Oberholser 1974; del Hoyo et al 1996; Grant 1997; American Ornithologists' Union 1998; Ewins and Weseloh 1999). It is now seen fairly regularly near the Great Lakes and along the Atlantic Coast (Ewins and Weseloh 1999). Sightings of this species have become more frequent in the southern Great Plains, including Oklahoma. In this paper, I review the Oklahoma records through 1999.

The first sight record of the Little Gull in Oklahoma was made on 1 January 1983. The bird, an adult in winter plumage, was seen by Coleen Withgott and James H. (Jay) Withgott, below the Fort Gibson Reservoir

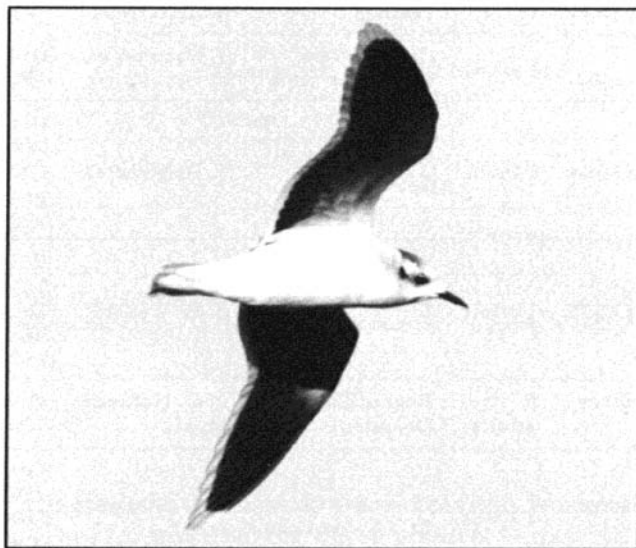


Fig. 1. Adult Little Gull. Photographed below Keystone Dam, Tulsa Co., Oklahoma, on 22 November 1998 by Steve Metz.

Table 1. Summary of Little Gull records for Oklahoma.

Date	Age	Location	Observer(s)	Reference
1 January 1983	1 adult	Wagner Co., Ft. Gibson Dam	C. Withgott, J. Withgott	OBRC
1- 11 December 1990	1 adult	Oklahoma Co., L. Hefner	J. G. Newell et. al.	Newell 1991; OBRC
21- 22 February 1992	1 adult	Sequoyah Co., L. Tenkiller	J. C. Hoffman, D. Verser	Grzybowski 1992a; Withgott 1992; OBRC
29 February- 4 March 1992	1 adult	Cherokee Co., Ft. Gibson Res.	J. Withgott, D. King, S. Metz	Grzybowski 1992a,b; Withgott 1992; OBRC
5 April 1992	1 adult	Bryan Co., L. Texoma	J. D. Webster	Grzybowski 1992b; Withgott 1992; OBRC
27 March 1993	1 adult	Tulsa- Osage Co., Skiatook Sewage Ponds	D. Reinking et. al.	Grzybowski 1993; Reinking 1994; OBRC; TAS
18- 19 September 1993	1 imm.	Bryan Co., L. Texoma	J. D. Webster, M. Patterson	Grzybowski 1994; OBRC
26- 27 November 1993	1 adult	Cherokee Co., Ft. Gibson Dam	J. Norman et. al.	Grzybowski 1994; OBRC
11 October 1994	1 imm.	Bryan Co., L. Texoma	J. D. Webster	Grzybowski 1995; Grzybowski and Loyd 1995; OBRC
11 October 1995	1 adult	Bryan Co., L. Texoma	J. D. Webster	Grzybowski 1996; Grzybowski and Loyd 1996; OBRC
13- 20 October 1996	2 adults	Rogers Co., L. Oologah	J. C. Hoffman et. al.	Grzybowski 1997a; OBRC
1- 3 December 1996	1 adult	Cherokee Co., Ft. Gibson Dam	J. McMahon et. al.	Grzybowski 1997b; Grzybowski and Loyd 1999; OBRC

Table 1. (continued).

Date	Age	Location	Observer(s)	Reference
23 December 1996		Rogers Co.	Christmas Bird Count	CBC 1996/97
4 January 1997	1 first winter	Sequoyah Co.	S. Berger, B. Beall	Grzybowski 1997b; OBRC
6 January 1997	1 adult	Bryan Co., L. Texoma	J. D. Webster	Grzybowski 1997b; Grzybowski and Loyd 1999; OBRC
12 January 1997	1 adult	Cherokee Co., Ft. Gibson Dam	J. McMahon	Grzybowski 1997b; OBRC
25 March 1997*		Mayes Co., Grand L. Dam	P. Moser, N. Lowrie	Grzybowski 1997b; OBRC
21– 24 October 1997		Oklahoma Co., L. Overholser	M. Oliphant, V. Anderson	OBRC
14 February 1998	1 adult	Sequoyah Co., Sequoyah Natl. Wildl. Refuge	S. Berger	Grzybowski 1998; OBRC
16 November– 3 December 1998	1 adult, 1 first winter	Tulsa Co., Keystone Dam	J. Arterburn et. al.	Grzybowski 1999a,b; OBRC; TAS
20 December 1998	1 adult	Johnston Co., Tishomingo Natl. Wildl. Refuge	C. Brown, M. Brown	pers. obs.
19 December 1999	1 adult	Tulsa Co., Keystone Dam	J. Hoffman, S. Metz	OBRC
23 December 1999	2 adults	Rogers Co., L. Oologah	P. Wilson et. al.	OBRC

*Reported as both 25 and 26 March in records.

(OBRC = Oklahoma Bird Records Committee; TAS = Tulsa Audubon Society)

dam, approximately 6.4 km east of Okay, near the Wagoner/Cherokee County line. The bird was foraging with a group of Bonaparte's Gulls (*L. philadelphia*). Although the bird was not photographed, it was clearly described and the sighting documented in a letter dated 22 January 1983 from Coleen Withgott to Jeri McMahon (Oklahoma Bird Records Com-

mittee files). The Oklahoma Bird Records Committee (OBRC) accepted this sighting on 20 March 1993, making it the second accepted record but the first known for the state.

The first Little Gull record accepted by the OBRC was from Lake Hefner in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, 1–11 December 1990. The bird, an adult in winter plumage, was initially identified by John G. Newell. It was subsequently observed by several others and photographed (Newell 1991). The bird was seen with group of Bonaparte's Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls (*L. delawarensis*) and a Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*). The sighting was accepted by the Oklahoma Bird Records Committee on 26 January 1991, and the Little Gull was added to the official Oklahoma bird check list.

Currently, there are 23 reported sightings of the Little Gull in Oklahoma (Table 1). Unfortunately, several of the reported sightings remain undocumented and therefore potentially unreliable. However, because Little Gulls are relatively easy to identify and thus the reports likely to be accurate, I have included them in this paper. All sightings have been in the eastern half of the state, with the Oklahoma County records being the most westerly. All sightings have been made near large reservoirs or other water impoundments. Sixteen (69%) of the 23 sightings have occurred in the northeastern quadrant of the state. Six (26%) have occurred in the south, near Lake Texoma. The remaining two (8%) were in Oklahoma County. Vagrant gulls probably move large distances over short periods of time, and thus it is impossible to determine with certainty how many individuals are represented among the Oklahoma Little Gull records. Several of the reported sightings almost certainly are repeated observations of the same individual. For example, the February–March 1992 sightings from Cherokee/Sequoyah County (Table 1) may be of the same bird. The records from Cherokee/Rogers County in December 1996 (Table 1) could be the same bird. There are three reports of two birds being seen at the same site (Table 1). At most 26 birds are represented among the 23 Oklahoma Little Gull sightings.

All 23 sightings of the Little Gull in Oklahoma fall between mid September and early April (Table 1). The records are fairly evenly distributed over the winter months. There is one September record, four in October, two in November, six in December, four in January, three in February, two in March and one in April. Vagrant Little Gulls apparently wander beyond their usual range in the fall and winter months.

All sightings in Oklahoma apparently have been of birds in winter plumage, so determination of age is difficult, but of the 23 sightings and possible 26 birds involved, 19 (73%) were of adult birds, four (15%) were of immatures, and the age of three (12%) was unclear (Table 1). It is not possible to determine from the data at hand whether these birds were post-breeders or non-breeders, or what subsequently happened to them.

Little Gulls are often seen in association with other gulls. In the Old World, they commonly associate with Common Black-headed Gulls (*L.*

ridibundus) and Black Terns (*Chlidonias niger*). In North America they are usually seen in small groups of 1–3 individuals, frequently associated with Bonaparte's Gulls (del Hoyo et al 1996; Ewins and Weseloh 1999). The Oklahoma Little Gulls seemed to follow this pattern, usually one or two birds foraging with or in the company of Bonaparte's Gulls. The Lake Tenkiller bird in 1992 was seen with a Common Black-headed Gull. The Lake Hefner bird in 1990 was observed with Ring-billed Gulls and a Black-legged Kittiwake. It is not clear whether these associations were inadvertent, with birds of similar ecology simply being in the same area, or if the Little Gulls were actively attracted to the other gulls.

Historically, Little Gulls are resident in Eurasia (del Hoyo et al 1996; Grant 1997; American Ornithologists' Union 1998; Ewins and Weseloh 1999). Their Old World breeding range extends from northern Scandinavia and northeastern Europe through the Baltic republics and eastward to Russia and central Siberia (del Hoyo et al 1996; Grant 1997; American Ornithologists' Union 1998; Ewins and Weseloh 1999) with sporadic appearances in western and central Europe. Their main breeding range is in central Asia, and they winter mostly in areas to the south and west of their breeding range (del Hoyo et al 1996).

The first North American sightings of the Little Gull were made during the 1819–1822 Sir John Franklin expedition to the Canadian Arctic Coast by John Richardson, the expedition's surgeon-naturalist (Franklin 1910; Ewins and Weseloh 1999). The first record of Little Gulls breeding in North America was in 1962 (Scott 1963; Oberholser 1974; del Hoyo et al 1996; Grant 1997; American Ornithologists' Union 1998; Ewins and Weseloh 1999), when three nests were found at Oshawa Second Marsh, near Lake Ontario, east of Toronto, Canada. They apparently first bred in the United States in 1975 (del Hoyo et al 1996). Their breeding range has expanded to include local populations in Manitoba, Michigan, Minnesota, Ontario, Quebec, and Wisconsin, with all recorded nesting occurring in the Great Lakes drainage basin (American Ornithologists' Union 1998; Ewins and Weseloh 1999). There have been only 67 documented breeding attempts in North America, all taking place between 1962 and 1989. No confirmed breeding has been documented since 1989, and most of the nesting attempts in North America have failed (Ewins and Weseloh 1999). Little Gulls typically winter along the Great Lakes and the Atlantic coast south to Virginia, although individuals have been reported from much of interior North America (American Ornithologists' Union 1998).

The source of the North American population of Little Gulls is uncertain. They may be trans-Atlantic immigrants from Europe. This is supported by the discovery in June 1996 of a first-summer Little Gull in Pennsylvania that had been banded in Sweden (Ewins and Weseloh 1999). Trans-Atlantic immigration is also suggested by the fact that sightings in North America have increased concurrently with increases in the size of the western European population (Ewins and Weseloh 1999). Another possibility is immigration from Siberia across the Bering Strait through

Alaska and Canada. This scenario may be the most unlikely, because there are relatively few records of Little Gulls in the Pacific Northwest. It is also possible that Little Gulls have always occurred in small numbers in remote parts of northern Canada (most likely the lowlands around Hudson Bay), and the Little Gulls seen in North America are members of that population (Ewins and Weseloh 1999).

The first record for the Little Gull in adjacent states occurred on 5 April 1965, when a immature bird (second year in winter plumage) was collected in Dallas County, Texas, at the Trinity River Authority central sewage pond (Pulich 1966). By the end of 1998, there were 29 accepted records of the Little Gull for Texas (Lockwood 1999). The Texas sightings are distributed largely throughout the state, except for the Trans-Pecos region and the northern Panhandle (Texas Ornithological Society 1995). The first Little Gull sighting in Kansas was on 3 November 1974 at Redmond Reservoir in Coffey County in the south central part of the state, and there are now at least three records for Kansas (Thompson and Ely 1989). The first record for Arkansas occurred on 22 November 1985 at Lake Millwood in the extreme southwestern part of the state, when an adult and an immature were seen (James and Neal 1986). There are now at least two records for Arkansas. The first Missouri sighting was on 30 November 1975 at the Maryville sewage lagoons, east of Maryville in Nodaway County in the extreme northwestern part of the state (Robbins and Esterla 1992); there are now at least three records for Missouri. The first sight record of the Little Gull in Oklahoma, in 1983, generally fits with the first dates for adjacent states.

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