

Gulls, terns and noddies are a large cosmopolitan group of mainly coastal birds. Most have short straight bills and short legs. Sexes alike. Usually grey, black or brown above, and white below in adults; juveniles usually have brown barring on back and wings. Bill and legs are often brightly coloured but usually change with age and/or season.

BLACK-BACKED GULL (Karoro) *Larus dominicanus*

Abundant native

60 cm; ♂ 1050 g, ♀ 850 g. The only large gull in NZ. Languid shallow wingbeats interspersed with long glides separate it from distant skuas and mollymawks. Juvenile dull brown, pale feather edges give a mottled appearance, especially on head, neck and underparts; bill and eye dark brown; legs pinkish brown. In flight, looks dark brown with a paler rump. 2nd year has head, neck and underparts white, mottled and flecked brown; back and upperwings scruffy brown and black; bill dull yellowish or greenish, darker at tip; legs pinkish brown to greyish green. In flight, rump white, mottled brown, tail usually barred brown and white, wings darker towards tips. 3rd year has head and underparts white; neck lightly flecked brown; back and upperwings black with narrow white trailing edge; bill yellow with red spot at tip of lower bill; eye pale yellow; legs greenish yellow. **Habitat:** Breeds circumpolar subantarctic; in NZ region, on coast of mainland, offshore and outlying islands, except only straggles to Kermadecs and The Snares; also breeds far inland on riverbeds, near lakes and alpine tarns. Ranges widely, feeds at rubbish tips, farmland, ploughed fields, beaches, harbours and behind boats, but rarely ventures far out to sea. **Breeding:** Oct–Feb.



[Sp 233]



GULLS, TERNS and NODDIES Laridae

About 88 species (47 gulls, 37 terns and 4 noddies) worldwide: 3 gulls, 6 terns and 4 noddies breed in the New Zealand region, and 8 terns visit regularly or as rare vagrants.

white below and shades of black or grey above, while noddies are more uniformly white, grey or brown. Juvenile plumage has buff barring, especially on the back and wings. Terns and noddies are more aerial than gulls and are more delicate; their wings are narrower and more pointed and their tail is often forked, sometimes deeply. They have straight, slender, tapering bills. They shuffle or waddle along on short legs. Gregarious; breeding in colonies and feeding and roosting in tight flocks. The nest is a simple scrape or depression in sand, shingle, shell or rock, but some noddies build a small platform nest in a tree or shrub, and White Terns simply lay their egg in a depression on a tree branch. Whole small fish, caught mainly by plunging or by picking from the surface of water and held crosswise in the bill, are usually brought in courtship display and to the chicks, but some tropical terns and noddies feed by regurgitation. Chicks go on begging for months after they can fly.

Gulls are coastal or inland birds in New Zealand. Adults have white bodies and grey or black backs, and broad wings with black and white patterning at the tips. Juvenile plumage has a distinctive buff barring on the back and wings. Gulls have a strong bill with a distinctive shape, deepest about a third of the way back from the tip. They walk well on quite long legs. Gregarious; breeding in colonies and feeding and roosting in large numbers. The ground nest is a shallow cup in a low, well-formed mound of vegetation. Chicks are fed by regurgitation. Gulls feed on a wide variety of foods, including human refuse, fish, shellfish, crustaceans and other invertebrates (including earthworms and grubs exposed by ploughing) and eggs of other birds.

Terns and noddies are mostly pelagic or coastal, except some are inland on rivers or over coastal lakes. Noddies breed only in the tropics or subtropics, and sailors may have named them for their absurd-seeming nodding courtship displays. Terns are usually

Reading: Grant, P.J. 1981. *Gulls: An Identification Guide*. Calton: Poyser. Harrison, P. 1983. *Seabirds: An Identification Guide*. Beckenham: Croom Helm. Serventy, D.L. et al. 1971. *The Handbook of Australian Sea-birds*. Sydney: A.H. & A.W. Reed.

233. BLACK-BACKED GULL *Larus dominicanus* **Plate 53**

Other names: Karoro, Kelp Gull (Australia), Dominican Gull, Southern Black-backed Gull
Size: 60 cm; males 1050 g, females 850 g

Geographical variation: Two subspecies: *vetula* breeds in South Africa, and *dominicanus* which breeds widely in the subantarctic and

temperate Southern Hemisphere, including New Zealand.

diameter, with a small but deep depression in the centre.

Distribution: Breed on coasts and offshore islands of South America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, on many subantarctic islands and on the coast of Antarctica. In New Zealand, they breed in colonies or in pairs along the mainland coasts, on most offshore islands and on the Chatham, Bounty, The Snares, Antipodes, Auckland and Campbell Islands, but are strangely absent from the Three Kings. They straggle to the Ross Dependency and the Kermadec Islands, and as far as Norfolk Island and Niue. They also breed on riverbeds, lake shores and subalpine tarns high in the mountains of the North and South Islands.

Most eggs are laid between mid-October and late November, with a peak in early November, but some repeat clutches are laid through to late January. The clutch is of 1–2–3–5 eggs, but the rare clutches of over 3 eggs may be laid by two females. The eggs (69 x 47 mm, 80 g) are greyish green in ground colour with brown spots and blotches, but there is usually considerable variation in the ground colour within a clutch. Eggs are laid 2–3 days apart, at any time of day, and egg size declines through a clutch. Both sexes incubate for 23–27–30 days and brood the nestlings for 2–3 days. The chicks then leave the nest for increasingly long periods. Until the chicks fledge at c. 50 days old, they are usually guarded by one of the parents. They remain with their parents for a couple of months after fledging, and juveniles up to 6 months old are seen begging for food. Some 2-year-old birds start displaying at colonies, but most probably do not start breeding until at least 4 years old. Annual survivorship of adults is about 93%, giving a life expectancy of about 14 years, but the oldest Black-backed Gull recorded in New Zealand lived over 28 years.

Black-backed Gulls use estuaries, harbours and open coastlines, rivers, lakes, wet pasture, lambing paddocks and freshly ploughed farmland, rubbish tips and city parks. They are mainly sedentary, but flocks commute 30 km or more each day between roosting sites near the coast and inland feeding sites. At sea, they are mainly restricted to coastal waters; however, they readily follow ships out into pelagic waters.

Behaviour: Generally gregarious; nesting in colonies, roosting in large flocks and often feeding in loose flocks. When breeding, they vigorously defend a small patch around their nest site and attack other birds or people entering the area. Young non-breeding birds normally form 'clubs' near the colony during the breeding season. Black-backed Gulls have a large variety of calls, but the most characteristic calls are a contagious 'long call' heard especially in breeding colonies or in feeding flocks, described as 'uh, uh, eeah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha' or 'kaloo-kaloo-kloo-kloo-kloo-kloo', and a non-contagious 'gorah gorah' call mainly from breeding adults.

Population: Widespread and locally common.
Conservation: Unprotected native. Black-backed Gulls have benefited from human settlement in New Zealand, especially with the creation of readily available food supplies from meatworks, fish processors, fishing boats, rubbish tips and sewer outfalls. With offal and sewage discharges into the sea being greatly reduced, and with improved waste management limiting refuse available, numbers are now declining in some areas.

Feeding: Black-backed Gulls are opportunists, taking a wide variety of food, including offal, refuse, carrion, marine invertebrates and shellfish, fish, eggs, frogs, lizards, birds, mammals and even small fruit and other plant material. They are often seen feeding on offal and refuse at rubbish tips, sewer outfalls,

Breeding: Most Black-backed Gulls nest in large colonies of up to several thousand pairs on coastal dunes, sandspits, boulderbanks, gravel beaches, rocky islets and riverbeds, but some nest solitarily on coastal rock stacks and headlands, near mountain tarns up to 1500 m asl, and sometimes on roofs of city buildings. Numbers of birds at colonies start building up in late July, and nest-building commences almost immediately. The nest is built mainly by the male. It is a substantial mound of dry grass, seaweed, twigs, feathers and tidal flotsam, measuring about 20 cm in

along the shoreline or behind boats. At sea, they feed on algae and plunge-dive for small fish and marine invertebrates. Along the coast, they can be seen carrying shellfish aloft and dropping them to break open the shells. During bad weather, Black-backed Gulls often head inland to feed on worms and insects forced to the surface in wet pasture or playing fields. They also congregate in lambing paddocks to feed on placentas and dead lambs, and will occasionally attack live lambs and sick or cast sheep. Undigested food items are regurgitated as pellets at roosts and breeding colonies.

In the hand: Males are larger than females, but measurements overlap, e.g. wing 400–427–440 mm cf. 373–404–428 mm; and bill 49–54–59 mm cf. 44.5–49–53 mm. Males have a positive score from the equation 0.126 x head length + 0.289 x bill depth - 19.707, and females have a negative score.

Reading: Fordham, R.A. 1964. *Notornis* 11: 3–34; 110–126. Fordham, R.A. 1968. *Proc NZ Ecol Soc* 15: 40–50. Fordham, R.A. 1970. *J Anim Ecol* 39: 13–27. Kinsky, F.C. 1963. *Rec Dom Mus* 4: 149–219. Nugent, G. 1982. *Notornis* 29: 37–40. Powlesland, R.G. & Powlesland, M.H. 1994. *Notornis* 41: 117–132. Powlesland, R.G. & Robertson, H.A. 1987. *Notornis* 34: 327–338.