

LAUGHING GULLS (*LARUS ATRICILLA*) IN JAMAICA

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Abstract.—We reviewed data collected on Laughing Gulls (*Larus atricilla*) over a 35-year period (1963-1998) in Jamaica, concluding that the species is common in Jamaica (particularly in Kingston Harbor) in the winter, which is contrary to reports from other Caribbean Islands. The species appears to be more common in Jamaica during the winter than during its breeding season.

THE LAUGHING GULL (*Larus atricilla*) is the most common gull in the West Indies (Raffaele *et al.* 1998). It is the only likely *Larus* species to be seen around Jamaica because all other *Larus* species are rare transients (Downer and Sutton 1990, Raffaele *et al.* 1998). In Jamaica, Laughing Gulls have been reported breeding from late April to early August (Van Halewyn and Norton 1984, Downer and Sutton 1990). Nesting is known from the Morant and Port Royal Cays, where numbers of nesting birds have apparently been small (Haynes 1987). This note on the species' occurrence in Jamaica has been inspired by the Seabird Group of the Society of Caribbean Ornithology, which has drawn attention to the fact that available literature suggests that Laughing Gulls are practically absent from all Caribbean islands in winter when they concentrate over continental shelf waters from Panama through French Guiana (Tuck 1980, van Halweyn and Norton 1984, Raffaele *et al.* 1998). We believe this is not the case for Jamaica.

Unfortunately, no population or census data exist for Jamaican seabirds. To determine the abundance of Laughing Gulls according to location and time of year, we retrieved the available sighting information from the *BirdLife Jamaica Broadsheet* (formerly *Gosse Bird Club Broadsheet*; 1963–present) and extracted data for this species from Fletcher's personal diary (1980-1998; Table 1). The data presented represent observations over a 35-year span at various coastal locations by observers who were not specifically interested in Laughing Gulls. Unfortunately, not all of the observers reported the numbers of individuals they observed. All sightings have been ranked by location and the month in which they were made. With the exception of the Morant Cays (an offshore cay) and the Martha Brae River estuary, all locations are on the southern coast of Jamaica and most of the localities are in and around Kingston Harbor. Kingston Harbor is the seventh largest natural harbor in the world and is bordered by metropolitan Kingston, St. Andrew, and St. Catherine.

The data are presented beginning with April to

group all of the winter months together in Table 1. By so doing, it becomes obvious that the highest numbers of Laughing Gulls have been observed from November to March. Admittedly, the data presented are limited. The data, however, suggest that the Laughing Gull is more common in the winter when they are known to be scarce in the northern Caribbean islands, such as the Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands (David Lee, pers. comm.). Additionally, in preparation of this note, on 13 December 1998 a survey of Laughing Gulls was made from two locations (Causeway Bridge and the No. 1 Pier) around Kingston Harbor, when a total of 428 individuals was observed. Laughing Gulls were by far the most common seabird observed. In the entire harbor their numbers were estimated as at least triple the total we counted. Furthermore, large numbers of this species have been observed roosting among dead mangrove trees in the Portmore section of Kingston Harbor during past winters (L. Douglas and H. Davis, personal obs.).

We conclude that Laughing Gulls are more common in Jamaican waters in the winter than during the breeding season, during which time they show a preference for Kingston Harbor for overwintering

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Table 1. Numbers of Laughing Gulls (*Larus atricilla*) observed in Jamaican coastal waters over a 35-year period, 1963–1998, listed by the month in which the observation was made.

Month	Year	Location	Number observed
April	1981	Yallahs Ponds	1
	1989	Port Henderson, Kingston Harbor	2
	1989	Refuge Cay	Present
May	1997	Morant Cays	Few
	1980	Great Pedro Ponds	1
	1988	Parottee Ponds	5
June	1988	Morant Cays	4
	1963	Port Royal, Kingston Harbor	6
	1994	Yallahs Ponds	1
July	1965	Morant Cays	10
	1984	Fort Augusta, Kingston Harbor	Many
	1998	Parottee Ponds	2
August	1998	Portmore Sewage Ponds	2
	1976	Morant Cays	5
	1983	Martha Brae River	1
September	1992	Yallahs Ponds	2
	1963	Port Royal, Kingston Harbor	3
	1973	Black River	1
October	1997	Yallahs Ponds	4
	1976	Kingston Harbor	1
November	1976	Kingston Harbor	4
	1987	Kingston Harbor	30
	1998	Kingston Harbor	45
December	1976	Kingston Harbor	39
	1983	Rock Fort, Kingston Harbor	55
January	1971	Savanalamar	6
	1972	Bluefields Bay	7
	1984	Kingston Harbor	Many
	1990	Yacht Club, Kingston Harbor	10
February	1991	Fort Augusta, Kingston Harbor	3
	1997	Port Royal, Kingston Harbor	21
	1987	Fort Augusta, Kingston Harbor	20
March	1984	Kingston Harbor	150
	1993	Port Royal, Kingston Harbor	21