

Ring-billed gull

Larus delawarensis

By Jim Pashby

For most of us, the wheezing squeals and squawks of seagulls evoke memories of the seaside, the smell of salt-water, and the feel of warm sand underfoot.

So what were these noisy white birds doing fighting over french fries in the McDonald's parking lot in Havre, 1,000 miles from the nearest ocean?

When I set out to solve the riddle, the first thing I learned is that, technically, there is no single "seagull" bird species. There are two dozen gull species in North America. Though most spend at least part of the year along an ocean shoreline, some live their entire lives no closer to the sea than a pronghorn or jackrabbit does. I also learned that many gull species are nearly identical, with a white head, neck, and chest; gray wings with black wingtips; and yellow legs and bill.

Montana is home to 18 resident or migrant gull species. The most common are the Franklin's gull, the California gull, and the species I saw in Havre that day, the ring-billed gull.

IDENTIFICATION

The ring-billed gull is a crow-size bird with a white head and breast, gray back and wings, black wing tips, and the namesake black ring near the end of its bill.

The species can be distinguished from other white-headed gulls by its lack of the red "gony spot" found on the lower mandible (beak bottom) of the herring, western, and California gulls. In addition to the red gony spot, the California gull has a black mark on its bill that makes the bird, from a distance, look like a ring-billed gull.

HABITAT

Ring-billed gulls are common across Montana except in the far west and southeast. The birds are especially abundant in areas



SCIENTIFIC NAME *Larus* is a Latin word for a gull or other large seabird. *Delawarensis* refers to the Delaware River, where the first specimen was recorded.

with large reservoirs and lakes, including Ninepipe, Bowdoin, and Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuges, Fort Peck Reservoir, Freezeout Lake, and Flathead Lake. Because ring-billed gulls tolerate people, they also hang around golf courses, landfills, and the parking lots of fast-food restaurants, motels, and big box stores.

DIET

You name it, ring-billed gulls eat it: garbage, crayfish, worms, insects, fish, small mammals, and the eggs and chicks of other birds.

A 1990s study at Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge north of Missoula found that the ring-billed gulls' primary prey were two vole species. Another study, published in 1960, investigated whether ring-billed gulls at Freezeout Lake were eating duck eggs or killing ducklings. They weren't. Stomach contents revealed that the gulls were instead consuming mostly earth-

worms, crayfish, insects, mice, and spent barley from local farm fields.

NESTING

Ring-billed gulls nest in colonies on the ground, usually on a sparsely vegetated peninsula or island of a lake or reservoir. Breeding pairs construct a nest consisting of a scraped shallow impression in the ground lined with twigs, dried reeds, sticks, grasses, or leaves. The female lays two to four eggs, which hatch in three to four weeks. Ring-billed gulls raise only one brood each year, but they re-nest if a predator or flooding destroys the eggs.

CONSERVATION STATUS

Like fox squirrels, Canada geese, crows, and coyotes, ring-billed gulls thrive in developed landscapes. They are especially fond of waste crops and garbage dumps. As long as people grow grains and create trash, this species is not going anywhere. 🐼

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