

Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus*: a new breeding species for Ecuador

Ben Haase

The Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* is a circumpolar, southern hemisphere species distributed in temperate parts of South America, southern Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania, various oceanic islands and around the edge of Antarctica⁷. In South America, the subspecies *L. d. dominicanus* breeds from 23°S in southern Brazil to Tierra del Fuego, and on the Pacific coast north to at least 6°S in Peru². In Ecuador, the species's occurrence is reported by Chapman¹ and Levêque³, but is omitted by Marchant⁴ for south-western Ecuador. Meyer de Schauensee⁵ suggests *L. dominicanus* is an occasional winter visitor north to Ecuador.

Since May 1993 I have regularly observed *L. dominicanus* on the Ecuasal salt lakes at Salinas (2°15'S 80°58'W), south-west Ecuador. Initially seen in small numbers, by October 1993, 39 adults were counted, and although some were moulting inner primaries, they regularly showed intraspecific aggression and gave the typical "long call" of territorial birds.

In January 1994 at least 40 adult birds and 17 nests were found on a low (up to 1.2 m above water level), 800 m² oval-shaped, bare, sandy island in one of the Ecuasal salt lakes. The nests comprised herbaceous and algal material, and were found up to the top of the island. Ten of the nests were occupied by incubating or brooding birds; one adult was guiding two recently hatched young, and seven chicks, 1-3 weeks old, were standing near the water's edge. Although a juvenile bird was seen flying nearby, there were no recently fledged or soon-to-fledge birds in the colony.

On 6 February, seven gulls were still incubating eggs, and on 20 March at least three gulls were brooding downy young. By 26 May, only one adult gull was attending a nest.

A subsequent dramatic reduction in the number of adults left just one dependent young on the island on 6 July, and two adult birds that were already (or still?) showing pair-bond behaviour on 19 July. Two weeks later, the number of birds had increased to 17 adults resting on or near the colony island. Moreover, two pairs of gulls had colonised a similar, but smaller island

(250 m²) in an adjacent pool. During August and September a total of 47 adult birds were resident on the two islands, and by October the colony was formed by 50 adults, of which eight were occupying nests, and three immature birds. In January 1995, the two islands supported 46 and 24 adult birds respectively, with some pairs holding territories in the low vegetation of the nearest dyke.

The winter season 1994-95 was not extraordinarily wet, but due to heavy rainfall in the first week of February 1995 the water level had risen over 40 cm, reducing the islands to 20% of their usual size. At least 12 nests were lost, with eight more-or-less floating or on the new water-line but still tended by adult birds. A total of 10 chicks or dependent juveniles remained on the surrounding dykes. After February the water soon dropped to its normal level, but no new nesting activity was observed. Between March and November 1995 most adults and juveniles dispersed throughout the area, forming small groups of 5-15 birds.

In contrast to previous years, the number of gulls observed near the colony during 1995 did not increase in September, and unfortunately in October the large colony island was flooded due to the lake's artificially high water-level. The smaller colony island in the adjacent pool was temporarily subject to disturbance when 10% of the island's sand was used to repair nearby damaged dykes. As a result, the gulls did not occupy either colony site. When the small island was once again free of disturbance in November, only 14 adults were found in the vicinity, but up to December (when this article was completed) there were no signs of reproductive behaviour.

Table. Presence of adult Kelp Gull *Larus d. dominicanus* at Salinas, May 1993 to December 1995. Note the strong decline in numbers after heavy rainfall in February 1995, and after man's activities in October.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
1993					2	1	0	2	9	39	38	36
1994	40	57	62	70	80	10	2	17	47	50	56	61
1995	70	83	15	10	19	0	1	26	22	27	4	14



Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* (R. L. Pitman/VIREO)

These observations constitute the first documented breeding record of *L. dominicanus* for Ecuador. Although I have watched the Ecuasal area monthly since February 1990, there was no indication of nesting activity until January 1994. *L. dominicanus* is the second gull species to have started nesting in Ecuador since the late 1970s, when Ridgely & Wilcove⁶ reported, in the same coastal habitat, the country's first breeding record of the Grey-hooded Gull *Larus cirrocephalus*. At present, over 450 pairs of *L. cirrocephalus* breed in south-west Ecuador (pers. obs.). The northward extension of these two species' distributions to the north is possibly related to the growing shrimp industry, which has resulted in an increasing number of shrimp hatcheries along the coast.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr C. Smeenk, Dr A. L. Spaans, Jon Curson, Ted Hoogendoorn and David Wege for their comments on the draft version of this article.

References

1. Chapman, F. M. (1926) The distribution of bird-life in Ecuador. *Bull. Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist.* 55.
2. Harrison, P. (1985) *Seabirds: an identification guide*. Revised edition. Beckenham, Kent: Croom Helm.
3. Levêque, R. (1964) Notes on Ecuadorean birds. *Ibis* 106: 52-62.
4. Marchant, S. (1958) The birds of the Santa Elena peninsula, S.W Ecuador. *Ibis* 100: 349-387.
5. Meyer de Schauensee, R. (1982) *A guide to the birds of South America*. Wynnewood, Penn.: Livingston Publishing Company for the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (reprinted with addenda by ICBP Pan-American Section).
6. Ridgely, R. S. & Wilcove, D. S. (1981) First nesting record of Gray-hooded Gull from Ecuador. *Condor* 81: 438-439.
7. Watson, G. E. (1975) *Birds of the Antarctic and Sub-antarctic*. Washington, D.C.: Amer. Geophys. Union.

Ben Haase

c/o FEMM, P.O. Box 0901 - 11905 (12-95), Guayaquil, Ecuador