

Bonaparte's Gull

Larus philadelphia



Photo by Monika Wieland

Physical Description:

This small gull (only 13" long) with an all-black bill has bright orange legs and a distinct, buoyant flight pattern. Adult birds in flight have visible white patches on the leading edge of their wings as well as black wing tips. Their backs are pale gray, and the bellies are white. In breeding plumage, Bonaparte's gulls have black hoods, whereas in non-breeding plumage they have white heads with a black spot behind the eye. Immature birds have paler legs, a dark brown bar on the wings, more black on the wing tips, and a dark tail band. These are "two year" gulls, meaning it takes two years before immatures get adult plumage.

Natural History:

Bonaparte's gulls are a small, tern-like gull species of North America. They nest inland and winter along the coasts, where they can be seen in large flocks.

Reproduction:

These gulls breed in single pairs or in small colonies on lakeshores and marshes of the northern coniferous forests of Canada and Alaska. They build nests in a tree (often spruce) 5-20 feet off the ground. Each female lays approximately three eggs that are incubated by both parents for 24 days. Both parents also feed the chick, and the chicks fledge after about 30 days.

Life Cycle:

After fledging, it takes Bonaparte's gulls two years to reach maturity. Each year the birds migrate from their nesting grounds in northern Canada to whichever coast is closer. During both the spring (April-June) and fall (July-November) migrations the adults migrate before the non-breeding younger birds.

Range:

Bonaparte's gulls breed inland in the northern parts of North America and winter all along both coasts of the United States as well as at the Great Lakes. Locally, we most often see Bonaparte's gulls in large flocks (numbering 1000 birds or more) during their migrations: in April and May as they head north, and again from late July through early October as they head south. A few birds over-winter here.

Diet:

Bonaparte's gulls eat fish and small crustaceans off the surface of the water by dipping down in flight. When birds are inland, either during breeding season or for some migrating birds, they eat worms and insects.

Threats:

Their population is considered to be stable. Their remote breeding grounds in the north have kept this population from being too influenced by human development.

Fun Facts:

- This is the only gull species that regularly nests in trees
- Their common name comes not from Napoleon Bonaparte, but from his nephew the naturalist Charles Lucien Bonaparte, to honor his contributions to American ornithology while a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences
- Unlike many other gull species, Bonaparte's gulls don't eat garbage or carrion
- In a study of the effects of fish-eating birds on Chinook salmon fry, Bonaparte's gulls were found to be the most efficient predator of the ten species studied

Sources:

National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, Fourth Edition

Stokes Field Guide to Birds ~ Western Region by Donald and Lillian Stokes

Birding in the San Juan Islands by Mark Lewis and Fred Sharpe

"Bonaparte's Gull" on the Cornell Lab of Ornithology web site
<http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Bonapartes_Gull>

"Bonaparte's Gull" on Bird Web <http://birdweb.org/birdweb/bird_details.aspx?id=195>

"Bonaparte's Gull" on Whatbird.com
<http://identify.whatbird.com/obj/459/overview/Bonapartes_Gull.aspx>