

# Heermann's Gull

*Larus heermanni*



Photo by Monika Wieland

## Physical Description:

A distinctive gull, the Heermann's is about 19 inches long with a 51-inch wingspan (a bit larger than a Mew Gull and significantly smaller than a Glaucous-winged Gull). Nonbreeding adults are generally sooty brown and unpatterned with black legs and feet, and a red bill. Breeding plumage, most commonly seen when the species first returns to the Salish Sea in July, is striking because of the distinctive white head, red bill, and white trailing edges of the wings and tail. Juvenile birds are sooty brown with a dark head and pale bill. By the second winter, they begin to show a red bill and white trailing edges on their wings and tail.

## Natural History:

Heermann's Gulls travel in a "reverse migration". They breed in southern waters (Mexico) and then, in July, they quickly move north along the coast, as far as southern British Columbia. In October, the birds begin to depart the Salish Sea and by mid-November, they are quite scarce. Most have returned to the breeding areas by March.

## Reproduction:

Nesting takes place in colonies, almost exclusively on Isla Raza, in Mexico (90 to 95% of the total world population). Nests are located on the ground either in rocky depressions or in the grass. Monogamous parents incubate two to three eggs.

## Life Cycle:

Juvenile birds migrate with adults, although we see far fewer juveniles than adults in the Salish Sea. This is a two-year gull, reaching breeding maturity in its third year.

## Range:

Heermann's Gulls breed on offshore islands along Mexico's Pacific Coast in the spring. Post breeding, the birds spread out to forage along the West Coast, with a significant population over-wintering in California, while others migrate as far north as the Salish Sea, the northern most limit of its range.

## Diet:

Like other gulls, Heermann's are active surface feeders, flying from bait ball to bait ball. In addition to small fish, this species also feeds on marine invertebrates, lizards, insects and carrion. Heermann's Gulls are known to aggressively pursue other birds, Brown Pelicans in particular, harassing them to give up their food.

## **Threats:**

The Heermann's Gull is "near threatened", primarily because of its limited breeding range. The primary breeding island in Mexico, Isla Raza, has been designated a wildlife sanctuary since 1964, significantly reducing the threat of human disturbance. The effects of weather on prey species also threaten the birds.

## **Fun Facts:**

- Despite their smaller size, Heermann's Gulls are aggressive feeders and regularly compete with large gulls in the confusion of a bait ball feeding frenzy
- Powerful fliers, some Heermann's have learned to follow jaegers as they harass terns and smaller gulls to get them to drop their food. The crafty Heermann's Gull then zips in to grab the prize before the jaeger can get it.

## **Sources:**

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

"The Sibley Guide to Birds", by David Allen Sibley

"Heerman's Gull", Cornell's Lab of Ornithology

<[http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Heermanns\\_Gull/lifehistory](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Heermanns_Gull/lifehistory)>

"Heerman's Gull", Whatbird.com

<[http://identify.whatbird.com/obj/477/\\_/Heermanns\\_Gull.aspx](http://identify.whatbird.com/obj/477/_/Heermanns_Gull.aspx)>

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October 2010