

(Jeff Lemons)



Laridae the GULLS, TERNS, and SKIMMERS

The family Laridae is comprised of close to 100 species of gulls, terns, and skimmers distributed across all continents. They are primarily coastal in nature, most are “sea” birds, but some inhabit large inland freshwater lakes and rivers. All nest in colonies and are strong fliers. Many are highly migratory. They all have webbed feet. Many people refer to gulls as “seagulls,” but, as not all gulls live at the sea, it is best to simply call them “gulls.”

The identification of gulls and terns can be a very time consuming and often tedious, absorbing, and complex task. Not surprisingly, many birders find it thrilling. There are great variations in the appearance of individual species in different plumages at different ages. Thankfully, there are numerous specialized books and websites dedicated to helping observers with the identification of these birds.

To date, birders have identified 12 species of gulls, 10 species of terns, and one skimmer in the Central Carolina region. Three are discussed in the Supplementary Bird List. The accounts for the rest of the family Laridae are presented below. None of these birds breed in this region.

Three years after the end of the Civil War, *The Charlotte Democrat* newspaper published an article written by a special correspondent who was visiting the coastal town of Beaufort, NC. In it, he describes various bird life including gulls and terns, and the scene he witnessed then is much the same today: “The Gull is one of the most abundant birds of the coast. It lives mostly on the wing. It floats over the water, and fixing its eye upon a fish, it poises over few seconds, then folding its wings, it drops upon the victim. The Gull is mostly white, but not unfrequently they are found mixed with white and black. They will follow vessels for miles, to pick up the refuse from the cook’s department.”

The earliest account of gulls reported in the Central Carolina region comes from Cabarrus County. It was published in *The Charlotte Observer* on September 16, 1888: “Last Monday Irish Buffalo creek was higher than it has been before in the memory of almost the oldest inhabitant. The wind blew a perfect gale and the waves rolled up to the hill side with a perfect swish, shish. The most singular part of the scene was 150 or 200 sea gulls rising on the wing before the wind and then coming suddenly downward to the water. Where they came from or where they went no one knows, and the attempt to secure one was a total failure.”

Almost 30 years later, gulls were reported in Mecklenburg County:

“ ‘What would you interpret it to mean, if you saw four sea gulls hovering over and around the Charlotte Navy Yard,’ asked a voice over a telephone in *The News* this morning. The authority at the receiving end of the telephone was unprepared to prophesy, but ventured the opinion that it might mean that the Charlotte Navy Yard is again to become a scene of activity after fifty years of quiescence. The voice at the other end of the phone stated in all soberness that four gulls had been seen early this morning flying over and about the Navy Yard.

There were some varied opinions, as to the occurrence, some holding that the gulls were blown inward by the wind and rain storm that enveloped Charlotte, while others, who believed that ‘coming events cast their shadow,’ were positive that the appearance of the gulls was an omen of import and that it portended that the most unique navy yard in the world—probably the only one in the world located 175 miles inland—is about to enact another role in the life of the nation, as it did in 1861–1865.” —*The Charlotte News*, March 6, 1917

The number of sightings, the diversity of species, and the abundance of gulls and terns in the region, have climbed slowly but steadily since the first large man-made lakes were created in the Carolinas in the early to mid-twentieth century.