

Franklin's Gull *Leucophaeus pipixcan*



Folk Name: (none)

Status: Migrant

Abundance: Accidental

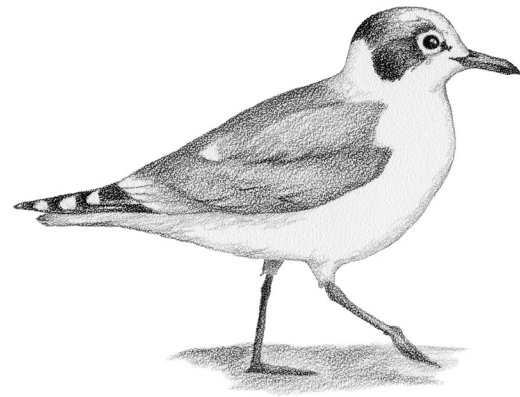
Habitat: Open water on lakes and rivers

The Franklin's Gull is a western species that breeds in the Great Plains, from Idaho and the Dakotas, north into Canada. In non-breeding plumage, it looks a bit like a small winter Laughing Gull with a dark head. These birds occasionally wander into the eastern United States in fall, winter, and spring.

The first Franklin's Gull ever found in the Carolinas was found in Mecklenburg County. An immature female was shot by a goose hunter on October 13, 1952, on the Catawba River on the York–Mecklenburg county line. It was picked up alive on the North Carolina side of the state boundary line and turned over to the Charlotte Children's Nature Museum. Rhett Chamberlain examined it on the day it was shot, and his son Norman photographed it 3 days later. On 6 December, after almost two months in confinement, the bird died. Chamberlain sent the carcass to Allen Duvall at the National Museum in Washington, D.C., who confirmed the identification and noted minute, undeveloped ovaries, thus confirming the sex of the bird as well. Duvall also noted that the gull's left humerus had been broken by a shotgun pellet.

In a letter Chamberlain sent January 31, 1953, to Harry T. Davis at the North Carolina State Museum, he apologized for the condition of the skin which he was mailing later in the week. He wrote the skin needed "a good going over to make it presentable" and joked that "to look at the skin now, it might have been collected in Utah where they are as thick as mosquitos and brought east in a covered wagon." Staff at the museum carefully repaired the damages and were able to properly prepare the skin. Sixty years later, it is still available for examination.

In 1957, Milby Burton of the Charleston Museum of Natural History wrote Harry T. Davis requesting details about this bird's location and its movements when it was first seen. He was hoping to come to an agreement that it had been flying on both sides of the river and therefore in both states. The response he received from Davis indicated the bird had been solely in North Carolina waters, which left Burton quite bemused: "Thus, the gull, realizing that the river was the dividing line between two states, made certain that it flew only within the boundary of North Carolina." In 1989, Post and Gauthreaux provided a reasonable conclusion to this debate when they published this Franklin's Gull record as the first state record for both states—noting that the bird was found on "the Catawba



River, York County / Mecklenburg County.”

By 1989, there were six records of Franklin's Gull recorded for the entire state of North Carolina, five reports from South Carolina, and reports continued to slowly rise. In the fall of 1998, there was “an unprecedented migration” of Franklin's Gulls into the east and on December 20, 1998, a second Franklin's Gull showed up in Mecklenburg County. David Wright and Wayne Covington videotaped this bird at a large well-known evening gull roost on Lake Norman.

Five years later, Penny Soares discovered a third Franklin's Gull on Lake Norman on December 15, 2013. She was with a team on David Wright's boat participating in the annual Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count. They were actively searching through large flocks of gulls when she spied an “unusual gull” and alerted the group. The bird was quickly identified and several excellent photographs were taken, thus providing



Franklin's Gull found on the 2013 Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count. (Chris Talkington)

documentation of the second sighting of this rarity on a Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count.

In the fall of 2015, another large movement of Franklin's Gulls along the East Coast was reported. About 10 sightings were noted in the Carolinas, including a group of six birds photographed on Lake Hickory by Dwayne Martin and Lori Owenby on 13 October. This

flock represents the second largest number ever recorded at one time in the Carolinas.

Today, at least one individual of this western species is usually found somewhere in the Carolinas each year. Regrettably, the authors of *The State of America's Birds 2016* report warn that the continental breeding population of the Franklin's Gull is now in steep decline.