

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*



Folk Name: (none)

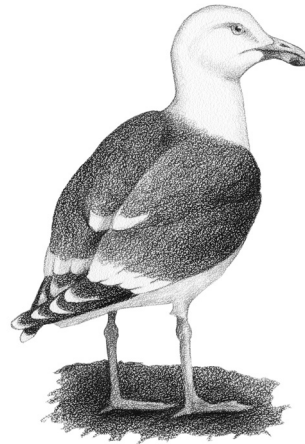
Status: Winter Visitor

Abundance: Very rare

Habitat: Open water of lakes and rivers

This deep ocean wanderer is a breeding bird of Iceland, the British Isles, and northern Eurasia, but it is known to migrate long distances during the winter. At 21 inches, it is about 4 inches smaller than a Herring Gull. The Lesser Black-backed Gull was first identified in North Carolina on December 30, 1968, on the Outer Banks and in Charleston, South Carolina, on September 16, 1976. Sightings of this gull began to rapidly increase in the Carolinas during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Today, it is regular along the coast with flocks of 150 or more birds having been reported, and birds have been found in all months of the year. Inland records are increasing, but are still considered notable. A few of these birds have occasionally wandered into the Carolina Piedmont and here into the Central Carolinas.

Lesser Black-backed Gull has been reported six times in this region and all but one were seen on Lake Norman. All sightings have been of individual birds. The first report was of a bird seen by Audubon members participating in the Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count on December 18, 2005. It was seen roosting on Lake Norman in the Davidson Channel gull roost in association with other wintering gull species. The second observation came one year later. Judy Walker reported one bird at Lake Don T. Howell in Cabarrus County on December 9, 2006. The third occurrence was on March 13, 2011, when David Wright photographed a “late third-cycle”-plumaged bird from a boat on Lake Norman. It was also found “in the evening gull roost in the Davidson Channel of Lake Norman” with an estimated 3,500 Ring-billed Gulls and 15 Herring Gulls.



The fourth sighting was on February 18, 2013. Taylor Piephoff and David Wright found a first-year Lesser Black-backed Gull in a gull roost near Governor’s Island on Lake Norman in Lincoln County. The bird was seen roosting on the water and in flight. Two months later on April 5, 2013, Rob Gilson and David Wright found an adult bird on Lake Norman in both Iredell and Mecklenburg counties. This bird was photographed in an evening flock of over 1,500 Ring-billed Gulls with two Herring Gulls. It “was flushed and the yellow legs were clearly seen.”

“One or two” first year birds were seen by boat on Lake Norman on February 23 and March 9, 2014. It’s often impossible to say for certain how many are present when you are dealing with an evermoving flock of thousands of gulls. Observers noted one bird was missing a few primary feathers and also “the undefined pink area at the base of the bird’s bill,” a characteristic of many first-cycle birds. On 9 March, Chris Talkington photographed what he believed to be one of these same birds in Mecklenburg County. He noted it was a first-cycle bird missing the same primary feathers as the one previously reported.