



**Natural Heritage
& Endangered Species
Program**

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

**Great Black-backed Gull
*Larus marinus***

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The Great Black-backed Gull is the largest and heaviest gull in North America and one of the largest in the world. The adult is mostly white with a black back and wings and has a yellowish bill with a red spot near the tip. Overall, this gull appears heavy and robust with a heavy bill. In adults, there is no significant seasonal or sexual difference in plumage.

The Great Black-backed Gull's reputation is built on its apparent bullying of smaller gulls and terns, as well as its voracious appetite for the eggs and young of other birds. Formerly unheard of as a breeding species in the Commonwealth, the Great Black-backed Gull is now relatively common along coastal Massachusetts.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: In North America, the breeding range includes coastal areas (particularly on offshore islands) extending from Labrador to North Carolina and along large inland waterbodies (e.g., Great Lakes, Lake Champlain). Historically, Great Black-backed Gulls did not nest in Massachusetts and were first documented as a breeding bird in the state in 1931. Since that time their populations have dramatically increased, thought to be a result of increased food resources associated with a human dominated landscape (e.g., landfills). However, the Coastal Waterbird Census conducted by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife revealed that the breeding population had declined by 40% since the prior survey in 1995, a pattern similar to that found for the Herring Gull.

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: Great Black-backed Gulls nest in a variety of habitats including small islands, rocky islets, salt marshes, dredge-spoil islands, barrier beaches, dunes on barrier islands, flat-topped stacks, and rooftops. They often breed in areas with Herring Gulls, but prefer more open and higher microhabitats than the

Herring Gull. They use open areas as roosting sites, including parking lots, fields, helipads, and airport runways.



THREATS: Pesticides, pollutants, storms, habitat degradation, and decline in food resources could affect local populations.

REFERENCES:

- Good, T.P. 1998. Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/330>
- Melvin, S. 2010. Survey of Coastal Nesting Colonies of Cormorants, Gulls, Night-Herons, Egrets, and Ibises in Massachusetts, 2006-2008. Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program.
- Walsh, J., and Petersen, W.R. 2013. *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas 2*. Massachusetts Audubon Society and Scott & Nix, Inc.

Updated 2015

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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